

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 11 of Turning to the Mystics where we're turning to the teachings of Gabriel Marcel. And I'm here with Jim to dialogue about Jim's second session on fidelity.

Jim Finley: Yes, exactly. Glad to get into this again for the people.

Kirsten Oates: I'm so looking forward to our discussion. And I just wanted to remind everyone we're using The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel by Kenneth Gallagher. The quotes we'll be quoting today are from that book.

Jim Finley: Yeah, chapter five of that book.

Kirsten Oates: Excellent. Chapter five Roman numeral one on fidelity.

Jim Finley: Right.

Kirsten Oates: I think just to situate ourselves back into the realm of Marcel, you've shared with us, Jim, that Marcel shares vision and path aspects to his view of the world. Fidelity is the start down the path aspects. He has these three path aspects. But I thought it might be helpful before we talk about fidelity to situate ourselves in the vision aspects of Marcel's path.

Jim Finley: Yes. And notice also, we saw this in all the mystics also, they start out by bearing witness to what reality looks like through awakened eyes, with the spiritual worldview of the contemplative way. And this is what Marcel does. So his approach to this, we saw that each mystic has his or her own voice of expressing this, he talks about a winding path as a way in our daily life where we constantly meet the interface of aspects of our life that are problematic as distinct from those that are mysterious.

The problematic, the problem that we face is when we seek an answer or a solution to a problem that's dualistically other than ourselves. So the example we use is that my car won't start. It's a problem. The roof is leaking. It's a problem. I can't figure out a certain math problem. It's a problem. And so when it comes to problems, we look for a method to solve the problem, or we go to someone trained in the use of the method to help us solve the problem.

And then once we solve it, we're done. We move on to the next problem. So there is the reality of the problematic of our lives. The realm of the mysterious is different in that when we turn to mystery, we realize that we're turning towards aspects of reality that cannot be objectively set over dualistically other than

ourselves. It includes us. So example, if I ask what does it mean to be human, it's myself as a human being that's asking, what does it mean to be human?

What is consciousness? It's me in the reality of my own consciousness asking about consciousness. Or if I ask, what is love, it's my very self and my desire for love and my gratitude for love that's exploring and asking about love. And so I cannot separate myself that I'm always involved in the mystery. So these are mysteries and not problems. But he doesn't mean, and this is key to Marcel's vision, he doesn't mean it in a reductionistic sense where everything refers back to myself as my opinions, my conclusions, my answers, my beliefs.

He means the opposite. He means that the mystery of myself extends out into and is woven into the mystery of humanity itself. And also, my consciousness is woven into the mystery of consciousness itself, and my love is woven into the mystery of love itself. And ultimately speaking, that my consciousness is woven into being. This is what he means by the ontological mystery.

It means the mystery of being. And by mystery of being, he means that which is infinite, which is eternal. We're being very free about making explicit about fullness of being being God. So this is implicit in Marcel. We'll look at this closer later. And so what it really means then, what mystery is, is that the mystery of myself extends out into and is woven into the mystery of God who's extending out and woven into and given to me as the mystery of me.

So I'm caught up in a trans-subjective communion with God, and that's the whole realm of mystery. So he presents it first by inviting us to just reflect upon this. And there's another key thing for Marcel in this, primary reflection is objective and factual. It refers to the problematic that has its own reality. Secondary reflection is a reflection that recognizes the inadequacy of primary reflection. And it recognizes it because we begin to get immersed into mystery.

And really to be immersed in mystery is to be immersed in presence. It's insofar as I'm grounded in presence, I start to see the non-objectifiable mystery of myself. So he says, "This is the insight, this is the vision." So then the question is, if this vision rings true, say it rings true, but I realize how much I get caught up in the problematic, I get caught up in the concerned about the outcome of a situation, about what the person's going to think of me.

Is this going to be okay, not okay? I'm skimming over the depths of my own life caught on the surface of the problem. But there are certain moments where the mystery shines through, and this is where we talked about the thou moment. So the thou moment is where there's someone that I love and I see them objectively. I know what they look like and who they are.

