

Turning
to the
Mystics



The Way of a Pilgrim

Dialogue 3

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've been turning to the way of a pilgrim by an anonymous author. And I'm grateful to be here with Jim, and we're going to dialogue about Jim's third talk. Welcome, Jim.

Jim Finley: Yes, thank you. Yeah, got to be together again. It's nice, good.

Kirsten Oates: So we're following the journey of this pilgrim, and it's been wonderful to follow along with your talks. And in this latest one, the pilgrim finally gets a little bit of what he's been looking for on the how to pray without ceasing. And so just a little recap, our pilgrim was touched in church, or quickened in church, when he heard the verse "pray without ceasing" and he's been on a quest to discover how to do it. He's visited preachers and an abbot and someone known for being a holy man and someone who prays. And then he kind of stumbles across the staree who's become his teacher now and has some ideas for him about how to pray in this way, and so that's where we're at so far.

And Jim, one thing you've made clear in this session of the podcast, and it reminds me of what became clear with all the mystics we've studied, is that the contemplative path arises with a deep sense of longing, and the longing asks something out of us, and that seems consistent with every mystic we've looked at.

Jim Finley: That's right. I think for all of us, there's moments where we're graced with moments of sensing God's presence in our life, from time to time, in all kinds of ways. But what starts to happen with some people is the desire to abide there, that is so the longing is to live in an habituated sensitivity to that oneness, God's oneness with us. It's always there, breath by breath, heartbeat by heartbeat. And so the path is how to consummate that longing or how to be healed from what hinders us from living in that habitual state of God's oneness with us that's always there, and that's the path.

Kirsten Oates: And for the pilgrim, the path opened up, the longing was praised ceaselessly. So does the longing kind of transform into that desire for the habituated state?

Jim Finley: Yes. See, because it's interesting how it takes... this is why the teacher is so helpful. For a while we could tell something's going on and we're drawn to follow it, but we don't yet understand what's going on. For quite some time he's thinking how to pray constantly, literally, and only little by little, he gains clarity over the nature of the quickening that sends him on this really kind of a deepened understanding of what even pilgrimage is. He's a pilgrim. Now he's on this interior pilgrim. We always say it's a interior pilgrim that we're all on, a kind of a pilgrimage searching for this fulfillment in God, a longing for God.

And so it's only later little by little that he sees the habitual prayer is really a prayer that embodies the habitual longing, that echoes with God's habitual longing for us. So it's in that resonance where the longing of God awakens us to a longing, and it's in the deepening of the mutuality of the longing is where the intimacy happens.

Kirsten Oates: And one of the consistent pieces that goes with this longing, as you were saying, is that we can't consummate it, that we're longing for something and ultimately we're not capable of attaining what we're looking for.

Jim Finley: Yes. There are certain things we are capable of attaining through our finite powers and abilities, and that's the grace of our life. We self-efficacy in different ways. But anything that we're capable from a spiritual point of view, anything we're capable of attaining by our powers, because our powers are finite, we can only attain finite things. But since this is infinite, it's really we're quickened by God with a desire for an infinite union with God. So it's God-given longing for an infinite union with God that we, by our own finite powers, are powerless to attain. So what it does really, it radicalizes our dependence on God, who's mysteriously leading us in this way that we still don't understand. And notice also this is very subtle. There's no visions or ecstasies. There's a quiet stirring, like a restless stirring within his heart, and he feels called to listen to it and to follow it.

Kirsten Oates: And Jim, this pilgrim's journey, it seems to be innate in our universe, innate in the way God created us, and that this is an archetypal journey in a way.

Jim Finley: Yes. The way we would say it it's kind of classical to the whole contemplative tradition, and I want to paraphrase Thomas Merton here, is that our life proceeds from a hidden infinite source, is sustained breath by breath by that source, because we're powerless to give ourselves our next breath, and it's fulfilled. Its destiny, it's an infinite union with that infinite source. And what happens to the grace of the stirring of the spirit within us in prayer is that we know the source, but we know it mysteriously in our heart. St. John of the Cross says, "They have no light to guide you except the one that burns in your heart." So it's a kind of quiet listening to a kind of interior subtle attentiveness. So in the monastery, everything in the life is designed to cultivate this and foster it. But out here in the world, it's not like that.

We have to cultivate a contemplative culture in our heart by being quietly attentive in the stirrings of our heart and how to be more faithful to them and open to them and patient with the longings. So we're receiving, just as through the pilgrim receiving guidance, the pilgrim is passing on the guidance received from the teacher. And so we're being led by the pilgrim, where we can touch base, that we can resonate with... we kind of echo with a kind of familiarity that we're no stranger to a longing that tugs at our heart. And we're no stranger to only know, "How can I fulfill that? How do I go about... What's going on here this way?" So that's the kind of discernment that I think that's opening up in the pilgrim and all these mystics, really.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. And what's surprising and amazing about the path, Jim, is... and you said this in the talk, you say that for the pilgrim, ceaseless prayer is not something we're capable of doing, and that's the whole point. And so that the transformation happens in the process of trying to pray ceaselessly or trying to find out how to pray ceaselessly.

Jim Finley: We are capable with God's grace of trying to fulfill it. That's where we lean into it as an act of the will. That's our intention. So we lean into the longing, but we're powerless to consummate the longing because it's a longing for an infinite union with the infinite. But what we can do, and that's what the pilgrim is doing, too. He's giving himself over to leaning in closer to follow the longings so that he can be overtaken by God in the midst of his

longings.

