

**Turning  
to the  
Mystics**



# **The Way of a Pilgrim**

Dialogue 4

with James Finley and Kirsan Oates

James Finley: Greetings. I'm Jim Finley.

Kirsten Oates: And I'm Kirsten Oates.

James 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 anonymous author of the Way of a Pilgrim. And I'm here with Jim to discuss his fourth session in the season. Welcome, Jim.

James Finley: Yes. It's good to continue on together with The Pilgrim.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. I'm enjoying it so much. So I thought I'd start just with a little recap, grounding us where we are in the book. And so we've been following this pilgrim who was already living life as a pilgrim, but he had this quickening or awakening in church one day, the 24th Sunday after Pentecost when he heard the verse that talks about praying without ceasing and it quickened him and it sent him on a quest. It called on him to understand what it would mean to pray without ceasing. And so he went looking for teachers or people that might know how to do this. And just when he was about to give up, he didn't know where to go next, the teacher appeared and guided him to the monastery and to this lineage, this wisdom lineage. What the teacher said was mystical teaching. And he showed him the teaching and the Philokalia and this beautiful prayer of the heart, which is a way to pray without ceasing.

And after the pilgrim got the teaching, his awakening deepened another layer, and he longed to have the habit of this prayer. And so he's made a commitment to the teacher to practice this prayer.

So I thought, Jim, it might be helpful just to read the instructions the teacher gave him so as we talk about the prayer, people have it in mind what the pilgrim's actually trying to do. So I can just read them here. So this is what the teacher read. He said, "Sit down alone and in silence. Lower your head, shut your eyes, breathe out gently and imagine yourself looking into your own heart. Carry your mind, your thoughts from your head to your heart. As you breathe out, say, 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.' Say it moving your lips gently or simply say it in your mind. Try to put all other thoughts aside. Be calm, be patient and repeat the process very frequently."

So that's what the pilgrim's committed to do. And so where you started session four, I might just read where you started the new text. "In church, I felt a glowing eagerness to take all the pains I could to learn unceasing interior prayer. And I prayed to God to come to my help. Then I began to wonder how I should manage to see my starets again for counsel or confession since leave was not given to remain for more than three days in the monastery guest house and there were no other houses near. "

So that was where we started. And what struck me about that was this, I love the term, glowing eagerness. Like I can imagine inside his chest, there's a warmth and a glow and an excitement. And then also, the first thing he did was to pray to God to come to his help, to come to his aid in trying this. And then he realizes he needs to find... He'd like to stay close to the teacher. The teacher's told him to keep coming back and checking in with him as he learns the prayer. So as he makes this commitment, he now turns to the practicalities, "But

where am I going to live?”

James Finley: Yes. So if the way we're proceeding here is taking little details, the pilgrim shares, and then bringing them out into the open as guiding aspects of our own search for God. So although the details may be very different than the details of the pilgrim, the underlying transformative graces are pervasively ribboned throughout all the mystical teachings of the mystics. And so right here then, one of these teachings is having found a teacher, how to keep in touch with the teacher for guidance because the teacher says the inward process requires guidance for someone who's already been transformed mystically in the teaching because we're subject to self-deception. And so the pilgrim is fortunate that he has his guide.

When I was in the monastery, I had Thomas Merton and some people, they do have a contemplatively grounded spiritual director they can go to for a guide, but a lot of us don't. A lot of us don't have that. But what we do have, is we have the prayer itself, our own prayer to God, we have the scriptures, we have discerning God's will in the unfolding of the details of our daily life. And we have a text. The deathless presence of the teacher and the pilgrim is talking to us and so we can open it as a prayer for the presence of the teaching is coming into our heart this way. And our hope is that in these podcasts that the oral tradition, hearing it spoken this way, it will also then touch the listeners as a source for them on this path they're being led by God to more deeper states of experiencing and responding to God's presence in their lives.

Kirsten Oates: And along those lines, for the pilgrim, he needs to find somewhere to live. And what happens next is, he learns there's a village between two and three miles from the monastery. He says, "I went there to look for a place to live and to my great happiness, God showed me the thing I needed. A peasant hired me for the whole summer to look after his kitchen garden. And what is more, gave me the use of a little thatched hut where I could live alone. God be praised. I had found a quiet place and in this manner, I took up my abode and began to learn interior prayer in the way I had been shown and to go to see my staretts from time to time."