I know their history. I know their personality. I know all of that. But to know them as thou is to experientially realize who I know them to be and my love for them. And what I realize them to be is that the infinite presence of God is

presencing itself in and as the presence of the beloved and they're thou unto me. And then when the one who is thou unto me returns the favor, then I'm thou's thou.

You have the reciprocity or the union of love. And in this union of love, we realize that the two of us together, and this also applies to family, father, mother, sister, brother, friend, just love, that all of us are the thou of the infinite thou of God who is being poured out and given to us as the thou of ourselves. And there are certain moments, and this is going to help us to see this, there are certain moments where it flashes for us.

We recall way back when we first started with Thomas Merton, where he says, "The world and time are the dance of the Lord in emptiness." And he says, "We don't have to go very far to catch echoes of that dancing." And he gives some examples. He said, "When we're out walking alone and we turn to see a flock of birds descending, where we know love in our own heart, where we look down into a child's upturned face."

And there are endless other examples, the quiet hour at day's end, lying awake at night listening to our breathing. There are certain moments, sometimes it can be very intense, transformative, but usually they're very, very delicate. And so he's pointing out these moments where the thou shines through. The thou is our very ontology, it's our very being, but where it shines into our consciousness. And the first example that he uses is the moment of fidelity.

And then he's going to look at hope, then he's going to look at love. So now he's going to talk about fidelity because the question is this, if there's a moment where I know the thou, the moment in which I'm illumined and the awareness of the thou passes, so the moment that I'm awakened to the thou is what he calls the summum bonum, an extreme good, only if the moment in time that transcends time can be sustained through time even when I'm not feeling it, and that's fidelity.

And so he's going to talk, what is the path? How do we do that this way? So he's going to give a concrete example in real life, and he's going to invite us to reflect and explore it and walk through it together. And we can apply it to the endless various ways that we experience this moment because it comes in many different ways. So that's the setup. Here's this transition to path.

Kirsten Oates:

Well, I do want to spend a little bit of time going back through the vision because these phrases that you took us through that Marcel uses, they're so deep. They're familiar words. And when we were practicing, Jim, you reminded me that we have to slow down to really experience what Marcel's trying to help us learn. So if it's okay, I might just take us back through some of those key things that you've said.

Jim Finley: That would be good. That would be good. By the way, I want to pick up on what we're doing right now. Just what you said always before, you can't skim read the mystics. And therefore, the pedagogy of Marcel, we can't follow him unless we're willing to slow down enough to sit with the implications of what he's saying. It's not theoretical. It's not abstract. It's just we're not used to being consciously aware of what's so intimate and subtle. So it would be good to do this.

Kirsten Oates: Excellent. Excellent. So just listening to your summary there, Jim, if I was to put my own summary on it, you said that Marcel helps us see what reality looks like through awakened eyes. And his definition of that is that we're in this living inside of this thou, this being, we're participating in a thou, a greater thou, a being, but we're in a communion with each other in that the whole experience is relationship, relationship with being, relationship with each other, relationship with creation. And so we live inside of this relational field.

Jim Finley: That would be very good. I want to refine it. I'm going to refer back to the Christian mystics, and it was Thomas Merton also on this, is where he said, "It's very helpful to keep in mind that when we die, we don't go anywhere when we die. We don't take off and go to some far off place. Scripture says in God we live and move and have our being. We're living in the vast interiority of God. So all the dead are here never die because they're all eternal. All the angels are here."

So that's the infinite thou. And that infinite thou is expressing and giving itself to us as the manifested presence of thou, which is the mystery of ourself. And so we're all siblings of this infinite presence, but we recognize we're siblings of the infinite presence in our recognition of each other, of ourselves. So that's the insight he's trying... And so we would try to do this, I think. It's kind of like we hear something like this and we realize we need to...

Just like we're doing right now, this is what makes it Lectio Divina. We need to pause and let it sink in and reflect on it. It intuitively rings true, but it intuitively rings true in a way we can't explain. So if someone would say, "Oh, you're reading about Marcel. What's he say," how do you say it? But when you're in the presence of his words, in the presence of his words, you realize your own presence is in resonance. Is it resonating with this like, "Oh yeah, he's helping me put words to something that matters this way?"

