

Turning  
to the  
Mystics



# The Way of a Pilgrim

Dialogue 2

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.

Kirsten Oates: Welcome everyone to Season Nine of Turning to the Mystics where we're turning to The Way of a Pilgrim by an anonymous author. And I'm here with Jim and we're here to reflect on Jim's second talk for this season. Welcome, Jim.

Jim Finley: Yes, so good. This is one of my favorite texts actually, in the mystics. So glad we're doing this together.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, me too. I've just been so enjoying this season and this book, it's just wonderful.

Jim Finley: Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: So Jim, you've given all of us an invitation to let the word and events of the pilgrim shed light on our own lives and the way our lives unfold, and then you and I also offered an invitation for people to send in their own stories of pilgrimage or their own stories of being quickened this way. And so in today's episode, we're going to go through some of the elements that the book's teaching us about this journey, and so if someone's thinking they might write into us, they might choose one of these elements and how that played out in their life. Just starting with the overarching theme, and the overarching theme is that we are all pilgrims and we're on a journey to God.

Jim Finley: Right. Yes. Let's say a pilgrimage is a journey and a movement towards spiritual fulfillment. And we wend our way through our days, but ultimately speaking, we're all on this pilgrimage toward God because when we breathe our last breath, we cross over into God. So in via on the way through time, we're trying to go into every deeper realization of God's oneness with us and God's guidance with us, and then to express and share that with others.

Kirsten Oates: And the pilgrim starts with just life as usual, and you pointed out how he has the daily essentials. He's got his food, he's got a certain set of tasks and then the Bible in his pocket over his heart representing God's loving presence. So we're just living our lives as usual.

Jim Finley: And again, suggesting that the details of our life are probably vastly different than the pilgrims. But the point is all of our belongings, our home, our furniture, our clothes, our all that, you think of it, they sustain our bodily existence through time, really. But if over our heart, the scriptures and our passage through time is the eternity of God's love guiding us through our days into God. So in that sense, we're in concert with the pilgrim. We see ourselves in the same light.

Kirsten Oates: What I just love about this book is it's so embodied. It's really about the concreteness of our lives. It really reflects that so beautifully.

Jim Finley: Yes. And I think something too, another good thing about this text, and another book that's like this is Teresa of Avila's, The Life, her spiritual autobiography, her life. Because when you get right down to it, it's our life. It's our very life. Thomas Brinton once said in the

monastery, “Wouldn’t it be interesting when you die and face God, and you find out God isn’t even at all interested in your spirituality, God’s infinitely interested in you,” and so it’s our very life. It’s the living of our life. And the book concretizes that. We see that also in the Gospel, God revealed in the life of Jesus, he lived his life.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: Exactly. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: It’s so helpful. So he’s in his usual life, and his life, he’s living the Christian life. And then he goes to church and it’s the 24th day after Pentecost, 24th Sunday after Pentecost. And he hears Paul’s words, “pray without ceasing,” and he’s quickened and you talk about this is the next element. So life’s going on as usual and then out of nowhere he’s quickened, and what’s fascinating about the quickening to me is that he would’ve heard this scripture many, many times. He’s been to this church probably many, many times, and out of nowhere it speaks to him in a much deeper way.

Jim Finley: That’s right. That we’re living our, this life of devotional sincerity in our own way if it’s given to us to do so. And then from time to time, we’re graced with a quickening that we usually don’t see coming, this way. And it comes in many forms in all the realms of life and love found and love lost, day by day whatever the journey is, and in this case it happens in church. And it happens in church, and hearing something heard many times before, but hearing it for the first time in a new way because it accesses him with an inner necessity, like a riddle or a coin, how can this be? And it says it forced itself upon his mind. See, that was the grace where the stirring begins. And so he is about to open up an unexpected new phase of his life, and that our life is this way, from time to time we’re granted quickenings and it sets us off in a certain direction and it’s the providential nature of our unfoldings, I think.

Kirsten Oates: And you say that when we have one of these quickenings, if we don’t let it pass us by, it asks something of us, and I’m curious about that statement. It seems like for the pilgrim, he’s got a question he must answer, he cannot not answer that question. So it’s almost like it’s asking him to answer this question. Is that the kind of thing that happens?

Jim Finley: Yes. I don’t know if I referred earlier to this, one of my favorite passages in Thomas Merton, where he says, when people first begin their spiritual life, there’s this quickening. These beginners have many questions. He has a question, like many... And therefore they look for an answer for their question, which is good, because he’s looking for his teacher. He said, but along the way what you discover, here all along, God’s the one asking the question. And it isn’t just you don’t know the answer to God’s question, you don’t even understand the question. And so it’s a deeper, deeper unraveling of assumptions, if when we’re led by grace, through life, just these different things that unravel us and bring us unexpectedly to things, and this is what’s happening to him. And so he’s starting out then with the imperative of this question, and it’s what is asking out of him, his own awakening heart is how to find then some response to this question because it says in scripture, God tells us where to do this, but I don’t see how it’s possible. So that sets the story in motion.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. So it sounds like he’s partly confused, but then he also has this deep longing to understand that question.