So along the lines that you were just talking about, Jim, his life unfolded in this graced way that showed him just the next thing to do, which is, to settle in this house, he can be close to his teacher. And do you think this synchronicity when you're in this flow of desire and longing, that often things arise in this kind of way?

James Finley: I do. I think when we're on this path, there's unexpected graces encountered along the way, like connecting the dots, like we're following this path. And I also think that for us, he finds this place to practice his prayer, this contemplative prayer. And so for us, our place to practice, we can say it anywhere, but the day-by-day practice, is our home is the place. And a lot of people have a certain place in their home, a certain chair they sit in or they might have a little altar with the scriptures and a candle. So that's like your place you go to in your home where you cultivate this rendezvous with God until it becomes more and more habitual throughout the day.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. And I do wonder for people listening to this podcast, what this might be bringing up for them, whether they want to create a place for the first time in their home, whether they're drawn to try this prayer or whether they're drawn to deepen in their own commitment to

their practice using some of these guidelines or some of these things they might be learning along the way because hopefully, this podcast is providing some kind of synchronicity to what people are longing for and looking for.

James Finley: Yes. See, I think really the transformative power in a practice is that a practice is any act faithfully entered into with our whole heart that takes us to the deeper place. And we have to faithfully practice it because it's subtle. It isn't like you just try it once or twice or it isn't as if you practice it just every so often. There's a calling for daily quiet time. And if this is your practice, each mystic has his or her own. We've been listening to these variations toward contemplative union with God. So it's an actual act where you sit and you're present with your whole being with childlike sincerity and you just quietly stay with it, with this delicate, subtle longing and just see how you're unexpectedly led by God as it takes you deeper.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Beautiful. I love the way you always encourage us, Jim, in those practice to start with the first things first, to always open ourselves to God's presence with the understanding that God's always present to us.

James Finley: That's right. And another big thing I think really, is that by going deeper, it doesn't necessarily feel like we're going deeper. It might feel like nothing's happening. So what we do when we practice the prayer is in, "Lord Jesus, have mercy on me for being so limited by my abilities that it closes off how you're working in my life in the midst of my incompleteness." Otherwise, we're turning it into an achievement like we're trying to get somewhere. It isn't even like that. It's more like surrendering ourselves over to God's mercy, sustaining us as we are and not like we think we're supposed to be. And that's the intimacy of transformation, I think, how God works with us.

Kirsten Oates: That's a wonderful encouragement. Thank you. And it's a good lead into this next section because I wonder if you think the pilgrim's going deeper in this section where it says, "For a week alone in my garden, I steadily set myself to learn to pray without ceasing, exactly as the starets had explained. At first, things seemed to go very well, but then it tired me very much. I felt lazy and bored and overwhelmingly sleepy and a cloud of all sorts of other thoughts closed around me. I went in distress to my starets and told him the state I was in."

James Finley: I think any heartfelt commitment and a transformative process, it's not a constant glide path. Marriage and being married or parenting or teaching or being an artist or a poet or living in solitude, there are times where the ego hits rough water and nothing's happening and you feel stuck and you feel disheartened and bored. And that's part of the journey. That's part of the journey is to know that. So we sit with that and listen to that and ask for God to sustain us in our boredom or sustain us and guide us in the midst of not knowing where to go next. And that constancy of an underlying sincerity of being led by God on God's terms for us to walk our paths and not ours, is itself a very intimate part of where we go deeper, I think.

Kirsten Oates: Jim, and I just so appreciate the honesty in the book about this kind of a phase. The words he used are just so ordinary that the things that we all experienced. He felt lazy and bored and overwhelmingly sleepy.

James Finley: I think these periods of aridity are an important part of the path itself that often come up in any lifelong transformative process, marriage, parenting, artists, whatever. But there's another thing to consider here about boredom and sleepiness and so on. It's to check in with yourself physically, with your health. Are you getting enough sleep? Is there an ongoing support system that sustains you in your life? What's going on with you?