Kirsten Oates: And what I really love about Marcel is this emphasis on relationship. One of the modalities, we discover this being, discover this life in God is in relationship with each other. This relational way of interacting that can illuminate this thou, my own sense of thou and my sense of thou in you. I think that's so helpful that we turn to Marcel to see how the way we interact with each other can be a way of either illuminating or closing off this thou relationship.

Jim Finley: One of the ways that helps me to see this idea is that each of us is a unique addition of the universal story of being a human being. This story is playing itself out as my life, as your life, as a life of everyone who's living with us on this

earth. We're all woven into each other. We're all entwined with each other. And we're all woven into and entwined each other entwined in the infinite thou that's expressing itself as the intertwining of each other.

So it always brings us back to the relational quality. How I put it, like we subsist in God like light subsists in flame, but we also subsist in a oneness with each other. We're woven and we belong to each other. So fidelity is the moment where we're quickened with the awareness of that. It's always true and that's God's fidelity to us. But the moment of fidelity as an awakening is all of a sudden then the trans-subjective intercommunion of fidelity in the presence of a thou, and he starts inviting us to reflect on this this way.

Kirsten Oates: And so then the whole idea of the winding path is we're winding towards this union with the thou and the way our life might illuminate that, the way we might discover that in the way we participate in our life.

Jim Finley: Yes. Another way that I say it, yes, put it this way. It's a winding path in moments such as this where an intuitive resonance with a thou dimension of every moment, but the cell phone goes off and we lose it. So the winding path is recognizing how we move in and out of the awareness of a oneness that's always there because it alone is ultimately real.

And so then the winding path is how can I then in seeing this recognize in myself the desire to abide in an evermore habitual state of this unit of mystery of the thou nature, where we're all woven into each other, woven into God. And that's the path.

Kirsten Oates: This idea of problem and mystery, Marcel's really helping us identify ways we direct thought in these two realms. And that the thought also is coming out of a state of consciousness. So if I'm in a state and my consciousness is in the realm of the problematic and my thoughts are directed to solving a problem, I might've lost touch with that mystery that's always present.

And so there's a kind of thought that is more in alignment with that mystery, which is Marcel's words, his thought as a philosopher. But this idea that our thought can be more in a state of consciousness that's aligned with problems, it can be more in a state of consciousness that's aligned with mystery, but what Marcel's hoping to engage is the intermingling of the two.

Jim Finley: That's right. So in primary reflection, which is the problematic, which is real, which is our schedule and whatever, the details of the day, and there's the thought that pertains to all of that. I have to think my way through something, figure out something and fix something. And spirituality of maintenance, like maintaining things, all of that. But notice we're thinking now, but it's a different kind of thought.

It's a certain kind of interior way of thinking that's commensurate with the depth dimension of the presence we're thinking of. This is why I tell you this is the language of lovers. This is the language of parent with a child. This is the language that we hear in the cry of the poor. We hear it in the healing word. It's really the rhythm and cadence of the poet's voice.

It's the deep meaning of the words of Jesus in the Psalms when we hear the cadence of this invitational kind of presence this way. And this is the voice of Gabriel Marcel. It isn't right now where we're thinking about what Gabriel Marcel wants us to think about, but we're in a deepening intuitive resonance with the unit of mystery that he's inviting us to sit with and stay with.

And he's offering us guidance in that which makes him then the teacher, because that's who spiritual teachers are. They teach us, because he himself embodies it. You get the feeling he didn't make this up. This isn't something he's trying to be clever. This is something that he lives by it. And then he's going to say, "Deep down called to be, we're called to live by it too."

So how can I be in a more consistent fidelity? Do I deep down really am, I'm called to be in my very ontology, in my very being where it atmospherically permeates my consciousness or my sensitivity of everything as I go through my day?

Kirsten Oates: Yes. And that point you just made is so key to this idea of primary and secondary consciousness. Because if I treat everything like it's in the realm of the problematic like myself, everyone I'm in relationship with, all creatures, if everyone treats me like I'm nothing but a problem to be solved or someone to be analyzed, you get that sense of they don't really see me.