Jim Finley: That's right. And that's another thing too. I think that's a good way to put it because it's almost as if we're confused and that we can't comprehend it. But we're confused by the shining of a gentle light in our life that wasn't there before. So it's almost a deeper clarity that we can't figure out. So it's confusing, but it's a paradoxical new clarity, that he's leading him on, this way.

Kirsten Oates: So it asks something out of him, which is to answer this question, to find a teacher, someone that can help him with this, and for him it takes him on a journey and it's leading his whole life forward now. And he's asked to leave the familiar, and I was just wondering about that part of it because for some of us, we can't leave a job or a relationship or we're parents, and so I'm just wondering, for those of us that have a built-in life, how does the journey feel?

Jim Finley: Yes. So you watch his evolving understanding, he goes to hear famous preachers and you can tell they're not talking about what he's looking for. But you're right, it's hitting him... But also notice though, and this is true of us, it isn't as if in being faithful to this, he's no longer the pilgrim he always was, but it has radicalized his understanding of what the pilgrimage is. So therefore sometimes we're called to something new like a vocation or a calling, a parenting or marriage or ministry. Sometimes it really does that, but often it isn't like that at all. It's a radicalization of a depth of holiness and what was already there that were being asked to live by, and I think very often the transformation happens at that level rather than changing a different channel in the universe.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. And you said in this talk, I think it was in this talk about how for us now we can go on our journey outwards into the world, really globally through the internet and look for teachers and look for teaching in ways that the pilgrim did on foot.

Jim Finley: That's right. As for example, what we're doing right now that people are listening. Case in point. Exactly. But there's just a wealth of all kinds of things on the internet, but there's just a wealth of lovely spiritual sites on the internet. We should post those someday, I think the ones that I found so helpful, monastery and cyberspace kind of, and so you're exactly right. We have access to that, this way. Sure.

Kirsten Oates: And so you said it asks us to leave the familiar, but a lot of what we are leaving is the way we used to answer a question, the way our mind used to be able to answer questions or the way we felt as, the center of ourselves has been thrown off or the way we identified ourselves or what we thought we knew, so it's kind of the familiar is, these reference points that form part of I guess, how we feel about ourselves, our identity.

Jim Finley: Yes, it's very good. Martin Heidegger says somewhere, he said, "It's very hard to see our assumptive horizons." That is, we just assume certain things are true. A lot of psychotherapy is like this too, is you shed light on an assumption that here maybe there's something even more true, that wasn't present in your assumption, and so it's like that. It's that, never humiliated but endlessly humbled in the willingness to see the inadequacy of a previous understanding and that we're led into a deeper place to be faithful to the deeper understanding. A lot of life is like that, I think too.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. So then he is searching for the teacher and he's trying out some different teachings. He listens to sermons and finds some people that are known to be wise or holy in prayer or in the hierarchy of the church, like the abbot. So he's looking for those and at the beginning he can only tell when someone's not giving him what he wants. There's something about, there's a knowing deep inside of him of what he's looking for, but it only shows him when it's not there. Is that how it works, Jim?

Jim Finley: Yes. One example that I use is someone you haven't heard from in years went to high school with is in town and calls it like to get together like 20 years later. And for years you've been in this grace relationship with this person, this deep love, and so you tell the person about this relationship, you show the person the person's picture, how you've met, their... All that. And the person says, no, I don't... He said, what I want to know is, who do you know the person to be in your love for the person? And you don't know what to say. And your heart breaks when you try. Anything you could say wouldn't be what you know. So that's the flame that burns within. And so he is waiting for someone that talks at that level. Not about it or theory or an encouragement, but a word that actually embodies the vibrancy of what his heart is looking for.

And he goes to these, so the awakened heart can tell when it's not there. And so it sends him on his way looking-

Kirsten Oates: Somewhere else.

Jim Finley: ... Looking further. Yeah, looking further to be true to his own heart. And another thing to look at it too later, when the person finds the teacher or the pilgrim, I think of when I was with Thomas Merton, is that in the presence of the teacher, you know your heart has not deceived you, because you know you're in the presence of someone in whom your own heart's longing has been consummated. They incarnate or bear witness, that's what these mystics are I think, they help us see, the voice of this pilgrim touches us with the reality of our own longing, this way. It's so beautifully true.

Kirsten Oates: And there seems to be a tipping point. So when this fest takes place, he's energized, he packs his bag and off he goes and he is looking for teachers and he's meeting with people, but there seems to be this tipping point where you talked about he's in the dark night where he's realizing the old reference points don't work anymore, but the new ones he's been searching for haven't arisen and he's tired, he doesn't know what to do.

Jim Finley: Exactly, betwixt in between. That's why I say Richard Rohr's Order, Disorder, Reorder. So if there's an order, then it unravels in a disorder, but the reorder isn't just a new arrangement, it's a qualitatively different kind of order. So he's betwixt in between previous assumptions and things that used, they were valid. But they are no longer adequate for him to comprehend or be true to what's happening to him. But that which would allow him to be true to it hasn't appeared yet. And this deepens a sense of pilgrimage, the sense of a journey.