Because God's will for us is woven through all those details, like we gather up the realities of ourselves and tend to those things as best we can. But it sometimes happens, we check that out and there isn't anything going on that would account for this feeling and then know that that's part of this process really. Because another way of looking at it, is the ego is dying to the illusion that it has the final say in who we are because in a way, we're passing beyond the boundaries of being in control and handing ourselves over to the love of God. And so there's an intimate interior struggle that goes on. So a person needs to quietly discern the different aspects of what's going on here.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm. Because to say that prayer over and over and over and over again for the ego self, I guess, could easily feel boring and make you sleepy.

James Finley: Yeah. Sometimes I used to think that the gate to mystical union has a big arch, has the word boredom written over it. Because in a way, on purpose, nothing interesting is happening. As a matter of fact, like the prophet Hosea about Israel, God says, "I will lead her into the wilderness and I will speak to her heart." So as long as we're surrounded in the complexities of what we can do and we can't do, we're trying to get beyond that. But the point of getting beyond that means leaving it behind. And we're so accustomed to it. Even though it's claustrophobic, it's infinitely less than what we long for. We have to be willing to go through a transformative process of resting. At one level, nothing's happening, but at a qualitatively deeper level, something that cannot be comprehended is happening to you in your heart. And you have to undergo that transformation of what dimension of consciousness now you're functioning at, which is, because this is beyond cognition, beyond anything. And that's the process.

Kirsten Oates: I'm looking forward to hearing from our listeners at the end of this season to hear some of their stories about how starting a contemplative practice was for them. This other description, I thought really helpful too, the way he said as he's trying to live into this prayer, "A cloud of all sorts of other thoughts closed around me." It's a great image the way you can feel like you get so distracted or taken out from the ability to concentrate on the prayer and concentrate on the image of Jesus and concentrate on the flowing down into the heart. Yeah.

James Finley: Yeah. Another insight I think here with this, is that, a lot of this has to do with he had mercy on me, have mercy on me. But have mercy on me for the ways I tend not to be merciful enough towards myself, because sometimes we're harsh and punitive and impatient with ourselves, and really, this is realizing God's infinitely in love with you in the midst of your inabilities, not in the midst of what you can overcome. So a lot of this really has to do with the tenderheartedness towards yourself, concretizing God's

infinite mercy for you. And so mercy upon mercy upon mercy. And it's oceanic and just keep leaning into it and stay with it and be patient and open.

Kirsten Oates: Lovely.

James Finley: I think it's also important to discern that this is for you. It isn't as if you heard about the Jesus prayer, and I'm going to sit every day and break through and practice the Jesus prayer. It could be self-will. Even though it's mysterious and subtle, it has to sit right with you. And that's why, by going through all these mystics, you find the mystic that most deeply resonates with you. And that could change as you go along over the months and years. You could switch. But you're always discerning. Even though subtle and challenging, it rings true to me. That there's something about this I feel, at least for now, I'm just, be on the unity path this way as a discernment.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Thank you for saying that, Jim. Because I could imagine there are people who listen to the season on Guigo or with the Ladder for Monks or the Cloud of Unknowing with the idea of that way of praying. And they may be well into a practice and this one isn't the one for them, but for someone else, they hear this and it's the one they've been waiting for.

James Finley: Yes. And here's another way to look at this also. See, it isn't as if as we go through each season, and as you go through each season you switch over and practice prayer that way. So this is not like you're changing channels on the television set. So what you do is, you listen and you draw from each one. And even though you may say to me, and say with Teresa of Avila, for example, but you would draw the insights in the Jesus prayer and apply it as it pertains to Teresa, and they're all interconnected with each other. That's important.

When I was growing up, my mother used to get a box of assorted chocolates, and so she would take a little bite out of each one to see what was in it. Sometimes people do that with spirituality, you just take a nibble here and a nibble there. So you have to settle somewhere, but be open to everything, but you don't just jump all over the place. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Well, I think especially, like you said, when it's hard to live in proximity to a teacher the way the Pilgrim does, that depending on what's going on in your life, one of the mystics that you've taught over the seasons might really be speaking to something that's happening to you. And that's the gift of having this breadth of teaching.

James Finley: It is. It's true.