Kirsten Oates: And that's really the path, this contemplative path, and you say that the transformation happens in that whole process of that, what you just described, yeah.

Jim Finley: And I also think this too, that in real life how this works, whether you're following this mystic or the John of the...., or whatever, is that along the way as you're just quietly faithful to it, you're over... It isn't as if we're waiting for the big crescendo to suddenly be overtaken. And we're kind of blindsided by little momentary ways that we're overtaken by God, by a glimpse or a touch or an awareness or an unraveling or a realization and like breadcrumb, like following a path. We're giving these intimations that what we're looking for is already within us and leading us on and on and on.

Kirsten Oates: Amazing. Yes. What's interesting about this story too is just when the pilgrim's coming to the end of himself, the teacher arrives, and it seems like he was at a point where he might just give up, and I wonder, do some people give up?

Jim Finley: I think a lot of people give up, and that's okay. I mean, we're infinitely loved by God. God never gives up on us, because God's always in our life. We may give up on this, but it doesn't mean we've given up on being a good person, we've given up on trying to be someone whose presence makes the world a better place, we're trying to be effective or engaging. So it isn't as if we give up like that way. Some people do that through major depression, different things. But we can give up on the subtlety of this thing. That's how it goes. And I think a lot of times we give up, and months or years later, it comes back again this way. And then there are some people, in all unforeseeable ways, they don't give up.

So everyone, it's a... That's where the spiritual teacher comes in. The teacher kind of helps you understand where you are, accept where you are, see what's being asked out of you where you are this way. But some people do give up on this. Like Thomas Merton said that there's people in the world for whom this, they're being led to this, but they have no one to help them understand what's happening to them. And so our idea here, the Turning to the Mystics podcast, is to help the people understand what's happening to them. Because we're not waiting for some big thing to happen. Big things can happen, but we're trying to calibrate our heart to an ever more subtle scale, wherein something as simple as our breathing or as simple as our sincerity, something starts shining through and we learn an obediential fidelity to that refined sensitivity this way. It takes patience and openness.

Kirsten Oates: I think, too, you've done a wonderful job with these podcasts of just normalizing this deep sense of longing because it's painful in some ways and in other ways it can lead you to feeling inadequate or... if you don't understand it.

Jim Finley: I work with a lot of people who come to talk to me on retreats and so on, as we hear about this, and our path is really is we long to long, we just long that we would long. But the very fact it's disturbing that we don't long, is the longing. We just can't figure out how to turn the TV off and sit in prayer and we have to get the remote and keep looking around, like, "Why am I doing this?" But God's with us in the discontent of

that and learning that God's with us in the discontent and what are the lessons that we learn? So God's always present, the lessons are always there, and we're to calibrate our heart to an ever finer scale of resonance with what's going on and be open and receptive to the twist in the flow of this path that we're on.

Kirsten Oates: That's the invitation.

Jim Finley: Yes. That's the... exactly, yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Then the teacher makes a pretty clear statement, and this is what the whole book is about, that this kind of quest requires mystical teaching. And so what's interesting for me about that is the words came out of scripture and he went and listened to preachers and met with the abbot, but that what he's looking for in this deep longing requires this mystical teaching. And so it can be the same words coming out of the scripture, out of a preacher's mouth, and a mystical teacher's mouth. So what is the subtle difference, Jim, that helps something move from-

Jim Finley: Yes.

Kirsten Oates: Move into this mystical-

Jim Finley: Yeah, this is a subtle point on what it would mean in the lineage, like what is this mystical teaching, and this would be one way to understand it. Mystical teaching could be understood this way. In the midst of my seeking, I was interiorly illumined by a God-given touch or an understanding that I myself don't understand. I can't comprehend it, but I know that it's true. It's mystical because it's not the result of our effort, rather it's given by God that overtakes us in the limitations of our efforts. So that's why Merton... Dan Walsh at the monastery in the class of metaphysics, see. "I know what I know what I know that I know it. The trouble is it's I who know that I know it. When I try to tell you what it is that I know, I don't know what to say." This way.

So you're kind of left at the intimate arising of the nearness, of the unexplainable, but it burns, like it quietly is there. So not to play the cynic, see, not to doubt your own awakening heart and to listen to this unexplainable stirring, which is God's deepening. It's the God-given deepening awareness of God's infinite love for you and desire for you, drawing you ever deeper to surrender to it and walk with it, and that's the mystery of it. That's the subtlety. That's why a teacher can be so helpful, either if you're fortunate enough, a alive teacher like this, where we're led in a deeper understanding of the scriptures, like you indicate. Origen talks about the deeper meaning, the inner meaning, or through these mystics, that you read something and you're so moved by it because it's so beautiful. And in your heart, you know it's beautiful because it's true. And you know it's true, because it was given to you to know that it's true, and that's mystical understanding, this way, I think, at least one way to understand it.

Kirsten Oates: And there's something about the embodied teacher, Jim, that really is necessary, even if you're not live with the teacher, but there's something necessary about the sense of the embodied teacher. Is that right?

