

**Turning
to the
Mystics**



The Way of a Pilgrim

Session 1

with James Finley and Kirsan Oates

Jim Finley: Greetings. I'm Jim Finley.

Kirsten Oates: And I'm Kirsten Oates.

Jim Finley: Welcome to Turning to the Mystics.

Greetings everyone, and welcome to our time together, turning for trustworthy guidance to one of the great classic works in the Christian mystical tradition, *The Way of the Pilgrim*. In the previous session, Kirsten and I kind of laid the groundwork for the background of this work, so indicating now as I said there, that I'm going to walk paragraph by paragraph through the first chapter. I'll be sharing with you what it evokes in me. Hopefully, as you listen, you can see what it might evoke in you as a source of your own guidance in your search for God.

The pilgrim begins, "By the grace of God, I'm a Christian man. By my actions, a great sinner. And by calling, a homeless wanderer of the humblest birth who roams from place to place. My worldly goods are a knapsack with some dried bread in it on my back. In my breast pocket, a Bible, and that is all." In the very beginning, the pilgrim sets a tone for the whole story, and really is going to say ultimately the tone for our story, the ultimate dimensions of our story. In this great truth, that God is love. When love touches suffering, the suffering turns the love into mercy. And so the pilgrim's solace, the pilgrim's peace of mind, is in the mercy of God, for him as infinitely precious as the beloved in the midst of his wayward ways and his brokenness, which is the essence of the gospel of the good news, sets the tone for it.

And he says he's a wanderer of the humblest birth. Here, I would say we're looking for the ways in which it's obviously in the literal sense our life's very different than the pilgrim's life. For example, I'm not a wanderer. I'm sitting here in my home, I've been living here for 30 years and chances are too, you're living in your home, apartment, wherever you live. But we're all a wanderer in a different sense, in an interior sense that is St. Augustine, you made our hearts for thee, oh Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee. We're on this pilgrimage of finding our way to this homeland of learning to rest in God, who's unexplainably already resting in us. God's resting in us as the beloved, and we with God's grace, are seeking to be healed from all that hinders us from resting in God who's resting in us. And this is the pilgrimage that we're on, this winding path toward this realization.

Also, as we're going to see here too is that this homeland, the ultimacy of it, just isn't something that's actualized in its fullness in death when we cross over into glory, but it can be intimately and mysteriously realized here in *via*, *homo viator*. While we're still on the way, we can realize the homecoming that we're searching for is already taking place. This is what the whole story's about, really, this way. There's a book I like very much in Buddhism by Bhaumi, B-H-M, on the Middle Way. And he says, "The thing about Buddhism is the teachings of the Buddha is a heightened sense of ambivalence between means and ends." The same is true of the gospel, that the path that leads toward the fulfillment, this infinite union or the infinite presence of God starts welling up beneath our feet on the path in which we're searching for it.

There's this kind of realized eschatology, this realization of what we're searching for is already

here or it's already found us and it's drawing us towards itself. And so the author of *The Way of the Pilgrim* sets this whole tone of interiority of our life and how God is present in our life and guiding us. We would say here too, then, as we listen to these teachings and with all these mystics, the light that shines out from the teaching is illuminating our own path in the sincerity which even draws us to be touched by the beauty of these teachings, which bears witness too, that we're already on this path of which the pilgrim speaks this way. When he says that his worldly goods are a knapsack with some dried bread in it on his back and in my breast pocket a Bible, and that is all, is that the dried crust of bread, again, it's very different for us.

Because I'm sitting here, my worldly goods not reduced some dried bread in it because I'm looking at my furniture in the living room. I have a lot of clothes in my closet. You too, probably. You try to be sensitive and sensitive to those who have less and all of that, but here's the whole point, the deeper level. It's that the dried bread in it, on his back, sustains his bodily existence in his passage through time from birth to death. As long as you can realize that all your worldly possessions, no matter how big your house is and how many clothes in your closet, when you really look at it, really it's just sustaining you through your brief passage through time from birth to death, and just be grateful for it. Be grateful for it, be responsible for it, but don't base your life on it. Don't base, as if somehow the more you have, the more you are, because pretty soon you won't be here anymore. I won't either.