Kirsten Oates: So with this challenge of feeling lazy, bored and sleepy, our Pilgrim goes back to his teacher and this is what happens. "He greeted me in a friendly way and said, 'My dear brother, it is the attack of the world of darkness upon you. To that world, nothing is worse than heartfelt prayer on our part, and it is trying for every means to hinder you and to turn you aside from learning the prayer, but all the same, the enemy only does what God sees fit to allow and no more than is necessary for us.'" So Jim, I just wanted to spend a little bit of time on this section. I'll be honest, these kind of discussions make me a little bit uncomfortable about this kind of darkness. So I wonder if you could just help me understand it a little bit better.

James Finley: First of all, talk about the powers of darkness and so on, is that in the tradition, the Christian tradition and all traditions have variations of this, all world religions. But in terms of being

a person, there's the persons of the Trinity, these infinite relations of knowledge and love. And then the uncreated persons of the Trinity create persons destined to share in God's own life as completely as God shares in God's life. And some of these created persons, which us, as humans, are corporeal persons, we have a bodily nature to realize this call. And then there's incorporeal persons, which are angels. So just as in the human with the corporeal nature, the mythic story of the garden, there's a fall. So God endlessly permeates all things incomprehensibly forever, but our experiential consciousness of it is traumatized, it's fallen. And so we're trying to find here a way to be re-stabilized in God's infinite oneness with us and felt consciousness that we can live by it this way.

And so doing this, so we're saying there was also a fall in the angels. And so the fallen angels then, you have the angels with God, guardian angels, angels, the scriptures are full of angels. And then the fallen angels is tempting us. And so in a way, they took this very important for them, this idea of an invisible world and so on. But it's very hard for us to, we so psychologize things and look at things. We're not used to this. And part of this can be seen as superstitious and naive, but I would put it another way. In day by day consciousness where you know what time it is and you look, walk around, no angels in sight. You can't find any dead people around. I don't see God either. I looked over and over through all the closets. I don't know where God is, God's not around.

But in deep meditative states, you can see God. That is meaning, you can realize God. But you can also realize the dead. We can't see God for the same reason we don't see the dead. They're in infinity this way. So in deep meditative states, the powers of darkness, primordial powers of darkness, are working out this, like Jacob wrestling with an angel, this kind of thing. But they're very interior things this way.

So I think, take it however you want to. If it doesn't speak to you, just walk past it. But there's another way, just know that it's alluding to things that are actually subtle and mysterious. And the more we venture into these things, the more we can unexpectedly finding ourselves dealing with matters that we didn't realize we're going to be asked to deal with, both in terms of angelic joy and illuminations, but also in terms of interior struggles and darkness. But in their culture where they live, this was very real to them. But for us, it's not the way we tend to look at this. We're very secular and psychological and empirical and practical this way.

Kirsten Oates: Scientific.

James Finley: Yeah. But if you're going to practice this practice, you transcend and include, like Ken Wilber says, you include the secular and the material, but you transcend it in boundless of realms of divinity. And those boundless realms are transforming you into those realms, in love, and this is very mysterious. This is why we need guidance, and patience, and humility, and calmness, and stay grounded, and stay open.

Turning to the mystics will continue in a moment.

Kirsten Oates: It's interesting because you're talking about current society being so psychological and this book doesn't really touch into psychological, so he doesn't share the... He says, "A cloud of all sorts of other thoughts closed in on me," and he doesn't say, "And it's how my mother

rejected me, or my father died when I was a child.” There’s nothing psychological that he brings to the stares, but that’s more what happens in today’s world, do you think, Jim?

James Finley: I think so. First of all, sometimes the saints do talk about it. Like Teresa of Avila, she did her spiritual memoir and she talks about her experiences and how she experienced it. But a lot of the mystics, that isn’t what they were... This isn’t that wasn’t real, but we’re so taken to science, and I’m a clinical psychologist through psychology, but Jesus did not die on the cross to save your personality. We are our personality as a mode of the mystery of ourself that’s ultimately divine. And so, one for me, I was immersed in the monastery, really sitting with a loving heart and taking to heart the beauty of these passages can really help us find these more interior realms of God’s oneness in our life that include but transcend explanation, science and so on.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. So it is the case that psychological things may arise in this cloud of thoughts that overcome us, that will need to be dealt with, like you guided us earlier on about how’s your health? How’s your psychological health? How’s your physical health? So there may be things that are on earth that do require psychological support, but that’s not what the prayer is about. The prayer is not, yeah. The prayer is taking you somewhere deeper.