Jim Finley: Yes. As I said, when I was with Thomas Merton, I saw him as a lineage holder. He was embodied. But after I left the monastery, when I read his words aloud, I can hear his voice. So the teacher, you can be in the presence of the teacher, like the pilgrim is, where I was with Merton to the teacher. But also I think that's why these mystic teachers did the writing, because the directees who were getting directions said, "You're not going to live forever, if you'd write this down this way." So I think they were writing out of such a pure place that makes us loyal, a constellation without a cause. They say these beautiful things and there's such purity of presence, it awakens that presence in you and your heart sings with it. Then you're in alignment with the teaching, like you're being quietly guided about how to stay receptively open to this ongoing flow of God drawing you on and on.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, And this book is certainly a beautiful read from that standpoint. For me personally, anyway, it really opens my heart to this kind of longing and this quest and this journey.

Jim Finley: I think that all these mystics were reflecting or processing together this point. They all have that intimacy, but because it's a narrative of personal experience, it touches our experience. Another example would be Teresa of Avila, her life. It's her mystical autobiography, and you get that same thing. She winds you through these awakenings that she had, and then it helps us. That's how we're winding through our awakenings, because the key message is it's lived out in our life. It's not a theory or a teaching. It's a certain way to live our life. And I think that's the power of a narrative. This is why I think the gospels is the life of Jesus. We're following him in his life and it echoes and reveals our life to us, and so it's that, I think, yeah.

Kirsten Oates: There's something so comforting about that, that we find it in our own lives. We don't have to go somewhere. There's no big adventure or quest we necessarily have to go on, that our own life is the journey that God finds us in.

Jim Finley: Exactly. And the way I would put it, I would say this to people in direction too, to myself. Anyone who's listening to these reflections, who's touched by them, you didn't decide to be touched by it. You didn't say, "God, I want to get touched by it." You just discovered you were someone who's being touched by it, and it bears witness that you yourself are on the path that the teachings are about. Because there's many, many people that would click on these and listen, they're not touched by it. They're given other lights, they're given other ways. And so that's the gratitude, I think, for the love energy that guides us on this way.

Kirsten Oates: So then in this episode, the teacher is going to go through the how with the pilgrim. And I wondered, Jim, if we could just read through some of those pieces together, going back over some of the details of the how. And I was thinking about this, how sometimes when they show something on TV, they say, "Don't try this at home." But I'm wondering if this is something we could try at home.

Jim Finley: I say this sometimes when I give these silent weekend retreats. Meals are in silence and so on. But the whole idea is to create optimal conditions, to experience the presence of God that's present in your own living room. And it's harder, sometimes married couples, like marriage therapy, they're not intimate unless they go on vacation somewhere, but when they're at home with all their stuff, let's say. So the question is how not to let the stuff stop you from the intimacy that's always waiting for you, and it's that way with God too. And that's what it means to have been more deeply at home in our own home. It's our own dwelling place. It's

where we live. And so I think that's true. So he's now giving him a way, offering a teaching, that concretizes an actual thing he can do. And if he gives himself over to it with his whole heart, it brings about this deepening habitual state of the consummation of this longing, and so this is the teaching he's going to give.

Kirsten Oates: So just where he starts is he says, "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. The appeal is couched in these terms. Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." So he kind of gives him this summary overview at the beginning before he goes into some more detail. And what's interesting about the summary, for me, is this instruction about "forming a mental picture of his constant presence and imploring his grace during every occupation at all times in all places, even during sleep," and yeah, I just wondered how that works.

Jim Finley: Yes, here's what it means to me, I think, in presence. So it isn't as if... You can do this by the way. You can have a holy card, a picture of Jesus, an icon of the sacred heart. You can kind of internalize that image this way, but the image of his presence, I think it would be this in a way, that when we deeply love someone, we hold within in ourselves an image of their presence. It's not a literal, conjuring up a literal sense of a snapshot of them, but it's like an internalized sense of their presence that we know in our heart through our love for them. So he is saying it's the same way with Jesus. It's not an external image so much, but you hold in your heart the image of his presence. He's the image of the invisible God. Jean-Luc Marion, the Catholic theologian, phenomenologist, and he says, "This is the difference between an idol and an icon, an image."

He's not the idol of God, the image of God. He said, "Because if it's an idol, you can go to the idol that represents God, make an offering or pray." But he says, "An image is gazing into an icon and you gaze into the image and you see in the image God gazing back at you." And he calls this saturated phenomena. See, so it's a saturated phenomena and what you're doing, because it's already in your heart, you're actually deepening how lucid that inner image is and how more and more non-distinct that inner image of the presence of Jesus, it's non-distinct from your very presence. And the prayer keeps deepening the non-distinctness of your presence in the presence of Jesus this way, longing unto longing, fulfillment unto fulfillment. And so that's the subtlety of the interior intimacy of this.

Kirsten Oates: Wow. That's... yeah, yeah.

Jim Finley: I want to add one more thing too. I get the feeling sometimes, we all have images of ourself. Based on past experiences, we have opinions about ourself and all of that. But what this is about is a deepening awareness that the deepest most intimate sense of who you are is who you are in the oneness of this image of your presence, ever communing more and more with the presence of God in Jesus. And that's almost... See, Thomas Merton, this is the true self, this is unit of self, this oneness with God. And what the prayer does, it makes it more and more vibrant, or more and more all-pervasive or ever more atmospheric in your life, this way, like a metamorphosis of a sense of your very subjectivity to grace.

