

Turning
to the
Mystics



The Way of a Pilgrim

Dialogue 5

with James Finley and Kirsan Oates

Jim Finley: Greetings. I'm Jim Finley.

Kirsten Oates: And I'm Kirsten Oates.

Jim Finley: Welcome to Turning to the Mystics.

Kirsten Oates: Welcome everyone to season nine of Turning to the Mystics, where we're turning to an anonymous author who wrote The Way of a Pilgrim. And I'm here with Jim to discuss his fifth talk on The Way of a Pilgrim. Welcome, Jim.

Jim Finley: Yes, Kris, yeah good to be back together again, yeah.

Kirsten Oates: I thought what might be helpful as an opening is to read through all the instructions that have been given so far about the prayer. They're kind of interwoven throughout the story, but I thought I'd bring them together and just read them one after the other and then I'll ask you some questions about them, Jim, if that's okay?

Jim Finley: Yeah, that would be great.

Kirsten Oates: Okay, great. So here we go.

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 in all places, even during sleep. The appeal is couched in these terms, "Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me." One who accustoms himself to this appeal experiences as a result so deep a consolation and so great a need to offer the prayer always that he can no longer live without it and it will continue to voice itself within him of its own accord.

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. 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 also will open to prayer. We know this from experience.

Here is a rosary. Take it and to start with say the prayer 3000 times a day, whether you are standing or sitting, walking or lying down, continually repeat, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." Say it quietly and without hurry, but without fail exactly 3000 times a day without deliberately increasing or diminishing the number, I reported to my starets and he bade me to say the prayer 6,000 times a day saying, "Be calm. Just try as faithfully as possible to carry out the set number of prayers. God will vouchsafe you his grace." And then the last one, see that you preserve the habit and strengthen it. Waste no time therefore, but make up your mind by God's help from today to say the prayer of Jesus 12,000 times a day.

So they're all the instructions that we're given and what we're missing out is the conversations

going on in between, but you can feel the way the starets is upping the ante each time the pilgrim reports to him. So I have a couple of questions for myself and maybe for anyone else who might be trying to take on this prayer as a practice, should we be at 12,000 times a day at this point?

Jim Finley: See, my sense that it would be true to the spirit of the tradition, and the story also is notice that the whole story begins with the pilgrim in the midst of a life of devotional sincerity that he's living the Christian life as he wonders about, in his best pocket is the Bible over his heart, the 24th Sunday after Pentecost. So he's in prayer, efficacious unto holiness, efficacious unto holiness. And so we should be where we are in the sincerity of our desire to be open to God's experience and guidance in our life and so on, to live this love life that Christ modeled for us. That's where we should be.

And we would also be in our devotional sincerity and faithful to a daily rendezvous with God in prayer. So it's like experientially rooted within ourselves and each time we end our daily rendezvous to ask God for the grace not to break the thread of that through the day. And the way we pray will be where we are at the moment. And typically where most of us are is we start out with Lectio Divina meditation and prayer. We open the scriptures and we take a text, we read the passage as if God is personally saying that to us. We listen to God. Then meditation, we have a dialogue with God, meditation, loving, I journal it out. And then the prayer is asking God for the grace to be true to it. That's where we should be.

Next, if we're graced with a quickening like the pilgrim, he's in the middle of the service and he hears this text to pray always, but the point is it strikes him in such a way that there's an inner necessity. He's baffled by it, understanding, "And so how then can I then do this?" So we're touched with a sense of oneness that we can't comprehend. But then there's the desire to abide in the depths of leading the glimpse, and how do I do that? I don't understand what's happening to me. And this is the lure of grace calling us beyond a union with God into depths of unity, of oneness, beyond thought, beyond feeling beyond emotion, beyond into these depths.

And if we are on that path, then we should be faithful to what that path ask out of us, and that's the prayer. So each of the mystics we've been studying in the Turning to the Mystics Podcast, each mystic in his or her own way, this is the point they're concerned about. See, we're in the midst of the devotional life, but how to discern the point where we've been quickened or awakened toward these more non-dual unit of states, and then how to follow the path of being evermore surrendered over and transformed by God in those states. And where we should be then is where we are in our sincere desire to be faithful to that.

So we're at 12,000, which means really we're at the brink of the awakening, the great awakening. We should be at the brink of the great awakening. If we're just starting out with 3000, what we're really doing with 3000, notice if you say the prayer constantly, you're leaving thought behind, you're learning how not to think. And so you're really going beyond the boundaries of thought through the prayer, then you should do that. So we should be where we authentically are and where we discern that we are and then see what God has in mind, just stay open to that because we unexpectedly found ourselves here. We didn't plan on this, unforeseen. And likewise, we can't foresee what's going to be unfolding out of our fidelity to these unfoldings and that's in via on the way of our awakening heart. So that's my

sense of it.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, wonderful. Thank you Jim. And I think for many people listening to the podcast or like me listening and reading the book, they might be really touched by the story and feel alongside the pilgrim that sense of quickening and the beauty in this story might be an opening and they might feel called to try the prayer. So I know I've been trying it and you talk about that daily rendezvous, that quiet time, I know I've been trying the prayer in my daily rendezvous and enjoying it and finding there's a lot coming out of trying the prayer. I'm learning a lot of different things about myself and about the prayer.