James Finley: Yeah. So like in our bodies, for example, we go to a physician for our bodies. You can’t pray your diabetes away, or your cancer, you can’t. And so Ken Wilber says, “We have to heal the suffering at the level where the suffering is.” Likewise, I used to give a talk every year at the training program here in LA for spiritual directors on the distinction between clinical depression and the dark night of the soul, and so we need to tend to the levels of ourself at those levels, just to be responsible for ourselves, because the holy life is the integrated whole life.

Kirsten Oates: And then, the way the teacher responded about the world of darkness that you’re helping us understand a little better, what’s coming up for me when you talked about the angels and the fallen angels in this invisible world, it’s reminding me of nightmares I had when I was a little child, and I felt afraid in the dark about, yeah, dark forces that might be there.

James Finley: Lately, I’ve been studying, again, a deep study on Dante, the Divine Comedy for these journeys to hell, purgatory and heaven. And they’re really seen as evolving grace states of consciousness being led up to God, the brilliant light of God, this mystical rose. And it’s very dreamlike. I think a lot of deep psychotherapy is dreamlike. One Jungian analyst once said, when we’re going through some major thing in our life, we can’t figure it out. Ask yourself, “If this were a dream, what would it mean?” And so there’s a kind of a mythic, dreamlike, poetic, expansive sensitivity to things that get missed if we’re too locked in to the practical empirical things because we are that, but we’re infinitely more than that, and that’s what all this is about, being journeying into the infinitely more concretely in your life and your heart.

Kirsten Oates: That’s helpful. And can you just help me understand this sentence, “But all the same, the enemy only does what God sees fit to allow and no more than is necessary for us.”

James Finley: Yes, Thomas Merton once said, “Each one of us has something in our life that we must struggle with very hard, where it might destroy us.” He said, “This is the cross in our life.” And Teresa of Avila says, “These struggles we go through, but we’d be a lot worse off



without them because as we face them, they build character this way.” So there’s this idea and this kind of poetic thinking that these powers of darkness tempt us, kind of poetically to strengthen our character, to turn more deeply to God. And that’s why, but the tempter is never allowed to tempt more than God allows, which again, adds to more mystery because some people have psychotic breaks and commit suicide. It is another one of these subtle things to sort out. But anyway, that’s the idea behind it, that we’re allowed to be tempted for in the temptation, like the Book of Job, in the temptation, it clarifies us like we rise above, we come to a place of light we never would’ve gone if we didn’t have to struggle in the dark.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you for that explanation, Jim, about invisible things that are hard to imagine. I wanted to share what the teacher tells the pilgrim in his further response. He says to him, “It would appear that you need a further testing of your humility and that it is too soon therefore, for your unmeasured zeal to approach the loftiest entrance to the heart.” So there’s something else going on that the teacher can sense. How would you describe that?

James Finley: It comes to me as an example I use in my reflections on Thomas Merton on the true self, is imagine you tell God, “God this mystical union with you, I want it more than anything really, but under one condition. That when I cross the line over into mystical union, my ego will remain intact and I’ll become a mystical ego and finally get the respect I deserve.” What we’re talking about is the grace metamorphosis of our very subjectivity. And so then, he’s raising this, so now the prayer gets more intimate. See, because now it bears upon the intimacy of your zeal, and there’s kind a sophomore equality to it, covetedness like you’re just pushing through trying to reach it. If you could reach it in these terms, it would be more of you. Too it would be finite.

And so then we go to the teacher and say, “Well, what do I do about that? What kind of strategy is there in which I can be healed from immature zeal?” And this is a critical turning point where it starts to go into the depths of mystical union this way and what he’s going to say next. So he’s now encountering an unexpected layer of a need to undergo a transformation of the very way he experiences himself, especially the very sincerity in which he’s seeking God has to be transformed.

So it’s calibrating it to a more intimate level. And so the teacher, this contemplatively grounded teacher, starts leading him into this next realm.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yes, and the instruction he gives him, you pointed out, is one that takes the pilgrim out of his mind and further into his body. So the teacher says, “The faculty of pronouncing words lies in the throat, reject all other thoughts. You can do this if you will, and allow that faculty to repeat only the following words constantly, ‘Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.’ Compel yourself to do it always. If you succeed for a time, then without a doubt, your heart will also open to prayer. We know it from experience.” So the goal is, his goal, so to speak. The prayer is to bring the pilgrim further into his heart, and now he’s moving him into concentrating in his throat. It’s a physical journey, but it’s also, there’s something... Yeah.