Kirsten Oates: So in a way, Jesus carried the energy and the groundedness of this human divine connection.

And so we can kind of learn to embody that by embodying that sense of Jesus's presence, and.

Jim Finley: That's right.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. And how-

Jim Finley: Also, you get a strong sense in the gospels that this is how the disciples were so enamored by Jesus. When you read in the Gospel of John, the last discourse of the last supper just before he was to go out to be killed, about this love, this love energy. And you get this sense they were so enamored or taken by this love, it was becoming more and more non-distinct from who they deepest down were knowing themselves to be. And so I think the spirit with unutterable groanings groans within us, like birth pains, see, that we might come to this communal realization of God's wonders with us in us, and God in the mystery of Jesus. And the word became flesh and dwelt among us. That is, the word became us. I love that we may come out, yes. And so the prayer then is the embodiment, like a holding place where that goes deeper and deeper and deeper and deeper.

Kirsten Oates: And the call on Jesus, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me," is a call on that love that was alive in the world through him.

Jim Finley: That's right.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. And like you say, it's not just a call to Jesus to have mercy on me, subject to subject, but it's a call for transformation that I might be transformed into that love that-

Jim Finley: It is.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: Dan Walsh said in the class in medieval philosophy at the monastery, he said, "We must overcome objectivity and we must overcome subjectivity. We must find our way to trans-subjectivity." So this is this trans-subjective realization this way, and see, and the Lord Jesus Christ had mercy on me, is the realization that I'm not living up to... In my weakness as a human being, I'm not living up to who deep down I am, no call to be. But in the sincerity of that acknowledgement, when love touches suffering, the suffering turns love into mercy. See, have mercy on me, that you are all merciful. So Jesus is like a field with no stones in it, there's nothing to be afraid of, the fear has no foundations, because the mercy is oceanic, this way, that you're powerless to make God love you more because it's infinite, and no matter how bad you mess it up, you can't make God love you less.

That's powerlessness, it's a grace, power. So what you're asking is that that take root in you, because we don't know it yet. We actually believe that we're being measured by our ability to measure up to something. It's very hard to get over that. "Am I lovable yet? Am I lovable yet?" Thomas Merton once said, "We're all going around with a secret little list in our heart that once I stop doing this and this and this, God and I will really get down to business. Once I start doing this and this, God and I..." "

He said, "To realize with God, there's no list, but it's hard for us to step into that there's no

control. So we're afraid to lose the control that we think that we have over the life that we think that we're living. And our control is that we're being measured by the measurements of our abilities to live up to something which is the idolatry of effort over the grace that's infinitely in love with us and our powerlessness, which is experiential salvation." And that's this prayer, in a way, it's kind of melting into that and turns us into itself.

Kirsten Oates: Jim, would it be right to say that another way of saying it would be like, "Lord Jesus Christ, reveal your love to me, reveal your love in me, reveal the love that I am"? The term mercy, for me, can sound a little bit like, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." Like feel sorry for me, or you know?

Jim Finley: Yes, you could say that. This is a good point. See, if taken the wrong way, see, "Have mercy on me, because as you well know, I sure need it." Like I'm a lost cause, don't give up on me. But it's almost like saying, "Have mercy on me to see that your mercy on me has dissolved any lack between us at all. Have mercy on the fact that I've not yet tumbled into the abyss of that. Be patient with me. And I know you are because you're infinitely patient with me. So help me to be more patient with myself."

And by the way, the more we live this way within ourselves, it helps us to see everybody this way. It helps us to see the... and I think that's how Jesus saw the world, saw people. It's like we're infinitely loved broken people, and we're trying to be healed from what hinders us from realizing this love that takes us to itself in our weakness and bear witness to it.

Kirsten Oates: That's helpful. Thank you, Jim. I noticed that the longing now shifts slightly for the pilgrim after he's given that little summary piece about the prayer. The teacher asks him, "Now do you understand what prayer without ceasing is?" And the pilgrim says, "Yes, indeed, father, and in God's name teach me how to gain the habit of it, I cried, filled with joy." So it feels like he's gone from this place of almost giving up. And now he's reenergized, almost like another quickening's happened, that he's got a new level of depth of clarity. And his next quest is this idea of gaining a habit of this ceaseless prayer that the teachers described.

Jim Finley: Yes. I'm going to use an example in therapy, for example. So let's say in therapy, a person's working on some ongoing issue, whatever it is, and in the process of the work, in the dialogue with the therapist, there's a moment of clarity. There's a gestalt, the person gets it, like a light comes on like, "Oh, my God," it comes into view. But then he says, "Teach me the habit of it, because the fact I see it doesn't mean..." Freud called this working through. "It doesn't mean I've submitted to the process of being transformed in what I realize." See, how does it become an habituated reality in me this way? And so that is a breakthrough for him, like it crystallizes in a deeper realization. And then in the realization, he realizes there's a path in which it'll become as habitual to him as his breathing, or as standing up and sitting down. "Teach me that path." See?

Kirsten Oates: Yes. So he's been on this one path created out of the longing to find out how to pray ceaselessly. And now this new path opens up of becoming a person who is habituated in this kind of experience the teacher laid out for him.