Kirsten Oates: What's interesting about this phase of the journey is he continues to read his Bible. He continues with his devotional practices. Is that something you'd encourage people to do in this phase?

Jim Finley: I would say yeah, in this sense, everyone has to follow their own sense about scripture and what they read and don't read. But I think it's just, notice, he's not reading the Bible as apologetics or proof texts by flipping it open to believe in this and this, believe in this and all of that because it doesn't, fire doesn't burn there. He's reading the scripture and it echoes with God's voice that awakened him. And in a sense, I think it also means, you see this in John of the Cross to all the mystics and how they looked at scripture, that once one text lights up inside it illumines all the other texts that shimmer with that same resonance, this way. And so it takes us back to the monks chanting the Psalms over and over and over again. So he reads his Bible, I think in that sense. See, he's searching.

Kirsten Oates: With that new openness and vulnerability to the scripture.

Jim Finley: Exactly. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: So then he stumbles on the teacher. The teacher arrives really, he didn't find the teacher, the teacher arrives, and he doesn't recognize the teacher at first.

Jim Finley: That's right. And again, I think with our own life, this is often true. So he's searching, searching, searching, searching, and he's in this provincial town, whatever, and he sees an old man, looks like a cleric of some sort. And he doesn't know it yet, but he's found his... He's in the presence of his teacher. So I think the next series of texts in a way, they reveal to us the nature of the teacher. He's already been revealing to us the nature of the seeker. Now it's flipping over and he's going to reveal the nature of the seeker. The first thing is a seeker says, "You look like a pilgrim." In other words, a speaker is observant.

Kirsten Oates: The teacher. The teacher is observant.

Jim Finley: Yeah. The teacher is observant. And he says, and then the second thing he says, from a monastery six miles off the road, and we take in people like you, so not only, for lodging and food and so on, and so next the teacher is invitational, so he's attentive, he or she's attentive, and next, is engaging in an intentional connection with the person. But notice the pilgrim still doesn't get what's about to happen, but the teacher doesn't either, yet. All they know they're in this kind of moving toward this encounter with each other.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. And then you said that, but he's drawn to continue to walk with the teacher, the teacher's drawing him in with his presence, and then he asks the question, "What is troubling you?" And I guess the way he listens, his presence there, the pilgrim's just following him towards the monastery without even realizing it.

Jim Finley: Yeah, I think this is a very deep part right here really, seriously, is that here they're walking along toward the monastery, but notice he hasn't mentioned, he consciously decided to go along. But he's going along because when he says, "What's troubling you? What kind of teaching are you looking for?" So what he does is he self discloses himself, he pours himself out to the presence of the teacher, and what the teacher is listening for... Rilke on one of his poems talks about the call-note "A burning desire awoke within me, he says. And so the

teacher then recognises in the pilgrim, someone who's on the verge of this non-dual, unitive state beyond words and thoughts and emotions and so on.

Because he tells him, he said, "Thanks for your offer, but I'm not looking for food. I have my bread, I have my Bible, what I'm looking for," and St. Benedict says this in his rule in the fifth century. He said, "When someone comes to the gates of the monastery, don't let him in right away, but let one of the senior monks go out and ask him, 'what are you looking for? What do you want?'" This is in Buddhism too. And what they're looking for is that call-note, like a deep, quickening or unconsummated longing within the person. And at this point then this merging starts, the resonance starts to become more explicit.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Amazing. And you said that the teacher sees what the pilgrim can't see yet.

Jim Finley: That's right. That's right. And I say that too, that often, that sometimes you discover you're in the presence of someone who's more present to you than you are, and that they see in you something you're not yet able to see, but you see that they see it, and you have a kind of faith in what they see in you until it arcs over and it lights up in you too, or it becomes more explicitly present. So it's already there because it's burning like a longing unrecognized. So that's the intimacy of the deepening encounter, I think.

Kirsten Oates: This portion reminds me of how Richard Rohr also teaches that people can see people in this phase of life, the people with wisdom as very naive. But if you're looking for this path, they have the presence that gives you confidence that the path is real.

Jim Finley: That's right. See another way of looking at it, I think it's really true, like Merton says in the monastery, everything in the monastery is designed to protect what this is about. Every part of the life, the silence and everything. He said, there are many people he thinks in the world are being called to this, but they have no one to help them understand what's happening to them, because the person for whom it's happening, you start to feel maybe you're crazy inside. Because you can't talk about it, you can't show it to anybody. It's not explainable, this way. And so then you're looking for, that's what makes these teachings so precious to the person. Because you can tell this is about the stirrings of what's stirring in you and it starts to carry you along.