Jim Finley: Yes.

Kirsten Oates: That heartbreaking sense of not being seen, not being known. Would that be secondary consciousness?

Jim Finley: Yes. You can sense when you're in the presence of someone who can't see past the sum total of the details about you. They see through the details about you. You could get a sense that they see you. They see the presence. And that's why I say sometimes a lot of therapies like this, sometimes you get the feeling you're in the presence of someone who's more present to you than you are.

They can see in you a presence you're not yet able to see, and you start to find your way to it by believing in their belief in you. And you start to light up inside with your own presence. So that's very much at the heart of the path of Gabriel Marcel. His language carries us along to be ever more stabilized in that.

Kirsten Oates: You said from scripture, "In God I live and move and have my being," and how that's really what Marcel's pointing to. So he would be saying, "In being I live

and move and have my being, or in being I live and move and have my presence. And this sense of my own being and my own presence goes well beyond the details of my personality, but it encompasses all of that. It transcends that. It's something more pure."

Jim Finley: And you're hitting on another thing that's germane to Marcel also. It's true that later in his life he became a Catholic. He lived a devout Catholic life, but he's not... This is religious consciousness, meaning this incarnate infinity intimately realized outside of any belief system of any world religion. So it's almost a way of finding the divinity of life itself, which is the religiosity of reality.

And he says the more we get grounded in this, the more we can turn toward in a certain belief system without falling prey to fundamentalism like a certain tribal hardened lines of thought because we see the beliefs of, whatever, like in us is Jesus' dispensation of grace. We see it as poetic metaphors of this mystery that shines bright and is given to us in Jesus. That's why Jesus spoke in parables and didn't give lectures. And so this is helpful, which by the way is what religion is all about really.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: The religion is all about finding God in life itself, guiding God in who we are, created by God in the image and likeness of God, the holiness of standing up and sitting down.

Kirsten Oates: I love that about Marcel. And Marcel has his own lineage of philosophers who came to this insight, and some of them were Christian. So it's not like he stands alone in philosophy as people who recognize this religious consciousness. I love to be in the lineage of philosophers that came upon this same discovery. And Jim, just to say, what I heard you say is religious consciousness stands outside of religion, but it's what you said at the very beginning of this session, which is seeing reality through awakened eyes. That's religious consciousness?

Jim Finley: Yeah. Another way to say it I think it's helpful, Krista Tippett does this very nicely too in her book on religion and why it matters and so on, the root word of religion is religio, religio and religio is a ligature or a binding. Religio is to be rebound to the binding. The binding is the providential fidelity of God being poured out and given to us as life itself. It's sovereign, it's absolute, but we've lost consciousness of it. And so religion is to be rebound to the origin that never left us.

Matter of fact, it found us where we were lost. It's the experience of salvation. I once was lost, but now I'm found. So consciousness then is a religious sensitivity to the divinity of the concreteness of existence itself, the passage of time. And then my faith, whatever my faith lineage is is a certain dialect of that. It's a certain historically culturally specific way. And the truthfulness of each way in

the believer is holiness. The holiness of the believer embodies the truth of the belief.

Kirsten Oates: And so this is perfect, this idea of religio being rebound, because Marcel is saying we've become unbound from the realm of mystery and we've become myopically focused on the realm of the problematic. So we need to be rebound to the realm of mystery being presence.

Jim Finley: And it goes like this, and this is going to be an example. It's going to be an example for real life. So let's say in God's fidelity to us, which is sovereign and absolute and it alone is ultimately real, we tend not to be aware of it, but we are its manifested presence. It's the mystery of ourself. So what fidelity is, it's born in a moment where it shines into consciousness.

It's a moment where we're quickened, where we're amazed. It's luminous. And so he's inviting us. He's going to give one example, but we'll give more on this demand. And that's what he's really doing. See how? Not to break faith with my awakened heart. In this certain moment, I was given a taste of a oneness without which my life is forever incomplete. And I know it's true.