Jim Finley: There's something else too. I think this is true in life a lot of ways. There is this longing and he starts out, "Where do I?" And the longing leads... there's different points and it leads him

right up to this moment. And the longing is a kind of a fulfillment of the longing, he sees it. But the fulfillment of the longing opens out a more subtle level of longing. And I think that goes on and on that way. We seek it, it lights up, but the light that shines out from it illumines the path of yet deeper fulfillment, like perpetual grace metamorphosis of ourself into God's love this way. I think that's a subtle insight. I think that's how it is, yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. The next thing the teacher tells him is to read this book, the Philokalia. You described the book as it's a book that brings together a lot of the great teachers from this Eastern Orthodox tradition into one book and it describes how to pray or how to follow this contemplative kind of path. Is that right, Jim?

Jim Finley: Yes. That it would be, in other words, this pilgrim isn't freelancing. I mean, the teacher's not freelancing. He actually has himself been initiated into, informed in, a lineage of the Jesus prayer lineage. It goes back for centuries. And so he sat with the teacher and so now the lineage is being passed on, just like as we listened to the pilgrim it's being passed on to us from awakened heart to awakened heart. So he says, "Here are these writings this way on prayer." And again, the analogy would be, in Turning to the Mystics podcast and the Roman Catholic tradition, John the Cross and Teresa and Eckhart and so on, if they were all together in a great big volume. See, it'd be like the Roman Catholic Philokalia. "Here, read these." See? They just sit.

It's like an endless, it's like getting into the Word of God, like a deep, prayerful Bible study. It has these layers and layers and layers of meaning, by just sitting with these just brilliantly gifted teachers on this unit of way. And so he's introducing him now to this lineage. He's meeting the lineage, he's live in the encounter, and he's saying, "Here are our texts that you can sit with and ponder and take to heart for guidance this way."

Kirsten Oates: Like these writers that have had a trusted place in the tradition of their words, touching people and helping them in their path?

Jim Finley: That's right. There's been a communal affirmation of the authenticity of their teaching by centuries of the people who have been transformed and touched by the beauty and truth of them, and so it's like a heritage.

Kirsten Oates: And there's really nothing like that, an ancient text like that, in the Roman Catholic tradition. You pointed out there's these different mystics, but no one kind of put together a grouping of them until I guess recently, more recently.

Jim Finley: It's interesting how you could look on this too. We could say the whole Bible is a collection of inspired teachings in one volume walking around like this. But in terms of a collection of mystical texts, what you have now in more recent times are people who put together anthologies of some of these people. And we had Bernard McGinn on the podcast, just finished his fifth volume. So in a way, Bernard McGinn's five volumes is one volume, because it's a very serious in-depth that goes back through. But we don't have... The Philokalia stands on its own this way. It's just a classical set of texts in its own right, found its way.

Kirsten Oates: Did you study the Philokalia in the monastery?

Jim Finley: I did. I was very touched by the Jesus prayer, really, the simplicity of it. I didn't get as deeply

absorbed in it as I did John of the Cross and Teresa and Eckhart and a few of the others, and Merton. There's a couple others too. But it was one of those, I was touched by it. It became part of me. It affected me in my own sense of this I love you prayer, we'll talk about a little later. I think it was inspired by the Jesus prayer this way. So I was touched by it. I was so grateful for Merton introducing me to it.

Kirsten Oates: The teacher makes this big point about the Philokalia that it's, well, I guess the pilgrim asks him to compare the Philokalia to the scripture, like, "Is this more holy?" I think he asks. And the teacher talks about the Philokalia as a way of I guess helping, he says, "See things in scripture that might otherwise be hidden." And this idea of looking through glass at the sun. And Jim, you talked about these different ways we can read the Bible and reading it as proof text, and I just wondered if you could help unpack reading it that way versus what we're trying to do here.

Jim Finley: Yes. I want to say first of all what the teacher's talking about, that if we read... This is also true at liturgy, for example, when everyone stands for the reading of the gospel, or sitting in deep prayer, is that when we see the living, when we see, for example, we hear Jesus speaking to us in the scriptures and experientially in faith, it's the deathless presence of Jesus actually saying those words to us, and so it's abyss-like, it's infinite. It's just infinite. It shines so bright this way. And so what he's suggesting, he said, "Well, is the Philokalia like the Bible?" He said, "No, it's not the revelation of God directly in the purity of this." So he said, "If you take a little chip of colored glass close to your eye and look at it this way, it diffuses the light enough that you can see the beauty of the sun shining through the glass. So you can see the beauty of this deathless presence of God calling you to God this way." It's like that.

But then I say it's not like this when you use scripture as proof text. As a set of things, like in the creed, it has its own place or set of things to believe. You flip back and forth. It doesn't blind our eyes. It's that actually affirming a credal formulation, checkpoint, checkpoint, checkpoint, checkpoint. And so the creed, then belief, traditionally is known as a sign of faith, but we're not saved by belief, we're saved by faith. And faith is a ferment in the heart. Gabriel Marcel, is a blinded intuition, is an obscure certainty, like a living ferment of longing, and we're saved by faith. So we read the Bible in prayer as faith that if we're careful and what we're to believe is a layer of that. But when we turn the believe text back and forth, it doesn't have that. It can spill over into piety that way, it can catch fire.