Kirsten Oates: And I was struck too by when the teacher realizes where the pilgrim's at, he doesn't start with teaching, or here's how you pray, or here's this book or he starts with "Thank God," you know, "Thank God that you have this question," and he says, "God has been testing your will against God's will," which I just wondered about that kind of testing.

Jim Finley: Yes. I think that it's my understanding of it, yes. Let's say in all transformative processes where we're aware there are certain aspects of the way we treat ourself or other people or life, whatever that are compromising or doing violence to who we feel deep inside we are and are called to be. And so it's a gift to see that and it's a gift to want to move beyond those hurtful limitations, toward this ever deeper modalities of love, really. But this is actually making that infinite in that, your will is finite and your desire for this fulfillment is finite, but God's will for you is infinite because God's will for you is God.

So this is the testing of your finite will, being encountered by the infinite will, that's going to carry you beyond the boundaries of your finite abilities into God, and so he blesses himself,

“Thank God my dear brother,” and he calls it ‘unappeasable’ that is, you can’t appease it with anything less than an infinite union with the infinite. It’s a setup. You can’t, it won’t let you... no, it’s a gift to have something unresolvable because it’s only resolvable on God’s terms that are infinite and it’s already starting to happen, in you. So that’s a lovely moment in this story.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. That picture, the image you gave is really helpful that the finite will up against the infinite will, and so all it can really do is surrender into the infinite. It can’t hold its own.

Jim Finley: That’s exactly right. And as the story deepens, we’ll see what’s lovely about is the infinite will has already surrendered itself over to us. So in the reciprocity of the surrender, see, we surrender that and the prayer is then going to become embodying the mutuality of the surrender, the prayer concretizes, because that’s where the union happens.

Kirsten Oates: What do you think the pilgrim would’ve experienced when he heard that? When he heard the teacher say “Thank God” and explained to him what’s been happening, do you think he was relieved, gratitude, did it make him confident in his pursuit of this?

Jim Finley: I think, I’m reading this back to the first time I sat with Thomas Merton in direction, his acceptance of me. I think it’s an instantaneous sense of relief. So instead of a lecture or comment or an explanation, this spontaneous sense of gratitude, like this, and I think he’s touched by it because something in him already knows it’s true, but he hasn’t yet surrendered over to the... His perplexity is now being illumined by the teacher, name... It goes deeper. It’s gratitude. You could not have planned this if you tried. This was beyond your, “Blessed are you,” this comes from God. So I think he just kind of washed over him.

Kirsten Oates: Do you think he thought, “I almost didn’t come to this monastery. What was I thinking?”

Jim Finley: Yeah, really. I think too providentially, we say one, an Eckhart commentator says, we look back at our life, we say like, it so happened or it came to pass. Or later, in Mystic, we looked at Four Quartets, T. S. Eliot, we look back at certain moments where there’s a fork in the road and we took the one that led us to the union and we realized we almost didn’t take it, or we took the wrong one and here in a grace tumble, we fell into the right, you look back at the serendipity of how we found ourselves right at this moment. This is the grace nature of our own story, I think.

Kirsten Oates: That’s such a beautiful part of it.

Jim Finley: It is.

Kirsten Oates: Well, next, the staret, isn’t it? This is the staret or the teacher starts or the monk starts offering guidance in prayer and I thought it might be helpful, Jim, just given that we’ve talked about this as a potential way we could follow the pilgrim and go about praying or understand prayer the way the pilgrim’s learning about it. So I thought we might just go through in detail page 20 and 21 where he gives-

Jim Finley: What’s the first line of the paragraph?

Kirsten Oates: So the first line of the paragraph is, “The old man crossed himself and spoke,” but we’ll start a bit further down.



Jim Finley: Okay, sounds good. I'm right with you. Okay.

Kirsten Oates: I'll read it and I'd just love to get some of your thoughts to help us understand about prayer more deeply.

"It has been granted to you to understand that the heavenly light of unceasing interior prayer is attained neither by the wisdom of this world, nor by the mere outward desire for knowledge, but that on the contrary, it is found in poverty of spirit and in active experience in simplicity of heart."

Jim Finley: Yeah. Let's walk through that. Okay. That's another thing about all these teachings too. They're not challenging because they're theoretical. This is not the... But it's intuitively pure. Do you know what I mean? You have to just sit with it and let it sink in what's being said. It's been granted in this that the heavenly light, so this is that, you're being illumined by this heavenly light, just this longing, of unceasing, interior prayer is attained and here's a litany of things by which it's not attained.

So it's not attained by the wisdom of this world, that is not attained through cleverness, through any means of attaining it through your own effort, is something you can learn about in a book, or be instructed, a skill or a method or it isn't like that at all it says, that will not be helpful, this way, nor by the outward desire for knowledge. It isn't also affected if you're merely curious about it. It has to be innermost. It's not outward. It's an innermost desire. It's the desire you don't understand for a union you don't understand, but you know it's real because you tasted it or it visited you. So it's not outward. That's why it's so hard to talk about, this way.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: Neither way the wisdom of the word, or outward knowledge, but that on the contrary, it's found in poverty of spirit. It's found in your very helplessness to find your way to what you're looking for. That's where it's hidden.