Jim Finley: Yeah, no matter where we are on this path, we can say the prayer at any time and benefit from it from where we are. So it's a very simple prayer just throughout the day, even the meaning of the prayer, like what this means. And of course when we say, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me," we're asking not enough for the mercy of God, because we already have it, we're asking for the grace of realizing we already have it this way. It's a lovely way to go to sleep at night, anytime during the day, it's just so simple, it's like a grounding place and so we can be receptively open to practice it as it's given to us where we are.

Kirsten Oates: That's a wonderful encouragement, thank you, Jim. And along those lines, I did have a question about the rosary. So I didn't grow up Catholic and I've never owned a rosary and I'm just wondering, I'm quite intrigued by the idea of the rosary and how I might use it with this prayer.

Jim Finley: All world religions, especially in the contemplative, devotional and contemplative, have like beads. And so the Orthodox Catholic, like the pilgrim, they have the beads for counting the Jesus prayer on this way, and the Muslims have rosaries for counting the names of God or dicker by God consciousness and so on. And the Catholic rosary, I love the rosary, I grew up Catholic, I used to say it a lot, I haven't said it for a long time, but I always carry my rosary with me. It's a kind of sacramental for me.

So what you could do if you're interested and you're new to the rosary, you could look up on the internet how to say the rosary. And basically what the rosary is, Google and see what the rosary looks like, get a rosary if you want one, and so what you do really is that in saying the rosary, basically what it is that it's a way of meditating on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. So really there's the joyful mysteries. The first mystery is following scripture is the annunciation, the Angel Gabriel announcing to Mary. And so you would start out with the joyful mysteries.

And what you do with the joyful mysteries is you meditate on this, you meditate on your own annunciations, on how you've been visited by graces or awareness and so on. And so what you do is that you say the Hail Mary 10 times, like a decade, and so you say it 10 times. So the first half of the Hail Mary is from Heaven, "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed are thou among women. Holy Mary, mother God, pray for it." And the other half is our response to the angel. So it's an interesting contemplative practice because there's not a linear focusing on something, you're actually using the prayer as a kind of a mantra to be kind of intuitively

receptively open to the gift of annunciation.

And knowing that even as you practice the practice of the annunciation, there may be little touches of annunciations along the way, like visitations of graces in this way. Then when it ends, you end it, then you say the Lord's prayer, and then you do the next joyful mystery, the next joyful mystery and so on. So the sorrowful mysteries, Jesus being judged, you start with the first sorrowful mystery, the scourging of the pillar, Jesus falls and so on, and you meditate as you say the Hail Mary for each of the sorrowful mysteries, the passion of Christ that really see Jesus, the greater love than this is knowing that he lays down his life for his friends. And so we're not alone in our suffering, that out of love on the mystery of the cross, God is united with and one with us in our suffering. And so there's the consolation of the sorrowful mysteries as this redemptive love of God with us in our suffering.

And so you'd say the 10 Hail Marys, each time this way, you'd say the Lord's prayer and so on. So you would go through the five joyful mysteries and usually that'd be five decades, and usually that would be to say the rosary. Okay, then the next time you say the rosary, you would do the sorrowful mysteries, the five sorrowful mysteries, and the next time you would say the glorious mysteries versus the resurrection. So the idea would be the four rosaries, 15 decades. But typically when Catholics talk about saying the rosary, they talk about the five decades this way, meditating on the mystery of Christ who reveals our life to us in the presence of God. And I like the rosary, I don't say it anymore, but it's a very contemplative practice. And you can see the semblance to the Jesus prayer because it's repetition, it's a repetition to stabilize the mind so the heart can be open to the mysteries of God's presence in our life.

Kirsten Oates: Amazing. And you've got a rosary there in front of you. I can hear it clinking around, but there it is.

Jim Finley: Yeah, I'll put it down.

Kirsten Oates: No, no, that's fine. That's beautiful. So Jim, that's the traditional Catholic way of doing the rosary that you've just described, in this text, are they encouraging the pilgrim to use the rosary to count his 3000 times or his 6000 times?

Jim Finley: Yeah, yeah, he's going to hand him, so he's going to say... So here's the thing, you're saying you've been quickened with this touch. The touch has left you with the desire to abide in this realm of the heart. And so the question is, well, how do you abide in the realm of the heart? You can't make this deepening of the realization of the realm of the heart, this realm of oneness happen, but what you can do is assume the stance that offers the least resistance to be overtaken and carried into the realm of the heart. And so the Jesus prayer then is a way then of doing that.

And so the idea of counting the beads, he says this, start with 3000 without deliberately going one more or one less. And what he's really doing isn't just in the Jesus prayer, he's dying to thought because the thoughts are around the edges, but you don't think the thoughts that are arising, you just keep your focus on the words of the prayer, which is really you're keeping your focus on Jesus and Jesus's mercy on you

and one with you and the mercy of God this way. And so by starting out with 3000 times a day, you're dying to your own will. So in the prayer itself, you're dying to your head, to your thoughts to move beyond thoughts. And obedience, obediential fidelity to 3000 times a day, you're dying to your own will. He says, "Without deliberately one more or one less, do your best."