I will not play the cynic. I know it is true. And knowing that it's true then, that in a moment it shined in my consciousness, what is the path along which it could be more habitually established in this luminosity this way. And this is Marcel.

Kirsten Oates: Beautiful. So just pausing again to slow down, we're going to move towards the path that Marcel offers. But the path comes out of this desire to, like you said, Jim, to be seen and known in the wholeness of myself and to be able to see and know others in all creation, in the wholeness of itself, in being. And the path Marcel offers is to meet us in that desire.

Jim Finley: That's right. Remember T.S. Eliot in Four Quartets?

Kirsten Oates: I do.

Jim Finley: And he says, it's very close to Marcel on time and eternity. He says, "To be conscious is not to be in time." And then he gives examples very close to Marcel where you're out walking, it starts to rain, and you run underneath the grape arbor and you hear the big drops of water hitting on the leaves, or in a drafty church, a smoke fall. So he talks about these certain moments of an enrichment of our own presence subsisting in presence. It's very subtle.

And so he's inviting us to calibrate our heart to a fine enough scale that we become sensitized to the depth of these moments. And then it goes like this. But in order for this to be a supreme good, this quickening, a moment of time transcending time, it must then be sustained through time. And that's our fidelity in our consciousness to the infinite fidelity of God, breath by breath, heartbeat by heartbeat. And this is the path he's starting to mark out for us.

Kirsten Oates: Wonderful.

Jim Finley: When two people fall in love and get married, but they also know that there is the moment they fell in love. And there are also the moments, Marcel says, it requires moments to be renewed in time. And they also know that if they're not careful, they can get lost in the problematic dimensions of their day-by-day life and they can lose their way. So what we're trying to do is how to be more consistently established in the depth dimension of the concreteness of life.

As the holiness of the details themselves, he says to see that the incidental details of life are themselves flowing out of an absolute gift. So how can we see the holiness so that wiping down the kitchen counter matters in a way that we can't explain, and we matter to each other by listening to each other and being present to each other. So that has to do with parenting.

It has to do with marriage. It also has to do with being alone where loneliness turns into solitude. It's the way of the artist. It's the way of the poet. It's the way of healing. So this is the tonal quality Marcel invites us to be present to.

Kirsten Oates: And then this idea, because we subsist in God or in being that actually every moment is a thou moment.

Jim Finley: Exactly.

Kirsten Oates: And so we can start to look at our life as subsisting in this presence, and so being open to what that's revealing in every moment.

Jim Finley: That's exactly right. So every moment is a thou moment. And that's the ontological mystery. That's the mystery of the ontology, the very being of the infinite being of God given to us, free gift of our very being. The question is, what are the moments that it shines in my consciousness?

Kirsten Oates: Yes, shines in my consciousness.

Jim Finley: As a matter of fact, as we look at this example, sometimes it shines in our consciousness, it's shining and we don't even recognize that it's shining, where we want to reduce it to an emotion or a feeling. So he's trying to help us to be sensitive to the sacredness of certain moments and be attentive to their far-reaching implications and how to live in fidelity to that in the day-by-day.

Kirsten Oates: Wonderful.

Jim Finley: Turning to the Mystics will continue in a moment.

Kirsten Oates: So we'll move into the example of fidelity. I like what you just said about these moments when it shines in our consciousness, because the big thing, we're not in control of that. We can't force that to happen. But after it happens, we can

live in the resonance of it. We can live in alignment with it. And that's where you say, I won't break with my awakened heart. So there is something that comes through at the thread that we can hold onto.

Jim Finley:

That's exactly right. Another way to put it is we go along in the day-by-day and there's a certain moment where something flashes forth we didn't see coming, like an unexpected quickening. But once the quickening occurs, we're left to ponder it and what's it asking out of us.

And so he's going to look at a certain moment where someone's surprised or quickened and where the thou shines through the fidelity, and then the questions that it raises in the mind of the person. And we're to look at ourselves and see different examples for us and what are the implications for us that Marcel is inviting us to consider.