It's hidden in your very inability to find it. Because it's already found you in your inability to find it. See, it's leading you to it. So it's found in poverty of spirit. Best are the poor in spirit, Jesus. And an active experience, and what is the active experience? Leaning into and yielding to the longing, that God might fulfill it. So it's an active experience that... And they're engaged in the active experience right now in their encounter with each other, so this is the active energy of the experience, and in simplicity of heart. There's no room here for posing or posturing or clever complex answers for anything. It's very childlike, really. It's disarmingly as simple this way. And one Buddhist teacher says, Shunsuke, he says, "It would be easier if we were asked to be simple in a simple world, but we're being asked to be simple in a complicated world." So we all live in a complicated world, but this is found in this deep simplicity this way. And that's where it's found.

Kirsten Oates: I like the way it says it is found in poverty of spirit and in active experience in simplicity of heart. It doesn't say, and in active experience and in simplicity of heart, it's like the active experience is merged with the simplicity of heart.

Jim Finley: Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Beautiful. And then he goes on to say, and I think this is helpful for all of us to hear, “That is why it’s not surprising that you have been unable to hear anything about the essential work of prayer and to acquire the knowledge by which ceaseless activity in it is attained. Doubtless, a great deal has been preached about prayer, and there is much about it in the teaching of various writers, but since for the most part, all their reasonings are based upon speculation and the working of natural wisdom and not upon active experience, they sermonize about the qualities of prayer rather than about the nature of the thing itself.” So I’d love to hear your thoughts Jim, about, based on reasonings and speculations.

Jim Finley: Here’s one image that helps me with it, is to say that, it’s so true that we can’t get the ocean into the thimble, but we can drop the thimble into the ocean. And we are that thimble. And so compared to the boundaryless expanse of God, our abilities is like that thimble. But when we try to get there through speculation, that is through comprehension, explainability, whatever, it’s collapsed into that poverty. And that’s why you can’t find it there. There has to be an opening into a boundaryless state, that’s beyond your abilities, but it’s already overtaking you, and is manifesting itself to you this way.

Kirsten Oates: It’s like a different type of consciousness that you have to-

Jim Finley: It is.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: Yeah. And I think it’s always true. It is hard to find. I think there are ways that everybody embodies this deeper consciousness through sincerity, through love and so on. But it’s very hard to find this kind of consistency in it. And especially, I think a lot of people when they do find it, they find it in different modalities like through marriage or children or solitude or silence or service or art. It’s really the holiness of the modality. But this is, God’s the only modality. It’s not a modality of a context of God, it’s very God. The unfolding in your heart without any, unexplainably this way. And it’s already begun to occur and insofar as we’re touched by the beauty of these teachings, the very fact we’re touched by the beauty of the teaching bears witness it’s already stirring in our heart, like we’re being led along, because the teacher isn’t just teaching the pilgrim, the teacher is teaching us, or by the pilgrim passing it on to us, they’re both teaching us, leading it on, yeah. Absolutely.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. And you alongside Jim, teaching us too. “So one argues beautifully about the necessity of prayer, another about its power and the blessings which attend it. A third again about the things which lead to perfection in prayer, about the absolute necessity, of zeal, an attentive mind, warmth of heart, purity of thought, reconciliation with one’s enemies, humility, contrition and so on. But what is prayer and how does one learn to pray?” And it’s funny, having read all that detailed description, you think you have heard about what prayer is and how to pray, but he ends with that question.

Jim Finley: Yeah, he does. Merton says somewhere, he said, “All renewal and spiritual groupings and also within ourself is returning to the fire of the founder. And the fire of the founder is this one who is illumined by this fire of God.” So it isn’t as this litany of things he’s mentioning aren’t important or helpful, but, The Cloud of Unknowing sees God naked as he is in himself and not the gifts of God. And so this is where he’s pointing to this, and it’s hard to find.

Kirsten Oates: It's hard to find. And this list of things that we could get caught up in zeal, attentive mind, warmth of heart, they all sound like ways to pray, but he's talking about something deeper than that, yeah.

Jim Finley: And I would say this too, when Bernard McGinn was a guest on the thing, and Karl Rahner say, "Mysticism in the broad sense for everybody is religious experience, is discipleship." So all these things in this broad sense are God really is present in our life, veiled in insight, veiled in aspirations, veiled in sincerity, veiled, but what can happen is a refinement towards unveiled union, that when we cross over to the veil of death and to God, it'll be unveiled glory. But sometimes God doesn't wait till you're dead to begin to give you unveiled union. So this is not veiled in these modalities. This is modeless. It has no mode, except very God. And so he's leading him to this tipping point, this way.

Kirsten Oates: This section reminded me a little bit... Years ago I was helping a church nearby do some strategy and operations work. And one of the big requests from people in the congregation was, I just want to go deeper. I really want to go deeper. And that's all they could articulate. And what the church offered was more Bible study, on more challenging books in the Bible, things like that. But it wasn't meeting the need. I just reflect on this now and think, I don't think they could really articulate the need, and the church couldn't really offer to meet the need in the way, just like this text is laying out.