And the point is because you're human, you'll lose count a lot, you'll lose count a lot. But that's the point, that every time you lose count, you go back to pick up where you left off, knowing that in your frailty you're to be touched by God's mercy on you and your frailty. And really that's the prayer. The prayer is really a medium or a vehicle to coming to this mercy of God, this way of the prayer itself.

Kirsten Oates: Coming to the end of yourself in a certain way?

Jim Finley: Exactly. You come to the end of your own abilities, accepting the end of your own abilities as the opening through which God unexplainably takes you to yourself and what God can achieve and is achieving in you beyond your abilities, which is the mystery of grace, salvation, the mystery of salvation.

Kirsten Oates: Well, I'm inspired. I think I might try getting a rosary and trying the prayer with the rosary. Talking about the realm of the heart, you give some wonderful definitions that I want to read through in a moment, but just I'm curious about this word realm. When I think about the word realm in my own experience, it's been in mythological stories and it's a kingdom, a realm that the king or the queen oversees. And so yeah, I'm just wondering how to think about this idea of a realm in a spiritual context.

Jim Finley: Yes. I think in this sense, the realm of the heart refers to a dimension of our experience of ourselves and our life. And correspondingly, it's also the dimension of our present understanding of God and God's oneness in our life is a realm. It's deepening degrees of grace, states of consciousness is a realm.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, we can't see with our finite senses, but that we can experience.

Jim Finley: That's right. And really what we're saying here, this will be very important, we say the realm of the heart, I know it's what we're going to be looking at now really, this realm of the heart is this unity of mystery that alone is ultimately real. It's this oneness this way. But to find our way to the realm of the heart bears witness that we become exiled from it. So the whole path is the path of finding our way to experientially being grounded in the realm of the heart that is always there, this place of oneness between ourselves and God.

Kirsten Oates: Lovely, thank you. I just thought I'd read back some of the statements you made about the realm of the heart because you said a number of just stunningly beautiful things in a row, and I thought it would be nice just to hear them again. And so there's about five, I'll read them just one at a time, Jim, and then maybe you'll comment at the very end?

Jim Finley: You know what would help me?

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: To read them one at a time and I'll respond briefly to each one.

Kirsten Oates: Okay, let's do that then.

Jim Finley: That would help me more.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, excellent. Okay. So the realm of the heart is a realm within and beyond ourselves, which is God's very presence or God's inmost being, or God's very heart being given to us as persons created by God in the image and likeness of God. I was struck by the 'within' and 'beyond' in that statement, that it's within and beyond ourselves.

Jim Finley: That's right. So let's say first of all, the realm of the heart is beyond us because it's the realm within God's heart. To give us the depth of God's own heart is our very heart, that's how it's beyond us. And yet this mystery of this realm of the heart that's beyond us because it's in God is within us because it's God's realm beyond us being given to us as us. And so it's this unit of mystery or this communal mystery of the heart, one with God, yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Beautiful. Do these sayings just flow out of you, Jim? It's amazing.

Jim Finley: It amazes me too. I'm used to it. It's poetry. It's kind of just a certain poetic... I don't know, I can't explain it.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, it's just stunning, I love it. So the next one was, this is another description of the realm of the heart, it's our God-given godly nature, our inmost being as God's beloved in our eternal nothingness without God.

Jim Finley: That's right, that's right. So what we say then another way of saying it this way is that ultimately this is understanding creation this way and the creation of ourselves by God is persons in the image and likeness of God, is that ultimately speaking just one thing is happening. So the opening words of Genesis in the beginning, God said, "Let there be light, let there be, let there be, let there be." So in the beginning, just one thing is happening that the infinite presence of God is presencing itself or is pouring itself out kenosis, pouring itself out and giving itself away in and as the intimate immediacy of the gift and the miracle of our very presence, the presence of others and the presence of all things and our communal nothingness without God.

So it's not saying we are God, we are not saying we are God because we're absolute nothingness without God, God would cease at the count of three God's self-donating act of giving God's presence to us as our very presence as the beloved, we would vanish at the count three because we're absolutely nothing without God. It is the paradox, but it's a very nothingness without God that makes a very presence to be the presence of God and that's the realm of the heart.

And this is why we need to transcend our head, because the very nature of the sequential nature of thought, an example I use that I think that really helps when two people that love each other very, very much say to each other in a moment of their oneness and love, "We are one," and they know they're a one in love, they don't cease to be two because if they would cease to be two, they couldn't be there to know that they're one. But they don't live by the two-ness, they live by the one-ness. It gives meaning to everything they do in the two-ness

this way. So I think when you really think about it this way, you can kind of see this subtle kind of unit of sensitivity this way. We all have moments like that. So this is bearing witness to the ultimacy of that unity that's realized.

Kirsten Oates: I've been looking forward to going over this one with you. You said the realm of the heart, it's who we deep down really are in a trans-substantial communion with God in a state of oneness. I'm curious about a trans-substantial communion.