See, "He walks with me and he talks with me and he tells me I am a zone and the love we share as we tarry there, no other has ever known." That's mystical. See, that's the devotional piety, but the proof. So he's talking about reading the scripture. It's like the monks chanting the Psalms in the monastery, the chanting back and forth. They know a lot of them, they know them by heart. They chant them seven days a week. But it's a chanting back and forth of the harmonious kind of tonal quality of God's voice resonating in the words of the Psalms. So that's how he's talking, I think.

Kirsten Oates: That's helpful. So the Philokaleos is really, like all these mystics are, they're opening up a pathway so that this power in the scriptures transforms our heart, versus just giving us concepts to believe or...

Jim Finley: Yes. When you look at all the teachings of the mystics, they always start with a revelation

and they use it as a poetic metaphor to give a language for interiority. And so the passage of the dark night, the interior castle of the soul, the blind stirring of love in the dark of night, the cloud. So they take a text from scripture, then they explicate it as a way to pray, whereas a revelation of a path of prayer that stabilizes us in that which it is revealing so we can live by it. How I put it too, you look at it this way, it's like the Bible is like a love letter from God.

The example I use is imagine two people who love each other very much. They have to be separated for a long time. And so every week they send each other a love letter and the one who has to be away without telling the other one comes back for a surprise visit, and the person that's sitting in the car waiting for the beloved to step out to get the mail, which will have their letter in it, and they don't know that the beloved is right across the street watching them. And so they're sitting on the sofa reading the love letter this way, and all of a sudden they look up from the love letter and the beloved walks into the room. They look at each other, saying nothing. That's contemplation. So the Bible is a love letter from God in whom the beloved suddenly appears wordlessly as the consummation of the words.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Stunning. I love you said that the mystics offering us a language for interiority, like how to find our way to our own heart and that connected contemplative place.

Jim Finley: That's right. And because this is so subtle, I found this contemplative spiritual direction, they give us words for our own heart's longings. Sometimes in someone in direction, I'll have someone, we'll walk through these texts together and they'll bring the copy in with them and they'll read some sentences out loud. It's almost like how do they know how to say that? The words kind of in a succinctly way express our own heart's longings we can't find words for. I think that's a big part of what the gift is, I think.

Kirsten Oates: Okay, so Jim, maybe we'll go through some more of the instructions. And what I love about this text and these instructions, it's so embodied. So there's a lot of instructions for the body to help move the body into this state of openness that you were just describing. So it starts with, "Sit down, alone and in silence."

Jim Finley: My sense is this, if you do this in passing on your way to something else, like, "I think I'll do this for 10 minutes and then go watch television," nothing happens. So what we're assuming here based on the desire for this habituated state, when you sit, you sit with all your heart, that as you sit there, it's your whole bodily being, like, "Here I am, Lord. I sit this way, and I'm alone. I'm alone, because you alone are God, and I alone out of all the millions of people, millions of... I alone is who... Not a single one of those people's me." So Plotinus says, "Alone with the alone." See, is the alone with the alone, and all humanity is included in this aloneness, because everyone is this oneness this way.

So "I'm sitting still with all my heart, I'm sitting down alone and I'm in silence." Meaning I'm in a silence, the hero, Israel. I'm in the silence, I go silent in order that I might listen, and that I might listen more deeply to the voice you spoke in me in the 24th Sunday after Pentecost when I heard the words "pray without ceasing" and my heart was quickened this way, and you're the one who got me right here, right now. And so I know I'm sitting here to marinate in this kind of... to be soak this in and walk with this. So it's just a way of just being fully, quietly, bodily present in the presence of God, yes.

Kirsten Oates: And you're saying, Jim, it's important to also give some time to that and not to be rushing on the way to somewhere, which is helpful.

Jim Finley: I would say this sometimes, I search people to... See, if you just sit for two minutes, it's not long enough. If out of devotional sincerity, you're going to sit for two hours, you probably won't do it, or it won't last long. So take something that's reasonable, for example, 30 minutes. Also, I would suggest to people to set a timer, put it under a pillow or something so it doesn't jar you when it goes off, so you don't have to do any clock watching. Because in a way, when you're deeply absorbed like this, you're not in time. It's a kind of a timeless state. It's like a deep, intimate conversation with someone. You have to look at the watch to see how long you've been together like that, because you're beyond time. You're beyond time. And so you have to give it long enough.

And the next thing is this, it has to be a habit. You have to do it every day, because it's so subtle. It's a habit that deepens over time, it ripens in fidelity to it over time. You need to be very patient. And I think our patience with it is that it rings true to us. And the fruits, the subtle fruits of it become clearer and clearer the longer we sit with it. So it has to sit long enough in each sitting and then long enough over time to sit until it becomes ever more habituated as something then that starts showing up throughout the whole day. That's what we're really looking for is an habituated state where this one just shines out from talking with someone or walking down a hallway, or because it's always there.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, those instructions are helpful. Thank you, Jim. What's interesting too is that starting place where you said, "We sit down with our whole heart," and I like the way you said that "my heart is so unique and my journey's been unique, so I sit down as myself with my whole heart." Like Kirsten's whole heart, that God's created and yeah, so there's something just really beautiful about that that's an important thing for me to do in my life.