Jim Finley: Exactly. Another way to look at it too is at the very heart of this thing about the Bible, see there's Bible's study, then there's Bible study. So you can sit there with your Bibles open with the commentary and it's important. But what happens when... Let's say that the author of the gospel invites us to join them in being affected, in being by the presence of Jesus in the way that they were affected by the presence of Jesus, and they were unexplainably transformed. So when we sit with Jesus and open the scriptures this way, there's this deep reading of the word of Jesus like, falling off a cliff into abyss like and it touches your heart. And so in a word, he's trying to, it has this feel to it.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Because we're so used to just being taught concepts.

Jim Finley: That's right.

Kirsten Oates: It's part of the way we're set up to take in the teaching as well as offer the teaching. It's about offering concepts and understanding concepts, and you're talking about something much more embodied and much, much deeper.

Jim Finley: I love that saying by Merton, praying to God, "You who sleep in my breast are not met with words," but within an emptying, within an unraveling within an unraveling, within a... You know what I mean? The rains fall from your hands. You've just been touched by something atmospherically present everywhere and unexplainable and it's transforming you into itself, and how do I conduct, how do I cooperate with this and what's happening to me?

Kirsten Oates: So then he goes on to say about these questions, what is prayer and how does one learn to pray? He says, "For these questions are more difficult to understand than all the arguments that I have just spoken of, and require mystical knowledge, not simply the learning of the schools," which is what we've just been discussing.

Jim Finley: That's right. Exactly.

Kirsten Oates: "And the most deplorable thing of all is that the vain wisdom of the world compels them to apply the human standard to the divine." Wow! That's quite a statement.

Jim Finley: That is, yeah. It's like we tend to absolutize the relative and relativize the absolute, and "You've made our hearts for dear lord and the hearts are restless until they rest in thee." That nothing less than an infinite union with the infinite presence of God will ever be enough to put to rest the restless longings of our heart. That's our destiny. And that's what's stirring in this, refined delicacy in the heart of the pilgrim.

Kirsten Oates: I see what you're saying. You keep pointing us to this all being on God's terms and we have to surrender our will. Yes. Beautiful.

Jim Finley: And what's interesting, and it's on God's terms, unfolding the unexplainable immediacy of the gift of our own life.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: So that's what's so disarming about it. It's not, God's terms far off, but it's God's terms in the imminence of the divine unfolding, and our hearts being opening up in this way. So amazing actually.

Kirsten Oates: Okay. So then the teacher goes on to say, "Many people reason quite the wrong way round about prayer, thinking that good actions and all sorts of preliminary measures render us capable of prayer. But quite the reverse is the case. It is prayer which bears fruit in good works and all the virtues. Those who reason so, take incorrectly the fruits and the results of prayer for the means of attaining it. And this is to depreciate the power of prayer. And it's quite contrary to holy Scripture, if the Apostle Paul says, 'I exhort therefore, that first of all, supplications be made' the first thing laid down in the apostle's words about prayer is that the work of prayer comes before everything else." So I just wondered if you had some reflections on that.

Jim Finley: Yes, yes, yes.

Kirsten Oates: It's like another riddle.

Jim Finley: Yeah. Here's another riddle. Here's a way to look at about God and us. That we're powerless to bring ourselves into existence. It didn't lie within our power to bring ourselves into existence. In a self-donating act, the infinite presence of God is pouring itself out as the gift of our presence and existence in the world. And also now that we are in existence, it doesn't lie in our power to keep ourself in existence, because death is coming. And likewise, it doesn't lie in our power to consummate the longing for God. Another image that I use is, what if our heartbeat was a voluntary muscle like our arms and legs? So in order for your heart to keep beating, you had to keep saying, beat, beat, beat, beat, beat. And what if you were absent-minded? Think of the anxiety.

And so we always imagine, we have to tend the store, but the grace is that which arises of itself, and God's the abyss like infinity of that which arises of itself, the sun moving across

the sky, the next breath, and so really it's deepening the awareness of that at a very, very deep level, and then prayer is this openness to that.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: You put aside all other concerns except love alone. "Here I am Lord" and you open yourself to be ever more sincerely accessed by the divinity of the immediacy of everything and it's nothingness without God. It's like that I think.

Kirsten Oates: I see. So what the teacher's saying is rather than thinking, if I pray well, the outcome, cause and effect, it'll bear great fruit, and, versus what you're saying is, I begin just with an open heart to God knowing I can't do anything without God, and my works may go well or they may not.