Jim Finley: Yeah. Here's one way I put it, it's coming to me to put it this way, in one of my other essays I put it, is that the things on which we tend to base our security and identity like our health, our reputation and our own eyes and the eyes of others, our belongings, all of that, these are things that are considered substantive. The house I live in, the clothes that I wear, my job, my reputation in the eyes of others, the reality of my career, all that is substantive. But when we look at these things very, very carefully, we see that they're all ephemeral. That is, they're all fleeting and the self that identifies with those things are self-ephemeral.

And so what we're talking about is a trans-substantial identity. It's an identity that's not reducible to the sum total of all substantial things. The ultimate, so we might say the most prevalent one for all of us, is love. Love is not reducible to something that's substantive, meaning something that we can have or get or acquire, but it shimmers and shines through everything that we do have and gives it meaning if we see them as expressions of love. But unto themselves like clinging and possessiveness of heart, it is myopic, it's claustrophobic, it's not enough for us. So we're looking for trans-substantial realizations. And as intimately experienced, see, incarnate infinity intimately realized that in my own heart there is a shining forth of a quiet fullness that utterly transcends and permeates the substantive details of my life, which makes everything I do. If I see them in their nothingness without God, then I really see them as sacred. As soon as I see them as real all by themselves, I get imprisoned by them because I get imprisoned of what I can gain and lose and it goes on and on.

So we're living a perpetual conversion in love. This is what the prayer helps us to do, it helps us to roll over into this boundless love that permeates. And the very fact we're have such a hard time with this and we stumble and fall this way in that which we're keenly aware of our limitations, so if it's up to us, it's not looking good. But if God is merciful, then my peace doesn't depend on my ability to measure up to what I'm supposed to be, my peace depends on your infinite mercy on me and my inability to live up to who I deep down really am, my confidence is in that, not in my ability to do this. And the prayer embodies that because if you really practice this prayer, you feel the poverty of yourself. So disarmingly simple and delicate, it opens us up to this mercy, it sustains us, doesn't it?

Kirsten Oates: And you drop into that communion that's always there.

Jim Finley: You do. And that's the realm of the heart. Here's the thing is we're trying to drop down in it experientially, but the ego resists the very dropping down that we long for because as soon as you drop down, you're not in control. See, as soon as I drop down, I love Kierkegaard's image, he talks about the leap of faith and he says, "You make this leap beyond reason, beyond things, beyond this reason," he said, "In the free fall, you're caught by Christ. Reflected in his eyes, you see your true face. There's no fear there this way." And so the Jesus prayer is slowly finding little by little by little was it God's grace? But we don't so much make

the leap, I think we fall right in the middle of a prayer. You fall down into this grace this way, and then you're sustained and it touches you this way, yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Well you made that very clear, trans-substantial communion.

Jim Finley: There you go.

Kirsten Oates: So the next one-

Jim Finley: By the way, I want to say something. See, if I would've explained it, I would've made it something substantial, but I didn't explain it, but I bore a witness to it. And by bearing witness to it, the heart recognizes it. And Merton called that spiritual communication. And I think that's the teachings of all these mystics, that's the depth dimension of everything Jesus says, really, it's trans-factual, it's not a set of facts or conclusions. Turning to the Mystics will continue in a moment.

Kirsten Oates: Well, that's a good setup for the next one because in the next one you use Jesus' words from John 10:10 where Jesus said, "I come that they might have life and that they might have it more abundantly," and you said the life of which he spoke was the life that was at once God's and our own and this is the realm of the heart. So I love the way you are helping us read scripture with this mystical lens, like the book describes that we need to be able to see things from this mystical or contemplative lens. So yeah, that was really helpful.

Jim Finley: It's so interesting, and this is true of all the mystics really how they contemplated this is origin, the deeper meaning. They didn't read it as proof text, like back and forth things to believe, but they saw it as transparent metaphors of the realizations of God's unexplainable oneness with us. And so Jesus always spoke out of that depth this way.

Here's another way of putting it, we might say too, see, it's the one life that is at once God's and our own. So in creation, in the instance of creation, the generosity of the infinite is infinite and we are the generosity of God, we are the song God sings. So God giving the infinity of God away is our very reality and are nothing without God. Eckhart says, "It's not the act that God performs, it's the act that God is." God is the act of giving infinity away this way. And likewise, receiving that infinity, namely realizing it, it's not an act that we perform as act that we are. But in receiving it, and this is a setup, if we're graced with the gift of consciously receiving it that we might in turn, be moved to give our very self to God in love who has given to us in love. And so this is the Jesus prayer.

So every time we inhale, this is the silence of Jesus, this mercy, this merciful presence of Jesus being exhaled into us. And every time we exhale, we say the prayer, but it's the prayer that is a self-donating act of giving our very self in love to the love that with the next inhalation is giving itself to us and in the reciprocity of love, destiny is fulfilled. And as that ripens and goes deeper and deeper and deeper, this falling when it comes to this habitual state of living in that.