We're right now in via on this bodily journey being led by God into our homeland in God, who's already at home in us and we're seeking to find our way home to rest in this oneness, this way which is the path. And over his breast pocket, the Bible that is over his heart is his Bible, and the heart is the revelation of infinite love to the pilgrim as being the beloved of infinite love. This is the deathless beauty of himself. Again, we have over our heart the revelation that in Jesus, as revealed that God's response to us in our dilemma, that is in our confusion, in our wayward ways, that God's response to us in our dilemma is to become identified with us as precious in the midst of our dilemma this way.

I would give another insight into this too, which is the heart of the gospel. Sometimes I see this a lot in psychotherapy too. Let's say you're really burdened by something, and let's say you're burdened by a certain habit of your mind and heart that you know is compromising who you deep down really are and are called to be. You know it's something that is hurtful to you bodily, being emotionally or to another person. Like the thorn in the flesh, you can't quite get over it, you can't get past it. There's maybe a lot of shame around it this way. And so you're sharing this with a trustworthy person and you get a sense in this person that you've been trusting, or to opening all this up to, that the person you're sharing this to, they acknowledge it's regrettable that you're caught in this.

They're acknowledging, yes, it would be really wonderful if you could be more freed up from this thing. But the point is, the person you're sharing it with sees the reality of what bothers you, but sees right through it to the invincible preciousness of yourself as God sees you, which is infinitely more real than what it is that you're so ashamed about this way. Little by little, what happens is you start to have faith in the person's faith in you. And little by little, that faith gets internalized and you find your way home.

With each other, that incarnates this way it is with God, that in the infinite tenderness of

God revealed in Jesus, forgive them, Father. They know not what they do. We see that God... It isn't just that God sees our weaknesses, which God does, and understands infinitely more than we do, but God sees through the weaknesses into the invincible preciousness of ourself as the beloved. And God sees that we're trying to find our way, to find our way to have faith in that. How can we join God in knowing who God knows us to be as the beloved, as a broken, infinitely precious person, which is the path. Again, which is the tonal quality of this whole work and of all these mystics, really, this way.

Second paragraph. On the 24th Sunday after Pentecost, I went to church to say my prayers there during the liturgy. The first epistle of St. Paul to the Thessalonians was being read. Among other words, I heard these: Pray without ceasing. It was this text more than any other which forced itself upon my mind. I began to think how it was possible to pray without ceasing, since a man has to concern himself with other things also, in order to make a living. I looked at my bible and with my own eyes, I read the words which I had heard, that we ought always at all times in all places to pray with uplifted hands. I thought and thought, but knew not what to make of it. I'd like to reflect on this, this way.

He's in the midst of living his Christian life and it's the 24th Sunday after Pentecost. What is Pentecost? It's in the Acts of the Apostles in the Scriptures that a long time ago in a far-off place, a small group of people were quickened by God. Talk about tongues of fire at the greater... Which is the birth of the church. And since we celebrate it in liturgy, we bear witness that we're participating in the Pentecost event. It's the 24th Sunday after Pentecost in liturgical time. 24th. This is going to be his unexpected Pentecost sitting in church, but it's going to come with it as an unexpected quickening.

Here's what I think is at the heart of this thing for all of us really, if we ask ourselves insofar as we're drawn to these teachings, these teachings of ever deeper union with God, beyond what thought can comprehend and feelings can endure, all of that, we look back to the beginnings of how our faith was formed. For many of us, it was in childhood from our parents. Not always. And it grew and deepened and it is what it is. But from time to time, what can happen in the midst of our devotional sincerity is that our heart is quickened in an unexpected way in being accessed by God. With a certain unexpected intimacy or this, these awakenings can happen. They start happening when we're very young sometimes, but sometimes they're very powerful, intense experiences. Sometimes they set our life off in a whole new direction.

What happens is the new direction we're setting in, we don't realize it at first, like it's the ferment. But what it starts with, it comes in all the fundamental arenas of life, really. In intimacy with another person, in the midst of nature, with children, with death, with solitude, with silence, with service to the community and the ordinariness of our days. It comes as it comes. It's given to whom it gives, but there's a quickening or an interior illumination inside that you can't explain. And sometimes what happens, and this is the case of the pilgrim, it comes to us really as a question that perplexes us. We're perplexed and we're perplexed about something... G. K. Chesterton's saying, "We're bored to death with a story heard over and over that we

never really listened to.” This goes even deeper. This is a story, and he’s heard this text many times at liturgy. It isn’t just this is the first time he listened to it, but somehow the active presence of God actively awakened him to it this way, as an inner event like a ferment, a little kind of taste of something deep within.