Jim Finley: I think it's like you're saying this, it isn't just once I get my ducks lined up right. I overcome this problem. I get this virtue. I get more... Eventually by getting everything arranged just right, I'll pray well. It's the opposite around. You go to God. Thomas Burton once said, "Those who are deeply transformed in prayer are not those who know how to pray, they are those who stay with God and their inability to know how to pray." Help me Lord this way. So it's like A.A. "Keep the first thing, the first thing," and the first thing is opening up to a powerlessness, to a mystery that sustain you and your powerlessness and prayer is the intimacy of that. Mr. Merton says, the thing about prayer he said is, "With God, a little sincerity goes a long, long way," and we begin by reminding ourselves we belong to God, and reminding ourselves that with God to understand us to know we're infinitely understood and we stay there.

We're always backing off to take notes with another insight and we're trying to stay in the fire long enough to let our knowing be transformed by this divinized unknowing through love.

Kirsten Oates: And this is the last little section. So he says, "Without prayer, he cannot find the way to the Lord. He cannot understand the truth. He cannot crucify the flesh with its passions and lusts. His heart cannot be enlightened with the light of Christ. He cannot be savingly united to God. None of these things can be affected unless they are preceded by constant prayer." In this book, this mystic uses the word constant prayer. Is that similar to other mystics talking about this union or unitive prayer or unitive consciousness?

Jim Finley: Well, what is the underlying themes for the whole book and it gets stronger and stronger, is that he sees, what's unceasing is the desire. So the prayer, it's the prayer that invites and embodies an ever more ceaseless desire for God that echoes God's ceaseless desire for us.

Kirsten Oates: Oh, wow! Yeah.

Jim Finley: See, that's the thing. The ceaselessness, is in the desire, so the prayer, it's the fruitfulness of the prayer, it embodies the ceaselessness, which echoes and embodies the divine ceaselessness and the merger happens there, that's I think what he's saying.

Kirsten Oates: I see. So the ceaselessness is really allowing that longing to stay open, not close it down because it keeps building, it's not fulfilled in this lifetime, and so it stays open.

Jim Finley: That's right, and there's another practical point in all of this too, I think. See, it doesn't mean that you're ceaselessly saying the prayer because that would be walking around with your hands in the air and you couldn't drive to work, you couldn't tie your shoes, they're not... The point is that knowing, it isn't that you're consciously, and like The Cloud of Unknowing says, "When we sit in meditation, we're engaged in the oneness in earnest." The rest of the day we're engaged with it playfully, that we're to live our life, we're to live our life in an underlying attitude sensitivity to the divinity of the task at hand. So there's an underlying ceaselessness of intentionality and sensibility to the innate holiness or mystery or value of the incomprehensible stature of simple things like, just to drink a glass of water.

Kirsten Oates: And the teacher's going to give him something to do to orient himself to that, and it reminds me, Jim, about you in the monastery about those, a very strict schedule and work and chanting the Psalms, and so this teacher is going to suggest there's something this pilgrim should do to help, send to him in this ceaseless prayer.

Jim Finley: Yes. In other words, it's any deep transformative act occurs in fidelity and committing yourself to the activity that embodies the transformation that you're seeking. So someone learning to be an artist, how did they become an artist? They sit with art, that is they pick up the brush, one artist I was working with in therapy talked about the anarchy of the ineffable. You dip the brush in the paint, it goes across the page like this. And so the poet, the artist, the teacher, the ministry to a community of people, silence, solitude, aloneness, long-suffering and patience and long-suffering and death, marital love, closeness. It transforms you in the giving of yourself over to its transformative power in your life, this way. So it's concretized.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: It's that act, which when we engage in it with our, habitually, with our whole heart, takes us to the deeper place. And then at the end of each rendezvous, we ask for the grace not to break this thread of the underlying sensitivity to it as we go through the day. So he's setting the tone up in that very practical, grace practicality of transformation.

Kirsten Oates: Wonderful. So he's offering him a practice that allows prayer to transform the pilgrim into itself, the thing that he's longing for which is to be someone who prays ceaselessly. And that's the practice he gives him.

Jim Finley: That's exactly right.

Kirsten Oates: And he talks about the practice, "The continuous interior prayer of Jesus is a constant uninterrupted calling upon the divine name of Jesus with the lips in the spirit, in the heart, while forming a mental picture of his constant presence and imploring his grace during every occupation at all times and in all places, even during sleep." So for this pilgrim, it's all consuming to begin with like when you went to the monastery.

Jim Finley: Right. Exactly. And I also like this, I said this in the talk too. I like it. You don't have in your mind an image of Jesus, like you cannot. You can't. But notice it's the image of the presence of Jesus. So it's like when you love someone very much, you have an image of their presence in your heart. And so you're saying the prayer with this heart-grounded mandala or this image of Jesus, so the words in the image and so on. Exactly. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: I love it. And we'll just close with where you ended, which is the teacher saying, "Now, do you understand what pray without ceasing is?" "Yes, indeed father, and in God's name teach me how to gain the habit of it." He cried filled with joy.