Kirsten Oates:

I love his so practical examples and how easy it is to relate to this example. So I'm going to put myself in the position of the person visiting a dying friend in hospital that Marcel outlines. So I go to visit a friend in hospital, and I have had this experience in my own life visiting someone I know and love that's dying. And we both know that's the path they're on. And Marcel says in this example that when I'm there with the person, I'm overcome by an experience that causes me to say, "I'm going to be here with you through this experience. I'll be back."

And I say that to them. And in that event of saying that to them, there's a response from them that is a sense that they feel loved, cared for. They respond in a way that's grateful. And so that's an event in time. And then however, a couple of days later when I said I'm going to go back and visit the friend, on that day, I don't feel like visiting the friend. And that event that took place, that holistic sense of, I want to be here with you, I want to help you, and here's an action I can take to be here for you, I've lost touch with that experience and that feeling inside of myself.

So what am I to do? That's the question. And I'm sure we've all faced moments like this where you felt one way at one point and you feel very differently later on. So there's two approaches that Marcel talks about that my ego can wrestle with. So one is I might call my friend and say, "I'm not feeling like coming today. I'm sorry I won't be there." That's one approach. Honesty.

And then the other approach is, I mean, I can't force myself to feel like I don't feel like going, but either I'm so concerned about my image, or for me, my go-to would be shame. Like I'm so ashamed of myself that I force myself to go, but it's out of this experience of being a shameful person and I should want to go. They're the two things. So one is I'm going to be honest and say, "I'm not coming. I just don't feel like I'm not up to it today," or I'm going to force myself to go. And Marcel says neither of those are fidelity. But then what are my other choices, Jim?

Jim Finley: Yeah, I want to find a little bit more. That's exactly right. You can see how real he is. So one is, I wouldn't say to the friend, "I don't feel like coming," because that would hurt. So what you would do is realistically you'd say something like, "I just can't believe it. I got all this on top of me this way, and I have to do this, I have to do this, and this and this and this. I'd love to come.

You mean the world to me. I just can't the way I'd hope I really... I'm so deeply sorry. I mean, seriously." And so that would be understandable and sensitive, but it's not what he means by fidelity. The other one is you want to preserve your image of yourself in your own eyes. You're a person of your word. And really you're living up to an image of yourself.

You don't want to be ashamed of yourself. And therefore, you're going to make yourself go to see that you live up to your own image. He said, that's not fidelity. They're both understandable. So then neither one is fidelity. Then what's left?

Kirsten Oates: Yes. What's left, Jim?

Jim Finley: That's what's left. And the error seems to be that Marcel is saying is we're assuming that the moment we made the promise to the friend, that it was a feeling. And it was a feeling, but we're assuming it was just a feeling.

Kirsten Oates: Like an emotion.

Jim Finley: An emotion. What we don't realize, what we tend not to be sensitive to is it is a feeling, but shining through the feeling, the dying friend intimately realizes thou. And by the way, you wouldn't necessarily be able to reflect on this when it's happening because you are it. This is why it takes thought to reflect upon this. And what happens? Because it's like a flash of light.

And what happens then is that they're seen as thou, namely in Marcellian language. Is that the infinite thou of God, Lord God our Father who art in heaven, the infinite thou of God, we realize its presencing itself and giving itself away in and as the very presence of my dying friend. So in the presence of my dying friend and in a certain sense, I'm in the presence of God.

And then also it isn't just that I'm empowered to see it, but the very fact that I'm empowered to see it reveals the thou dimension of me in this. So in a certain moment, my friend and I are kind of beyond time. We're kind of out of this earth. It's a moment of time transcending time and eternity. And so then I say, "See, I want to be faithful with a certain kind of fidelity to the truth of my heart.

That in that moment, I fleetingly glimpsed to I deep down really am, I'm called to be and seeing who my dying friend deep down really is and is called to be. And I will not break faith with that." So the question then is, this moment of time transcending time, I want to be faithful, but it's going to be a fidelity based

on the imperative of my heart. An example of this would be to extend this out the ways. In our own life, it can be a married love.