Also notice something else about this quickening. This is very subtle. He doesn’t understand what’s happening to him and he wouldn’t even know how to even start to put words to it. And a lot of times the great turnings in our life to the deeper place, they take place with such an unimposing simplicity. We don’t pause long enough to get into the paradoxical stature of the subtlety of what’s happening. That which is essential never imposes itself. That which is unessential is constantly imposing itself. But because we’re so caught up in what’s constantly imposing itself, see, we don’t catch the subtle touch of this thing for a while. It stirs with us, but it starts stirring in him as a desire to understand. How can I understand?

And here’s another theme I think at the heart of this work and in all these mystics, see this is a deeper way to understand what it means to understand. For us in our ego, we understand by comprehending it, but here, understanding is a radically deeper kind of understanding in finding yourself in the midst of... You can’t comprehend it because it’s incomprehensible. You can’t figure it out because it’s unfigure-utable. You’re suddenly in the intimacy, the unfigure-utable that has accessed your heart and you find yourself in this place. This place, this way. I thought and thought, but knew not what to make of it. What ought I to do, I thought.

Here’s the next big insight that it’s asking something out of us is asking. There must be a way. There must be a way for me to find my way to this inner clarity that I’m looking for. But if I’m going to find it, I just can’t keep sitting here. I have to somehow lean into it, let it set in motion a certain way for me to pursue it as a seeker. He says, “I thought, where shall I find someone to explain it to me?” That’s what he’s saying. Now here’s the thing about explaining. A person whose heart’s been awakened by the unexplainable can tell when the person they’re with is just explaining things. Because they’re just explaining things, they’re not saying what you’re looking for. See, where can I find someone to explain it to me? I will go to the churches where famous preachers are to be heard. Perhaps there, I shall hear something which will throw light on it for me. I did so.

I heard a number of very fine sermons on prayer: What prayer is, how much we need it and what its fruits are. But no one said how one could succeed in prayer. I heard a sermon on spiritual prayer, on unceasing prayer. But how it was to be done, no one pointed out. Thus, listening to sermons failed to give me what I wanted. Having had my fill of them without gaining understanding, I gave up going to hear public sermons. And so he becomes a dropout, and he becomes a dropout not out of indifference to Christ, but he comes as a dropout like Thomas Merton saying that a lot of Catholics are losing their faith and they’re losing it in church.

Because the church isn’t teaching this. The church isn’t teaching that God’s infinitely in love with us, is already upon us as unfolding in our hearts and bearing witness to this. And so he is kind of losing the familiarity of his religious surroundings

here, to the urgency of a question he doesn't understand this way, which is the solitude of the pilgrim. I think solitude in this sense is we're less and less able to explain to anybody, including ourselves, what's happening to us. But through the inner imperative of our heart, we're being asked to be faithful to this. It's like a longing we don't understand for a unit of mystery we don't understand, but we know it's real because we tasted it, because it's stirred within our hearts. Our own heart is bearing witness to this unfolding grace within us that we don't have our bearings in what this is.

I gave up going to hear to public sermons and I settled on another plan. And this is the unrelenting resiliency of the human spirit, not to be deterred by the fact that what you're looking for isn't given right away. Sometimes it takes quite a while and you become seasoned in the searching. The fidelity to the searches. The fidelity, that search, is changing you this way, maturing you in it. By God's help, to look for some experienced and skilled person who would give me, in conversation, that teaching about unceasing prayer, which drew me unceasingly. In other words, his new insight is. I think what I need to find is someone who's ripe with these matters. I want to see someone whose already been overtaken by and lives in the habitual state. When I'm with this person, it's not that I want to listen to a lecture, but it'll be a conversation. Really, this is contemplative spiritual direction. See, I'll sit with this well-seasoned person, and in a conversation, a dialogue back and forth, in the exchange back and forth, I can be led into this realization by finding my way to this person.