Jim Finley: And here's the input. This is exactly where we ended on. This is saying, is that when you're searching for something, and you're in the presence of a way to concretize the desire, your very desire is what allows you to recognize what's being offered is what you've been looking for. And you see it as an insight. But that insight, what remains is the path of habituating the insight. So Freud talks about, in the psychoanalysis he talks about insight. Then he talks about the need of working through. Where A.A. is like this too, the person that we've come to admit. But you got to walk the walk. You got to make your inventory, you have to make amends, you have to walk the walk. So what's the walk? Show me concretely the habituated path where this can happen in the unfolding of my hours, this way. And that's what we're moving into next.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Excellent. I'm looking forward to it. We're seeing what happens next from this very joyful high point in his journey, having had this insight.

Jim Finley: Yeah. I would say too as the, end on this too with an encouraging note, you'll notice that when we get into this, it helps us to be more conscious of the things that we're faithful to in the daily patterns of our day, this way. That they sustain us in the way. There are certain simple gestures or certain sensitivities that the fluctuations of it sustain us along, and it's trying to help us become more consciously aware of those patterns of fidelity.

Kirsten Oates: Beautiful. So as we go through the book, I'm sure you'll help illuminate how we can apply this in our own day-to-day lives, not in a monastery and not as a pilgrim, but how we can work it into our lives. Just one quick thing before we go, Jim, you mentioned in that session a story about Thomas Aquinas and you told it quite quickly and so just for those who are interested, I wanted just to unpack it a little bit. You talked about Thomas Aquinas, who wrote the Summa Theologica, and I just wondered what that was, and whether that was something significant.

Jim Finley: Yes. Thomas Aquinas was a Dominican friar, in the Middle Ages, who was a brilliant theologian, studied at the University of Paris, and he held the chair in theology at the University of Paris. He taught there. And so he wrote this work. He wrote other works too. But the Summa Theologica was a summary of all of theology. So it starts with, what is God? And he walks, it's lovely work, actually. It's quite lovely, and it's several volumes long. He goes all the way. It's a Summa Theologica. So the story is that he, toward the end of his life, he had a mystical awakening, and he asked for the Summa Theologica to be burned, because he said, compared to what he saw, it's straw, and Gilson, this Thomistic philosopher, a contemporary died not many years ago, he said, "But on that straw Europe was to make its bed."

See, it was to become the theology. It's no longer, it's more in the background now in the Catholic tradition, but it's brilliant. It played a very important role. But the deeper insight is this. There's a book, we're going to be doing it in the series on the podcast too. Josef Pieper wrote a book called The Silence of St. Thomas, and he talks about that story. But then he says, Aquinas says, that what makes things intelligible like a tree or a stone or star is their

essence, is the essence.

And the essence is what God eternally knows a stone to be, eternally contemplating it in God the word, in the beginning was the word and the words with God and the word was God, and all things were made through him, without him has been made, nothing that has been made. And so when God created stones, God didn't have to think up what stones might be, God's fiat god brings into existence what stones eternally are, in God and since everything in God is God, that's the divinity or infinity of stones. So, the Silence of St. Thomas is the very thing that makes things intelligible, namely, their essence is what makes them ultimately unknowable.

Because to completely know a stone, you'd have to know God. It's a brilliant, I just love that. But anyway, that's that story, The Silence of... And I would also say this too. Notice whenever we're struck by the beauty of this presence, we're silenced by it. And then if we speak, there's a way of speaking that breaks the silence, because maybe we can't endure the intimacy. But there's also words that don't break the silence. The cadence of the language embodies the silence, and I think that's the teachings of the mystics. That's the teachings of Jesus. It's not a word, the logos, it's not a word that breaks the silence, the silence it says. It's a logos, it's a living word. The cadences of which embodies what's beyond what words can say. And so that's very much at the heart of the book too.

Kirsten Oates: I think what you're pointing to as well is that because the Summa Theologica does embody that mystery, but because the mystery is infinite, Thomas Aquinas went even deeper into it and this beautiful, amazing work that we just are so grateful for, he's gone even deeper into the infinite love of God.

Jim Finley: There's something else too. Jacques Maritain, he wrote a book called The Degrees of Knowledge on Aquinas, but it was also true, there's also stories of Aquinas writing the Summa and going into ecstasy while writing the Summa. So really, it's like Bernard McGinn's book, Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart. So even though he said, "burn it," as in the story, where everyone so gratefully didn't burn it because the sheer beauty of it gives you reason to... You see what I'm saying? He wasn't someone, long-drawn-out explanations of unexplainable things, just before he died, God zapped him.

He knew it all along, but theology, mystical thought is the way that he saw to convey that. What's interesting is another difference between the Roman Church and the Orthodox Church is that they hold that the Roman Church pays too much attention to the Pagan philosophers. We would hold, it pays attention to Aristotle and Plato, and then transcends them as a language of the infinite. But they give much more emphasis to what this book is about. See, they get much more emphasis to mystical awakening and prayer. You even see that in their liturgy and so on. It's interesting.

Kirsten Oates: So interesting. Yes.

Jim Finley: Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Well, thank you for lovely dialogue, Jim. Such a joy to talk this through with you, and thank you for that beautiful second talk, we're on our way into a great season.



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