James Finley: I want to give some examples. This is a big thing. For example, let’s say you go to an art museum, and you’re kind of rushed to get there in the day. But as the hours go by and you slowly walk from painting to painting to painting, there’s a descent into a qualitatively way of being more holistically present to beauty this way. And it’s not in your head. I mean, it is

not an analysis where you'd explain the painting or define it. You can do that, what school of art it was from. But really the aesthetics is the experience of beauty.

In the same way you can spend a long time alone in nature, like you're at the ocean or walking in the mountains, and you can feel, moving from thought down into more kind of a grounded oneness with a primordial mystery of the darkness of the night, whatever it is.

So this is where he is leading him from his head, where he has the words, he has his intentions, he has all this, and he's leading him out of his head as his base of operation. See, it's too top-heavy with this conceptualization of intention. And so what he's saying there, is suggesting, and this is, it's very much like yoga. See, when he has them sit and lower his head, his heart this way, it's a kind of a groundedness. Zen is very much like this too, and it's the whole bodily self. And so in your imagination, your intention is to realize that the throat is saying the words, not your head. The head has thoughts about the word. So you're dropping from your thoughts about the word to your throat, like the somatic, the physical. The word became flesh and dwelt among us. It isn't that the word became a great idea about who we are and dwelt among us, but the word became the flesh is this. So we're dropping down into that.

And that's going to move us to the heart. And the heart is not just the heart center, as in the chakras. The heart, is that place in us where our heart and God's heart is one heart. See, the realm of the heart is this unit of love, of non-distinction between ourself and God and love. And so he's moving him then out of his head to the throat, which will lead to the passage on the way to this heart, to this union.

And then he says, "And if you compel yourself to do it always, if you succeed for a time, then without a doubt your heart will also open in prayer." Let's say you're sitting this way, very intense, it's all very calm. You've been at this for a while and unexpectedly, all of a sudden, there's oneness. This oneness beyond words, beyond thought, beyond... It's just like God in all directions, life of my life, breath of my breath this way. And then it might last just for a few moments, but when it does, it affirms its experiential tasting of a oneness that the path that'll become more and more habitual. It's like a reassurance of where all this is taking you. And so it's an important point, really.

Kirsten Oates: Lovely. So he's giving him a couple of physical cues. The first is, he's to listen to his own voice in his throat. Is that how you read it too?

James Finley: Yeah. It's almost as if, let's say, at the monastery I used to chant the Psalms.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

James Finley: So it's almost as if you could take a psalm, anything, and read it, but don't think about what you're reading. Just let your eyes see the words and say them. But don't stop to comment on what you're reading. Don't try to explain it, just go into the flow of words as words sincerely said, and stay with the flow. So the words are more like, and I think these texts are like that too, it's more like listening to music when you think about it in a way, the very cadence of the language, it doesn't lend itself to stopping to grasp it, but helps us to move with the flow of some ungraspable immediacy that resonates in the beauty of what's being said. So he's moving him in that direction.

Kirsten Oates: Oh, lovely. So you could feel the vibration in your throat as you say it, and focus on that and focus on what you might be hearing in your ears. But nothing, just be one with the sound, the words, the... Yeah. Lovely.

James Finley: And I think what happens also, it isn't as if you're still not aware what the words mean, but you're awareness of what the words mean falls into the background. But the music of the words being spoken by the body moves into a kind of a somatic divinised bodily presence this way. That's a subtle shift that heads toward the way of the heart.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, lovely. He gives him another physical cue, which is, he gives him a rosary and he invites him to start using the rosary. And he actually gives him a number of times to do this now, which is 3000. Just 3000. And to use the rosary to help count, I guess, now he can count the beads.

James Finley: Yeah. Okay, so let's say, the way he's being led by the teacher, beyond the boundaries of his own abilities, as something that's deciding what's happening. His own abilities are not deciding what's happening. He's in way over his head because he's in the depths of God. So he's leading him out beyond reliance on his own abilities, his own thoughts this way, into the throat. Then the rosary, notice you hold the beads in your hand and notice, beads are universal. There's a Catholic rosary, the joyful mysteries, sorrowful mysteries, glorious mysteries. And the Buddhists have beads, the Muslims have beads. There's something about the counting, and it's notice you hand-

Kirsten Oates: It's so interesting.