For a long time, I wandered through many places. I read my bible always, and everywhere I ask whether there was not in the neighborhood a spiritual teacher. He is knocking on doors, "Excuse me, do you have a mystically awakened spiritual director in your neighbor?" You can see how that would go over. Try it this way. But he wants to do what's ever possible to do. But I do think in more where there was still a spiritually luminous culture, it would've made more sense to do that this way. One day I was told that in a certain village a gentleman had long been living and seeking the salvation of his soul. He had a chapel in his house, he never left his estate, and he spent his time in prayer and reading devotional books. Hearing this, I ran rather than walked to the village named. I got there and found him. "What do you want in me?" He asked this way.

I want to say something else, too. I think in our society, our understanding of faith is so action-oriented. You might say, "Here's a person who never leaves his estate. Reads devotional books." We could say he's not out there changing the world. By the way, that could be true. It could be true. There are people who in the name of spirituality, shut themselves up and they have their own little devotional practices. But also, this is seen as a mysterious kind of fidelity to God, and our fidelity to God is touching the world in ways we don't understand. This is the intuition in cloistered monasticism, that our effectiveness in the world isn't dependent upon the ways that we're physically present to and help others. It is important that we're physically and help others, but what really matters is we follow our vocation. This is this interior vocation of being led by God into every deep reunion with God which touches the world.

By the way, this pilgrim is on this path to God. By sharing the story with us, he's touching us. We are being touched centuries later. Years, years later, we are being touched in the interiority of ourselves this way. See, "What do you want in me? Ask," Pilgrim says, "I have heard that you are a devout and clever person." I think clever here means wise or insightful.

“In God’s name, please explain to me the meaning of the apostle’s words, ‘Pray without ceasing.’ How is it possible to pray without ceasing? I want to know so much that I cannot understand it at all.” Not only does he not know the answer to the question, now he can’t even understand the question. Even the question now. It isn’t just that he doesn’t understand what it is he’s supposed to understand, but he doesn’t even understand what the question is about how to understand. It’s getting more and more unraveled from finding what he’s looking for and anything that he could explain this way.

“I cannot understand it at all.” He was silent for a while and looked at me closely and said, “Ceaseless interior prayer is a continual yearning of the human spirit toward God. To succeed in this consoling exercise, we must pray more often to God, to teach us to pray without ceasing. Pray more and pray more fervently. It is prayer itself which will reveal to you how it is to be achieved unceasingly, but it will take some time.” I’d like to reflect on this. He asked him this question, “I don’t understand, I don’t understand.” He was silent for a while and looked at me. What was that? What’s that about? I think it’s this: If he just answers out of cleverness, it’ll be his ego talking. He can quote a book. He can do this. He’s silent in the pause that allows God to speak through him. In pausing to be interiorly receptive to God, so God might use him to achieve God’s purposes in the world, which is say something helpful to this pilgrim, this way.

There’s something about that inner pausing to wait for the deep words to come. Sometimes we start talking before we know what we’re saying. And sometimes in the depth of the pause is where it starts to engender this clarity, so when you do say something, because of the depth that it’s coming from, it reaches the place that it’s meant to go, this way. Then he says, “Ceaseless prayer is a continual yearning of the human spirit towards God.” Here’s another shift that happens. See at first, we have to start somewhere. He was taking it literally, to pray without ceasing. How is that? How can I pray without ceasing? I have to go to work. I have the chores to do. And so he says, “The prayer without ceasing does not mean... It’s a metaphorical language. What’s unceasing is the desire,” is the prayer.

The desire for the unceasing embodies the unceasing, and your deepening desire to be ever more unceasingly grounded in the desire for God is it be a faint echo of God’s ceaseless desire for you. God is ceaselessly desiring you and God arcs over and places it within your heart a desire for God, this way. It’s true, we don’t have the constancy of God. It’s like a flame that flickers in the wind, but in the sincerity of the desire to be ever more constant in the desire, it becomes paradoxically ceaseless. Say, if you love a community of people, it isn’t as if 24 hours a day you’re just constantly... You’re living your life, but there’s an underlying sensitivity to the preciousness of these people. And so there’s a certain underlying sensitivity to what is somehow woven through the details of the day, regardless of what the detail might be we’re. In itself is a configuration of this underlying habitual stance that kind of permeates everything that we do.