Kirsten Oates: And Jim, you've mentioned it today a couple of times, but you bring back this idea that you've shared with all the mystics that the story of the fall, the mythic story of the fall, and that we're unable to experience what's always true and so we have to find a pathway back into that experience. But I love the way you told that story this time using this language from the

wave of the pilgrim. So I just wanted to read a little bit back from that and then ask you a question. So you said Adam and Eve were created by God in the image and likeness of God. Their human nature was translucent to the realm of the heart, it glowed with it. So I love the way you brought that in. And then you said the fall was trying to be like God without God. This is the idolatry of our illusory split-off self. So I was curious about that definition too. But yes, any further comments on those two?

Jim Finley: Yes, yes. See, God, let there be light, let there be stones and trees and stars, then God said, "And let us make the human person in our image and likeness," which that's the oneness, see, is this identification with God, this identity and love. Then God endows us with a nature, a human nature and the human nature, meaning not just reason and consciousness, it is that, but it's consciousness that's endowed by God with the capacity to realize the oneness that is at once God in ourselves. And so in the garden, in this mythic story of the garden, in the mythic story of the garden they were walking about, see, they were like God because they were created by God in the image and likeness of God. That's how they were like God this way. So the whole mystery of the fall really is a serpent, you'll be like God if you eat this fruit. And so it's trying to be like God without God, and that creates this illusory self that is this exiled place.

Now, the realm of the heart is still fully the realm of the heart within us because Merton says it's in us but it belongs completely to God, but the ability to experience it and say yes to it is wounded. I love this imagery of the Protestant theologian, Karl Barth, and he was talking about the garden of Eden and scripture revelation, and he was being interviewed by a reporter going over his book. And this reporter said to Karl Barth, "You don't seriously think, do you, in this story that really the snake could talk?" And he said, "Well, I don't think the question is whether or not a snake could actually talk, what I think matters is what the snake said." See, that's revelation. If we take it literally we missed the whole point. But if we listen to what the snake said, see then that's the realm of the truth of ourself, trans-substantially it's the truth of ourself.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, yes. So you described this illusory split of self. So the pilgrim in taking on the prayer and then with the guidance of the staretz is really trying to come to the end of that illusory split of self. Is that the...?

Jim Finley: Yes. So what we're saying is that we're in this state, the split-off state. So we are the beloved, infinitely loved, but experientially exiled who we are as the beloved. And we attribute substantiality to this illusory separate self that we're real without God and trying to make it work and fit it together. But God endlessly is always reaching out to us always. And so in human consciousness, one way of looking at it would be God's always reaching out to the transcendentals of being the one, the good, the true, and the beautiful God's reaching to the awareness that our life matters in ways that cannot be calculated. There's a value in life that cannot be explained.

Secondly, the one is every time we seek unity, even though we're not religious at all, we're not conscious, there's just something about sense of fulfillment or happiness because it's true to the dowry of our being to seek forms of oneness, community and oneness. The good, when we seek the good, which is the will through love, see to seek that which is one, to seek that which is good, the one, the good, the true, and the beautiful, that which is beautiful. So

that's kind of the implicit light of the heart shining out through the human experience itself. And when we stumble and fall, it shines out through the inner awareness of the preference of mercy over a harsh cruelty, that we be endlessly merciful towards ourself and everybody else.

And then the next level is where then this human exiled condition then is illumined by faith, by faith. And through the gift of faith, then this obscure certainty in our heart, Jesus said, "I'm with you always." It's an intimate experience of what faith proclaims. God is one with us. And even though we're fallen, God has met us and joined us and is one with us in our fallen state that we're still infinitely precious in our fallen state as Jesus. And this is where the pilgrim was in the beginning of the story, efficacious unto holiness.

So we're saying that what if the pilgrim never would've had the awakening? He would've spent the rest of his days in devotional sincerity, he'd be in heaven now and we'll all be there joining him soon enough. It is more than enough. But sometimes what happens, it can be the charism of this call to the radicalization of this unit of life as a way for us to follow this path. And this is what the story's about. So as we listen to this story, as the pilgrim shares his story of this, we can listen to pick up sensitivities to how the very fact we're touched by the beauty of it bears witness that we're resonating with it because we in some way are already on this path, or we wouldn't sense any beauty in the pilgrim's story, but it's strangely relevant, like there's something intimate about it, yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, yes. I have a number of follow-up questions to what you've just shared, Jim. And the first one is about, you say this in the talk as well about you kind of say at the human level, there are ways we're drawn into the realm of the heart. And you talk about, as you just did, the true, the good and the beautiful, and I'm really curious about that, so you don't necessarily have to be religious to touch into the realm of the heart. And would you say it's giving up a certain amount of control? Because you were talking about how that illusory split-off self needs to feel like it's in control, and that's kind of what keeps it alive and keeps us away from this experience of the realm of the heart. So is that a commonality with the true, the good and the beautiful?

Jim Finley: Yes. I want to put it this way. I was over the years a clinical psychologist, I worked with trauma and sometimes people would choose me for therapy because they wanted their spirituality to be resourced in their trauma, but some wouldn't, some wouldn't. And so for some people, there wouldn't be any explicit mention of God at all. But here's the intimacy of it all, the person comes in hurting, not just because of the symptoms that they're experiencing, they're depressed or anxious or stressful life, I mean there is that. But the pain that they're in is somehow closing off experiential access to the very value of themselves that they know is there. And as it unfolds, as they walk the walk through the laying bare of the pain, what starts emerging out of that wall is a shining forth of that value like I matter. And since I matter, it asks out of me that I be faithful to the gift of my life, that I be true to it and follow it.