James Finley: ...Is holding, it's very physical, you're counting the beads. And then he says, "Say 3000 times." What I think 3000 times is, he's dying to his own will. Because you're to be obedient. So really, it's a sacramental way to die to his own will this way. But without fail, exactly 3000, without deliberately increasing or diminishing the number. This is important, I think. Because see, if you deliberately increase it, like I'm on a roll, I'm going to just fire away, you're kind of betraying everything. And likewise, "Who cares? 2,999 will do. I'll stop, have lunch." So exactly, you die of your own will. But here's the point, also, "Do not deliberately increase or decrease." And I think this is another intimate point about prayer. You're saying it, but you will unintentionally increase it and decrease it because you'll lose count and you'll lose count because you're a human being. And every time you lose count, you renew your awareness on God's guidance and circle back around doing your best to pick up where you left off. And that's the incarnational intimacy of your humanity being transformed by this love. I think that's a subtle point.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Yes. Amazing. And then he closes that section with this sentence, "God will help you, and by this means, you will reach also the unceasing activity of the heart." So I love it. Sounds like you're reaching the prayer that's always taking place. You're reaching the unceasing activity that's always there between us and God.

James Finley: That's a very important point. I want to say that back. Let's say, there's the constancy of the sovereignty, of the infinite love of God, pouring itself out and giving itself away, is our very reality. The reality of others and of all things, rendering everything sacred and divine. The world is God's body and his body brought the love, uttering into being. It's always

happening. The river of this love is always happening. The thing is, but it's not always happening in our mind. So right now, we're trying to allow our mind to step into the constancy of this love. So there's a growing underlying constancy in the mind that is the constancy of God, pervading time itself, life itself, everything.

Kirsten Oates: Lovely. So the Pilgrim says, "I gladly accepted the guidance and went home and began to carry out faithfully and exactly what my starets had bidden. For two days, I found it rather difficult." I bet he did. Sounds rather difficult. Only two days? "But after that, it became so easy and likeable that as soon as I stopped, I felt a sort of need to go on saying the prayer of Jesus. And I did it freely and willingly, not forcing myself to as before."

James Finley: Yeah. You know, what's lovely about this too, so it's radical in a paced, sensitive way because he's pacing it. And I shared in the talk too, that I have here at the beach and the marathon, they practice the marathon out here because you have to build up to being able to run that far. And so groups of one or 200 people running, practicing, and they have to keep increasing it. So this is this incremental kind of strategy of gently going beyond your own abilities. And because you hit a new edge, any creative processes like this, you hit an edge. You struggle with the edge, and all of a sudden, what was the struggle, becomes the way itself. And you realize after going through that over and over, you're qualitatively able to be in the stream of something that's become part of you, that at first, you found quite too much. And that's another piece of this, I think, this way.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Yeah.

James Finley: By the way, another important piece would be this. If he would come to the starets and he doesn't, and say, "I'm confused, didn't work." He would ask, "Let's go back and start at 1000, and if that's too much, let's do 300. Let's see you next week." In other words, he's always tracking with the pilgrim and watching where the pilgrim's at, because that's where God's at this way. So he's leading him in this direction. And I think maybe for the sake of the text in a very streamlined way, they don't go into things.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yeah. It makes for good reading too, the way they've laid it out.

James Finley: It does. It's lovely reading. It's like a movie. Yeah, it's lovely.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Beautiful. So that was just a lovely little section where he moved from this first try and feeling lazy and bored and overwhelmingly sleepy to feeling he was praying freely and willingly, "Not forcing myself as before." Just a lovely little journey he's taken in this week's session.

So Jim, thank you for delivering this to us in such a beautiful way, and I appreciate you going back over what you went through in this way today. It's been really helpful to go step by step.

James Finley: And that's why I say with these matters, that's why I say repetition is not redundant, because these insights are so subtle. You have to quietly sit with them, and the more you sit with them, the more it soaks in and it grows and deepens with time. So yeah, it's a grace. Very good.

Kirsten Oates: Lovely. Thank you, Jim. Thank you, Corey. Look forward to next time.

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