It is prayer that will teach you. In other words, the way. Here’s another way I think to do this. Let’s say someone wants to learn to be a poet. How do they learn to be a poet? By sitting down with a blank piece of paper and writing poetry. You have to be willing not to be good at it to start. You had to start somewhere and you must be willing not to give up this way. In order to write poetry, in order to sing, in order to be an artist, in order to teach, you learn it by doing it. And doing it, you’re not claiming anything except you’re just sincerely

seeking to learn to do it and you learn to do it. Really, what you're trying to learn to do is teaching you as you commit yourself to doing it. It's actively transforming you in the activity. That's what this prayer is like.

Saying this, he brought food to me. He said, "But it'll take some time." "It's already taken some time." "It's going to take more." "How long is it going to take?" "It's not your business how long it takes," he said. So saying this, he had food brought to me, gave me money for my journey and let me go. Along the path, I think we can look back at people along the way. They played their role in how we found our way to where we are now with this. Maybe it was a little piece of the puzzle and it's almost like you can connect the dots where... Some of the people I think that played a role were people that, at the time, they played a role in a hurtful way, but we learned something from the hurt. See, that everything has lessons woven into it. And so this is this person kind of in passing on the way, he momentarily plays his role in this person's life.

Again, I set off. I thought and thought and I read and read. I dwelled over, over again upon what this man had said to me, but I could not get to the bottom of it, yet so greatly did I wish to understand that I could not sleep at night. What is the bottom? Remember if you were listening to this series, what we did on Eckhart on the Ground. The Ground for Eckhart isn't a ground you can walk on. The ground is abyss-like, it's bottomless this way. And so I can't get to the bottom of it, meaning I can't find my way to the bottomless abyss of the ceaseless prayer that incarnates and embodies God's presence in my life. You can tell he's not there yet, but he wants it so badly he can't sleep at night.

I don't think necessarily we're walking around with chronic insomnia because we can't... Clock's ticking. I'm not a mystic yet. It's not like that at all. But even at night in your sleep, there's ways that it's kind of never far away. A kind of an unconsummated longing that you're strangely grateful for because it's like a quiet light in your heart that before the awakening, you didn't even know it existed. You're in media res. You're in the midst of this unfolding, this way.

I walked at least 125 miles and then came to a large town in provincial capital where I saw a monastery. At the inn where I stopped, I heard it said that the abbot was a man of great kindness, devout and hospitable. I went to see him. He met me in a very friendly manner, asked me to sit down, and offered me refreshment. "I do not need refreshment, Holy Father," I said, "but I beg you to give me some spiritual teaching. How can I save my soul?" "What? Save your soul? Well, live according to the commandments. Say your prayers and you'll be saved," he says.

There's a saying in the Desert Fathers too, one of the stories, is one of the monks comes to the abbot, the head of the community of Christian hermits and says, "How can I save my soul?" And he said, "Keep the rule and love the brethren." And he says, "I do that." And said, "Then the teacher stood up and stretched out his fingers and his fingers became like 10 lamps of fire." He said, "Then why not become all fire?" That's what the pilgrim's looking for. Why not become all fire? This abbot, who's the abbot of the monastery, he's not gifted with that. He is gifted with his kindness. He's gifted with his humility.

There's another important thing here too, I think here, is this whole tradition is not a

tradition of spiritual attainment. It's a tradition of holiness. Remember in Teresa of Avila, she's talking about these mystical graces. She calls them special favors. She says, "There are people who don't have any of these special favors, namely this oneness, and they're holier than people who do." So the desire for this is a care-ism within the community of an eschatological knowledge of celestial knowledge that shines out through us, but it's our calling that some people are called to bear witness. I think everyone's called to it to varying degrees, some more than others I think, this way. Save your soul.

But I hear it said, and notice he doesn't accept the abbot's answer, it implied. "But I hear it said that we should pray without ceasing, and I don't know what unceasing prayer means. I cannot even understand what unceasing prayer means. I beg you for it." See again, it isn't just the question's unanswerable, the answer isn't available, but the question itself becomes more and more unexplainable this way. What he is really doing, he's being strangely liberated from imagining that anything he's even capable of finding will ever be what he's looking for. That what he's looking for is something he's never able to find, but it unexpectedly finds him and already is finding him, see. And the perplexity of his heart that's guiding him on this journey like this.