And so that way, when two people are like that together, it's like meditation for two and you're on holy ground together because you're in the abyss-like depth of the gift of the unfolding of someone discovering who they are and who they're called to be. It's priceless, you can't put a price on it. And I would say God's the infinity of that value, even though the person wouldn't consciously occur to them to put it that way. But if they are endowed with

the gift of faith, it allows them to see an experiential understanding of what the words of faith mean.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, yes. I see what you're saying, yes. I find that just so encouraging, especially in today's day and age where so many people are turning away from the church. And I know there's a lot of grandparents, parents, et cetera, that are concerned about how to bring the realm of the heart into the life of their children or their grandchildren. And so I think this is a beautiful encouragement that it doesn't have to be explicitly religious to find our way there.

Jim Finley: Not true. Because I think what we want for, say parents with their children, for example, if they're Catholic and they want their children, that's understandable, but really I think what parents want for their children is they want their children to be happy and they really want their children to be loving, vulnerable, patient, present, sensitive people. And we might even say then that's the essence of religion because God's the infinity of that. So there are some people who are not overtly religious as in a belief system that are more deeply religious in this sense than the deeply religious person carrying their Bible around with them. And I think that these mystical traditions, they shed light on that. I think it's really true. I like that saying by Thomas Merton, there's a lot of Catholics losing their faith and they're losing it in church because it's seen as empire as a set of teachings, and it isn't teaching this, which is the lifeblood of the gospel really.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, yes. Well, back to some of the instructions from the prayer, I did have a question for you, Jim, I was curious to know that when you entered the monastery, if you had this gradual increase of things, so he goes from 3000 to 6000 to 12,000, and I wondered when you join the monastery, if they gradually build you up to things or they just throw you in at the deep end?

Jim Finley: I think what they did at the monastery first, I understand the approach was different, but the effect was the same is when I was at, this is a cloistered monastery, so there's no active ministry, so you didn't leave. We lived in silence, didn't talk to each other, chanted the psalms throughout the day, got up at 2:30 in the morning to chant vigils, went to bed at 7:30 at night. And the down times during the day was for prayer, you could sit in the church or walk in the cemetery or walk in the woods or read the Bible. And you were just left there. There was no television, there was no radio, there was no ministry, there was no family. It was just endless ordinariness of life this way.

And what happens is in the rhythms of the unfoldings of the ordinariness, it gets unexpectedly deeper in unexplainable ways, and how can I then be faithful to this or listen to this or walk with this? And the image I'd like to share from Merton, he's describing a Sunday afternoon in the monastery, which was just like every other day in the monastery is if there's no manual labor so you still got up at 2:30 in the morning, went to bed at 7:30 at night, did nothing all day long. He to chant the psalms and walk in the woods and walk in the cemetery. And he says of the monastery, he said, "The young monks lean sadly up against walls asking questions that have no answers. The old monks are silent because they've given up interest in speech because they've crossed over into realms that can't be said."

See, because if you're asking the question that has an answer, once you get an answer, then you're looking for the next answer. But what if you're asking the question that has no answer

and you're opening yourself to the presence of God, and God's not an answer? God washes through you unexplainably. So in a way, the Jesus prayer invites us to that. It's kind of the rhythms of endlessly patient unfoldings of your receptive heart to being unexplainably accessed by this oneness, taking us unexplainably to itself or unexplainably transforming us into itself and the ordinariness of our days. All these contemplative traditions, all these mystics, that's what all this is about, I think.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. And that leads beautifully into this point you made about the pilgrim coming to this, you talked about sustained absorption, but that he wants to be alone. There's a phase in this journey where we are separate from other people, we want to be separate from other people. And you said that this can even go on for years. And so I guess in the monastery you are separated by silence and by living in the monastery.

Jim Finley: You know how I put it as I talk to people in spiritual direction like this and so on, is if you're drawn to this direction, you're less and less able to tolerate small talk. You're good for a while. "But how about those Yankees? What do you think?" Half hour later, "I think I'm done." And also the TV and the commercials and the chatter and all that. And so in a certain way, it distances you from patterns that are actually patterns of distraction. TS Elio says, "I was distracted from the distraction by a distraction. Pull a number, I'll be distracted by you later. See, but I've been touched by something that's not a distraction." And therefore there's a certain way it quietly separates us either by the need for alone time or the need for kind of a greater sensitivity to our own interiority and so on.

But it's an alone time in which we're actually distancing ourselves at one level on this horizontal level because we're being deepened by God at this vertical depth dimension of a oneness that utterly transcends and permeates the realities of the day by day. But then what happens, and this comes up later in the chapter, in the last talk on this chapter on the cloud, we'll do next time is what it does then, it comes full circle and it radicalizes your sensitivity to the sufferings of other people. That is, you're able to see through the chatter to the beauty of who they are, you're able to see and to be one with and for them, joining them where they are. And that's the balance of relatedness, I think, yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Do you think, Jim, in this phase, you talk about how in the presence of the staret, the pilgrim sees what he's searching for and knows it's real. So even though the staret is feeling this desire to be alone, he has the comfort of the staret guiding him along the way.