Jim Finley: That's exactly right. That you are sitting here in God's presence and you say, "You know, Lord, I've internalized a lot of ideas of myself and understandings of myself and experiences of myself, some truer than others, and you know all of those, and you understand them infinitely more than I do. See, they make up the interiority of myself. But in the deep, deep, deep down depths of things, the deepest sense of me is who I am hidden in you. None distinct from me who has quickened me and awakened me to rest in your presence resting in me." And that's why you and I are here like this. And that's why Merton says, "With God a little sincerity goes a long, long way." It's a childlike, heartfelt sincerity that lays bare the depths of their truest identity as is in God, yeah.

Kirsten Oates: I really hear that in those words you offered, the way you were talking then. It's like a beautiful way to situate myself in that sincerity. It feels so real. So then the next is, "Lower your head, shut your eyes, breathe out, and gently imagine yourself looking into your heart." And I was curious about this idea of "imagine yourself looking into your own heart." So is that I'm trying to go inside my body and be with my heart, or do you have a sense of that, Jim?

Jim Finley: Ignatius Loyola and the exercises of Ignatius, a lot of it is you take a scene from the gospel and you put yourself in that scene, so you're actually there with Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, where you're actually there. So this is the use of the imaginative self, because

the image can embody the feelings or the felt sense of it. So you sit down alone, you're in silence, you lower your head, which is also kind of liturgy of the body of humility. You shut your eyes, see, "Lord, that I might see. Lord, that I might see through my own awakened eyes what you saw in all that you saw, because you saw God in everything that you saw. You see God in me right now. Lord, that I might see this way."

Shut your eyes, breathe out gently and imagine yourself looking into your own heart. And hear the heart, it is our beating heart, but the heart is that place in us that God accessed for Him. It's a place in us that God accessed on the 24th Sunday after Pentecost when I was quickened. That's my heart. It's in there and you're in there all the time. And so it's a place where "you're waiting for me there, you're waiting for me." There's like a merging of a realized one, is my heart unto heart this way. So I'm imagining myself descending down into this meeting place with you or you're waiting for me in the depths of my heart. And carry your mind, your thoughts from your head to your heart as you breathe out. Say, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." And you do it while you're breathing out, because you can't talk when you're inhaling.

But here's what I say is going on with this. When you say, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me," you exhale yourself as a self-donating act of love to God, who then in the next inhalation is inhaling the infinity of herself into you. So as you listen to God in the inhalation, inhaling the merciful presence of Jesus into you, infinitely precious and boundless in all directions in the midst of your brokenness, as you inhale God inhaling into you, you then turn it back around and you exhale yourself into God, back. So in this fulfillment of this longing, each unto each, destiny is fulfilled and it's embodied in the breath. So the words are embodying a deep kind of back and forth and back and forth where the oneness gets more and more intimately realized this way, and as the prayer.

Kirsten Oates: And I'm hearing, Jim, it's an invitation to step out of thinking and concepts and beliefs, like you said earlier, and into a place in our body where we've experienced the warmth or the love of God's presence in however we've experienced it. And we're just floating our attention down there to wherever that place is in our being.

Jim Finley: This is a big thing, see, this exactly, because this is why he says, "Try to put all other thoughts aside, be calm, be patient and repeat." And he says, "try" because all these other thoughts don't politely step back so you can do this, see? So what happens is you try and so around the edges, all these other thoughts are there. But the very sincerity of trying not to let them intrude upon the subtlety of the intention is itself the grace, and this really varies. It goes in waves. Sometimes you can easily do this, like at the corner of your eye you see these thoughts and you're aware of them, but you try not to let... Then once in a while one gets in and carries you off.

So this involves starting over again, over and over and over again. You realize you've been carried off by thought, and you swing back around enough to the intention. But you know that every time that happens, it's a chance to deepen your complete dependence on God who's infinitely in love with you and your frailty. God's not giving the infinity of God's love to you and your ability to do this, but God's giving the infinity of God's love to you and deeply accepting your inability to do this. So we don't attain it, but it attains us and our deep acceptance of our inability to attain it, which is experiential salvation or the gift of tears.

That's a subtle thing about all these things, I think, actually like this.

Kirsten Oates: And Jim, when you get carried off by thought, like you were describing will happen, when we come back, you say we're to reinstate ourselves. And so I guess we try and find that place in us again where we've felt connected to God. We're reinstating our heart as being open to God's presence. It's kind of more of a physical reinstatement of where we were.

Jim Finley: It is. And Merton said something once in the monastery I thought was insightful. "Sometimes," he said, "we're sitting like this and all of a sudden somebody in our family or something comes to mind." He said, "Maybe it's not a distraction. Maybe God's inviting you to pray for that person. Leave a lot of openness in it. Be true to yourself. Don't be contrived or force in some rigid thing. Be very open." And so you would say a prayer or remember that person or you would draw that person into your own heart's desire. "Lord have mercy on me, Lord have mercy on me." So yeah, it's like an expansive, ever more inclusive oneness. But there's something about the singularity of staying with the word. Because we're so used to having the singularity of our heart dispersed among many things. We're trying to bring it down to a singularity of a love that includes, that permeates and transcends everything. We're trying to bring ourselves to this trans-subjective oneness that permeates multiplicities of things.

Kirsten Oates: As you've kind of been guiding us in this talk, it's not the actual words themselves. It's really what the words, the energetic kind of beauty and resonance of the words. So we're saying the words in a way that's bringing in that resonance and that love into our being.