"I beg you Father to explain it to me." "I don't know how to explain it further, dear brother, but stop a moment. I have a little book and it is explained there." And so he starts introducing him to the lineage of text, and notice that's what we're doing in turning to the Mystics Podcast. We're returning to texts. It just so happens the text that he gives him, we're being told about it in a story that is itself a text. That's how it works, I guess. He says, "The words of the apostle, 'Pray without ceasing,' should be understood as a creative prayer of understanding." And I'd like to reflect on that just a minute. See, it isn't that I understand now what I didn't understand before, but rather there has been a creative transformation of my understanding of what it means to understand this way. Really, it's that metamorphosis of subjectivity, the metamorphosis of the understanding that is the growth itself that's leading him toward this prayer this way.

He gave me the explanation. I spent the night at his house and in the morning, thanking him for his kind hospitality, I went on my way. Where to? I did not know myself. Now he doesn't even know where he's going. Not only does he not understand the answer, he doesn't understand the question, and now he doesn't even know where he is going. He's in great shape, really. My failure to understand made me sad, but by way of comforting myself, I read my Bible. In this way, I followed the main road for five days. And I always like to say this, it makes him sad, but it's a sweet sadness. It's a sadness that he's grateful for because the intimacy of what he's looking for is somehow hidden in the sadness this way. It's like a gentle sadness. It's the difference between depression and melancholy. Melancholy is a kind of a quiet sadness that's somber and has depth in it this way, and this way, this.

And so I follow the main road for five days, sad, reading the Bible, going along. At last toward evening, I was overtaken by an old man who looked like a cleric of some sort. In answer to my question, he told me that he was a monk belonging to a monastery about six miles off the main road. He asked me to go there with him. "We take in pilgrims," said he, "and give them rest and food with devout persons in the guest house." I did not feel like going. In reply, I said that my peace of mind in no way depended upon my finding a resting place, but upon finding spiritual teaching, see. At last toward evening, and at last, because

here, the person he's been looking for all along, he's looking at him right there, just shows up. What's interesting, this monk says, "Why don't you come just six miles off the road? You've been traveling for all your years anyway. Just six miles." Notice it's off the main road. It's like this, off the main road.

Here's what's interesting. He says, "No, I'll pass. I'll go." It's like that sometimes, I think. When we finally found what we're looking for, we don't recognize it because we were projecting onto it. St. John on the cross has this lovely image. He said, "Imagine your chest is made of glass and a light is shining out from your heart. If your heart is filled with fear, everyone you see is someone to be afraid of. If your heart is filled with anger, everyone you see, someone to be angry at." And so here, what if your heart is filled with longing, but your longing is ribboned with your expectations of what you're longing for. When you're finally looking, what you're really looking for doesn't match your expectations. There's another one of these transitional graces in our life.

Notice also something, and we're going to end here on this point, he's now going to be led by this teacher. What are you looking for? What do you want? And this is what we're going to pick up next time. St. Benedict says in his rule, he says, "When someone comes to the gate of the monastery to be admitted to the community, don't let the person in, but keep him waiting outside for several days. One of the senior monks to go out and talk to the person every day like, 'What are you looking for?'" And the senior monk is listening for something, like a call note this way. And so this monk is going to be listening for something and he's already picking up edges of it when he says, "I don't need refreshment. See, I'm looking for something." And so the next section that we'll be looking then is the teaching. We'll be looking at the teaching on the practice of this prayer, this transformative Jesus Prayer, the Prayer of the Heart. With that, then, we'll end with the sit. I invite you to sit straight and fold your hands and bow.

And bow. And we'll slowly say The Lord's Prayer together. Our Father, Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name; Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Mary, Mother of Contemplatives, pray for us. The Pilgrim in our story, pray for us. The author of the Cloud of Unknowing, pray for us. Until next time, blessings.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you for listening to this episode of Turning to the Mystics, a podcast created by the Center for Action and Contemplation. We're planning to do episodes that answer your questions. If you have a question, please email us at podcasts@cac.org or send us a voicemail. All of this information can be found in the show notes. We'll see you again soon.