Jim Finley: Yes. How I put it for me is when I went to the monastery and I was doing about his writings in high school, ninth grade, running through high school, and I'd be sitting with him in spiritual direction, just like the pilgrim with the stars, Martin and I would sit together.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, you'd be with Thomas May?

Jim Finley: The point is that the contemplative experience recognizes itself. And you can tell when you're in the presence of someone in whom your own heart's desire has been realized, that your heart has not deceived you, that the person abides habitually in this underlying divinity that permeates everything this way. And you sit with them and you seek their guidance in the hopes that what has happened to them might happen to you. But it goes the other way around too, the staret, because he was in this state, it was an empathy, and he could sense

that the pilgrim was being led to it in the very first fumbling phases of it. And sometimes, and this happens with the pilgrim, the teacher recognizes the student before the student recognizes the teacher. Notice at first, when he first meets him, he didn't want to go, but when he told his story of longing, he said, "Come now to the monastery," because he could tell in the longings of his heart that he was being led to something.

And then in their relationship then, this is how the lineage has passed it on this way. I love that in one of the letters of Plato, he said, "As regard to my true teachings," he said, "I've never written them down and I never will. They're handed down from student to teacher in a personal relationship and a self-sustaining fire catches hold in the heart of the student," and the fire is the fire that you sense in the presence of the teacher, that's the fire of God, shining out through the person whose yield is that, and they embody that in their ordinariness. This is very close in Hinduism to the guru. In the presence of the guru, we're in the presence of God. I love Richard Ward saying that when the realized yogi dies in India, that the ashram is empty until the next. And then you realize this path that you're being led on is the path in which what has happened to this person with God's grace is happening to you and why? So that you might pass it on. You might pass it on from one awakened heart to the next.

And one more little piece of this, "See, I've never written it down and I never will," he says. And all due respect to the good Mr. Plato, Jacques Maritain, the great domestic philosopher, his wife Risa was a mystic, and they were in bed together reading, and she was reading the dialogues of Plato, and she started weeping and got out of bed and knelt on the floor. So we haven't had the chance to sit with the stars. It'd be nice to have lunch with them and talk. But you know what? Even though it's not a face-to-face encounter, his deathless presence touches us in the words because it's written down, and that's the text. And I think those are echoes of the gospels also, I think.

And so it's kind of very mysterious, really, this logos that. Maritain once said to D.T. Suzuki about these meetings where someone is enlightened these zen stories. And he writes the Suzuki, and he says, "When I as a Christian read these stories of Buddhist enlightenment, something leaps off the page and says to me this is true. And I'd like to know if I as a Christian can dialogue with you as a Buddhist about this common ground." See, it's the realm of the heart. It's this realm of the shining out that all...

Kirsten Oates: And I love that vision of it catching fire. And that's what we're longing for in our own life is to-

Jim Finley: It is.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, for that to catch fire.

Jim Finley: Thomas Merton once said, "All renewal in religious communities is finding your way back to the fire of the founder." And I also love in the Desert Fathers and the Desert Mothers, one of their little stories is one of the monks comes to the abbot and says, "I'm trying to find my way to this awakening." And he said, "Well, follow the rule and love the community." And he said, "Well, I already do that." And so the Abbot stood up, put out his hands this way, and it said, and his fingers became like 10 lamps of fire and he said, "Why not become all fire?" And that's the lineage, really. And here's the point, in the realm of the heart, the God-

given realm of the heart, you are this fire.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, yes.

Jim Finley: And what you're trying to do is to be led and lured and transformed in the ways where it consciously burns as an unexplainable divinity, the ordinariness of everything.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, lovely. And I like the encouragement you give us to find the teacher or the mystic that really you feel that fire starting to burn. But what's amazing about you, Jim, is you have found the fire across these mystics and can invite us into it.

Jim Finley: Here's my sense of it, really. I think if we're called to this path, and let's say in Turning to the Mystics podcast, we go from mystic to mystic, and for whatever reason, there's a certain mystic that just gets to you see? And you can walk around with it, underline it, carry it around, keep the book under your pillow, and walk around. And you can open randomly to any page and read it out loud because everything they say counts in this unexplainable way. It's like that.

But what happens along the way, with God's grace, you can increase the repertoire. See, because one mystic caught fire within your heart, that same fire, you start to recognize it in the words of another mystic and another mystic. So it's so personal how this works. Some people, that doesn't happen. By the way, the fire of the Gospels is infinitely more than enough. It's the distilled essence of what all the mystics are saying, mystically understood this way. And then when Merton would say, "And sometimes that distilled fire, it isn't just recognized in our own lineage, but we recognize it in the lineage of another tradition, another world," because you can recognize someone who's been transformed this way.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, amazing. Well, just one last thing I'd like to talk to you about and just really celebrate in this text is the way it becomes so somatic. I think especially in today's society, we are so valued for what we think and what we know. And so this idea of trying to come into the body, and I love the instruction that there's a way the mind can start to hear the prayer in the throat, and it would kind of flip the script on how we are learning something or how we're becoming something.