Jim Finley: The example that I've used before is say two married people who deeply love each other and one says the other, "I love you." The other person doesn't say, "You said that yesterday. You're so redundant." Or the person doesn't say, "I had no idea. Let me write that down. You got any books on that?" And so the idea, he or she doesn't say, "I love you" to provide information, but like Richard Rohr says, "Turning information into transformation." And so the words of lovers, the words of poets, the words of saints, the words of Jesus, the logos, see, this living word. And that's where repetition is not redundant. It's like the mantra over, like a cycle, and cycling deeper and deeper and deeper and deeper and deeper. And then the deeper you go in silence, you discover the abyss-like depth of love you're descending into is welling up and giving itself to you completely in the midst of a single saying of the word or the breath of your heart. See, that's the mystical, where the union starts to light up inside, I think.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, gorgeous. I love it.

Jim Finley: I also think this is... Is it also then when you're really in the flow of this, there's just certain times that words disappear and you just rest in the silence. Because in the silence, this love union is implicit, unexplainably implicit, and the words come back again. And so they're not words that interrupt the unspeakable oneness. They're words that move with the cadence of unspeakable oneness. And the silence is not a cessation, it's the oneness beyond what can be said that's resonating in all the words. That's my sense of it. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, yes. Wonderful. And so just to finish this section, it reads, "The staret sent me away with his blessing and told me that while learning the prayer, I must always come back to him and

tell him everything, making a very frank confession and report, for the inward process could not go on properly and successfully without the guidance of a teacher.” So Jim, not all of us have a teacher, so I’m just wondering what advice you’d have for those who might be trying this or...

Jim Finley: I think I said this in the Merton thing we were doing in earlier sessions, is I was talking like this with Merton, and while we’re in the midst of this kind of conversation, he said to me, he said, “Once in a while you’ll find someone with whom you can talk about things like this, but they’re hard to find. And people would tell you other things, do them first. So they don’t even know about this.” He said, “And a lot of the path is like that.” He says, “That’s your solitude, but you always have the scriptures, and you always have your heart, and you always have God. And you also how God is present in the concreteness of your life.” See, the unfolding of the situation this way. And so the guidance is always there. It’s just that we don’t always have it in a face-to-face encounter like this. And I think that’s true, but that’s what makes the gospel, so scripture so beautiful.

And this text is so beautiful, because I have a library in here, floor-to-ceiling, with all these mystical books and texts and a lot of them I’ve read over and over many times over years, really. What’s interesting about books like this, you can pull any one of them off the shelf, open up to any page randomly and read it out loud, and it’s it. There are certain books where every word counts and you never get to the end of it because there’s no ending to it. So as to find a teacher, and if it’s the way of a pilgrim, take it to heart, underline it, journal, paraphrase it, put a copy under your pillow, walk around with it like ballast, to keep you in the world. So it’s great to kind of find something that rings so true, you walk with it. It becomes part of you.

And over time you can join other... like a repertoire of teachers that you find that guide your path. And the point is self-deception, that’s the point of the teacher, because the ego that is transcended in the awakening. And this is really the glory of the ego. The ego then with God’s grace must give up its claim to have the final say on who we are, and it’s inept at that. And therefore we’re not wizeden in what it means, because sometimes we think we’re doing great because a lot of emotions are happening. Sometimes we think nothing is happening, but it’s the heartbeat of the very thing you’re looking for. And so he says, “Come to me to the...” “And this is why we’re returning back to the Gospels, we return back to the text, we’re always decoding a dream. We’re trying to say, “How is this text shedding light on helping me find my way along this path?” But that’s the idea of coming to the teacher, the trustworthy guide who’s steeped in this oneness.

Kirsten Oates: That makes sense. And it’s very encouraging that the teacher doesn’t have to be alive, that we could read the words of Thomas Merton or the way of a pilgrim, and if we’re open and sincere, we can get the kind of guidance we’re looking for. And certainly I’m very grateful for the guidance you offer through this podcast, Jim, and I think that’s a wonderful gift to everyone listening.

Jim Finley: Thank you. I want to add something to this, come up at the end of this chapter. We’re just doing the first chapter. At the end of the chapter, a starlet dies. This is an important point of the journey. But then has this sense that the starlet’s crossing over into this is still guiding him, but now he has to live alone in his heart. But notice he lives alone in his heart. By

sharing the story with us, he's passing on what the teacher passed on to him. So there's a point of aloneness as a phase of love, this way, a solitude. See, Jesus died. So the thing is, so when Jesus died, they were bereft. They were bereft. And so the thing is, the beloved dies, their bodily presence that we're used to dies, but their deathless presence never dies. And ours doesn't either, because the point is we're not stuck here forever. We're going to die too. It's a temporary arrangement.

But our passage through time ends, but our passage through time is to taste the eternity that's already within us, see? This the gift of a happy death. It's a free from a happy death. It's freedom from the tyranny of death in the midst of death. There's also other levels of this where we're interiorly dying to everything less than the love we're being called to be faithful to. So it's like dying of love at the hands of love till nothing's left of us but love. And is it possible that could become so pure that when your biological death happens, nothing will happen? I mean, something will happen, you'll be dead. But what I mean is the thread will have already been broken because you've interiorly already crossed over. That's the mysterious part of all this, I think.

Kirsten Oates: Wonderful. Well, Jim, thank you so much for today and for your beautiful guidance on the way of the pilgrim. I look forward to next time.

Jim Finley: Me too. Me too.

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. So 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.