Jim Finley: I want to say about therapy first. The whole therapeutic process, say being healed from internalized trauma and so on, the person starts out explaining the story they have, but where it really starts is in the very talking about the hurting place, the hurt arises and it arises as a somatic experience, they tear up, they're moved, they kind of feel like all of a sudden they're vulnerable. And so all of a sudden they drop down into bodily dimensions of knowing. They're not explanations of anything, but it's the unexplainable immediacy of the felt sense of the truth of themselves and their pain that they're looking for.

Kirsten Oates: If they can stay with it, if they can stay with it.

Jim Finley: Yeah, and that's what the therapist is for, is how to find a way to make it safe to stay with it. Because what happens often without help, we get in touch with too much at once. We get re-traumatized, we distance again. So how can we help someone stay in that middle range? If we don't get close enough to touch it, it festers. We get too fast, we'll get flooded. And so the

therapist models... And also notice you're being re-parented in love because they're staying with you in it this way. So the relationship of the starets is like that at this mystical level, he's guiding it and so he's pacing him to go beyond himself, but also he's dropping down to get out of your head because he says to him, "The Pilgrim is struggling," he says, "Your unmeasured zeal is in the way."

Kirsten Oates: Yes, I love that.

Jim Finley: "Your sophomoric enthusiasm is in the way." And he said, "What do I do about that?" And then you start to discover the problem is the very way you're going about it, but it's because of who you are, how do I not do that? And he said, "Well, rather than figure out some how, which should be another strategy, notice the power is pronouncing the words is the throat." And so the mind is listening to the body, say it. And then the word became flesh and dwelt among us. See, it's in the body. And then when he says, "Sit very still, look down like you're looking into your own heart," you see, like a yoga practice is the state of complete absorption and a bodily groundedness of dropping down into this, the realm of the heart is in those depths, one with God, one with us, breathing in and breathing out.

Kirsten Oates: A deep state of presence where the mind's not off somewhere, it's kind of so great.

Jim Finley: Exactly, yeah. And I'll also notice that sometimes in an absorbed state, it can become so absorbed all the thoughts disappear. There are moments like that. But really it's like around the edges, the hum of the thoughts are still there, but you're so absorbed in the singularity of this love, you're not carried off. Or every time you are, you circle back around it, be reinstated again to God's mercy on you as you keep getting carried off this way. And it kind of starts in the intimacy of those patterns, I think.

Kirsten Oates: Amazing. Well, there's always much more to talk about, but I think Cory would be happy if we stopped about here. This is a good session for people listening to be able to take in. One thing I did want to bring up, Jim, I think in this season there's a new chime in your house. Am I right with that? There's a new clock chiming?

Jim Finley: Yes, there is. But now that you say that, when Maureen and I decorated this place 30 years ago, we were going to get a grandmother clock, a chiming one, but instead we got a long hand-carved wooden clock, it hangs on the wall. It's about four feet long, almost five feet long really. And it chimes on the quarter-hour, half-hour and the hour this way. But it just so happens, can't get into my life here, it just so happens we love it, and the pendulum swings back and forth, it was a pendulum but I liked it. And it stopped working about 10 years ago. And I appreciate it was beautiful, we just left it there. And then what happened about two months ago, it was hanging there on the wall, and I would try to start the pendulum and it would stop, it wouldn't keep going. So I moved the bottom of the clock over one inch off-center, and it worked perfect.

Kirsten Oates: Oh my gosh.

Jim Finley: So I went to the watchmaker, who I've been going to for years, and he said, he'll clean it, go over the whole thing, go over the whole thing. He said it may take three months to do it. It's very meticulous, he has to take it home and take it apart and put it back together again. And

so I'm looking over and now it's not there because it's at the watchmaker.

Kirsten Oates: Oh, okay.

Jim Finley: And he even increased it. He said it may take up to six months.

Kirsten Oates: Oh, wow.

Jim Finley: And I thought, "Don't extend the time any longer. I'm 80 years old, I might be dead. I'd like a cutoff point." So anyway, but it is, it's lovely, but I have another antique little ship's clock or a little brass clock, the chime is quieter.

Kirsten Oates: That's the one we heard today. Okay, yes.

Jim Finley: You heard it? Yeah, yeah.

Kirsten Oates: The big one's not there today, or is?

Jim Finley: No. Did you hear a chime today?

Kirsten Oates: I did hear the chime today, yes.

Jim Finley: You heard the little one. It's a little brass.

Kirsten Oates: I must have heard the little one.

Jim Finley: It's a ship's clock.

Kirsten Oates: But I have heard the new big one in some of your sessions once you got it working, I guess. It'll be back next season maybe.

Jim Finley: Yeah, I hope so. I just hope I'll be back next season, you know what I mean?

Kirsten Oates: Oh, I certainly hope so.

Jim Finley: I hope so.

Kirsten Oates: You can just exist in the realm of the heart in our presence.

Jim Finley: Exactly.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you very much.

Jim Finley: Exactly, exactly, exactly right.

Kirsten Oates: Don't disappear completely. Thanks, Jim.

Jim Finley: Thank you very much. I think this will help the students, this dialogue. Thank you.

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.