It can be a child. It can be a classroom of students. It can be the artist and their fidelity to art, the poet and their fidelity to poetry, the healing presence and their fidelity to healing, the solitary wanderer and their fidelity to solitude. There's a certain way we were quickened, silence or solitude or art or creativity, whatever it is. And in the moment of quickening, the moment passes, but we're called to continue in an interior fidelity through time of the moment that passes, that I think comes closer to how he's trying to apply this to our own life.

Kirsten Oates:

Yes. Yes. So just going back to that moment where it's almost like something comes over me in this example, because this is an example of this thouness shining through consciousness is what Marcel's referring to. So in this moment, it's almost like something flows through me. So it's not my emotions coming to the fore and my will coming to the fore and knowing what it means to be a good friend coming to the fore. It's like something beyond me and in me, it rises up.

And it's like all those ego components are stilled, and this energy and love flows through me for my friend. And then my words line up, my heart lines up, my body lines up, and I say the thing. And I find in moments like this, I'm often surprised by what I've said, and especially I'm so in awe of the moment of how well it lands, of how when you help someone in a way that you didn't see was possible or it comes from somewhere beyond you.

Jim Finley:

Put this way, when the moment's actually happening, we might say it's too self-evident to doubt. It's too deep to comprehend. It's like Moses in the presence of the burning bush. It's burning, but it's not burning up. So you're quickened. But here's the thing, even though it's too self-evident to doubt, it's so subtle we don't see it. But sometimes we're sensitive enough to see it. Put it another way, if you have a friend...

This happens a lot in therapy, spiritual direction too. If you have a friend who's really hurting and in your love for them, you say something that helps and you don't know how you knew how to say that, see, that would be the thou moment. It's not a preconceived memorized thing, but it was given to you out of the mystery of your own being in response to your love for the person and their being. And it was a granting that occurred this way.

Kirsten Oates:

So then those couple of days later where we were talking about those two options, the one of just sharing, "I'm so sorry, but I can't come or forcing myself to go." The third option, which a lot of people wouldn't even recognize, is this to move towards a state of prayer or honoring what showed up in me in that moment and trusting that that was a gift for this person that I need to honor. That the promise was made out of this thouness and that it calls me to live my life in alignment with that promise. And that's a gift to myself and a gift to the person.

Jim Finley: Yes, right. Example I use from psychotherapy too, a lot of psychotherapy is being in the presence of someone who invites you to slow down and listen at the feeling level to what you just said. That we're always skimming over the implications of what we just said. Another way of looking at it too in terms of Christian faith, you look at the world how collectively unaware it is of this.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: I'll just turn on the evening news. But Jesus is God's response to us revealed that we're invincibly precious in the midst of our unawareness and walked with us. And when you really look at the stories in the gospel, everyone who met Jesus, it was a thou moment. It was like an awakening. And then when we listen to it, you realize as you meditate on it, it's about you. This is Marcel's. We're in the realm now.

Kirsten Oates: I love this quote that, "Fidelity's axis is not the self at all. It is another. It is the spontaneous and unimposed presence of an I thou."

Jim Finley: That's right. And that unimposed presence was just the friend, the beloved, whoever it is, it's the I thou, and knowing that it's a thou is not dualistically other than the infinite thou that's presencing itself as the thou. And also the I thou is not dualistically other than me because we're in a communion together, like siblings of this infinite love.

We're in a communion in our wonders with each other that incarnates and embodies the infinite presence of this. And that's the sacrament. So Marcel's inviting us to just let this soak in and be reverentially attentive to it on how to bring this to bear on the realities of our life.

Kirsten Oates: And this is for Marcel and for many of the mystics what it means to be a person. And there's another quote, "We are called to be persons, to be selves, to found ourselves in eternal and unqualified meaning beyond the sum of our conscious states."

Jim Finley: That's right. That's very good. And we've quoted this before, or Thomas Merton saying, "The most important things in life are the very things we can't understand, but we simply have to accept or we go crazy inside." As we listen to it, my own awakening heart knows that it's true, but my own conceptual, problematic mind cannot find an explanation that does justice to it. It's the immediacy of the unexplainable mystery of myself this way. It's a thou this way.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, beautiful. And Gallagher also quotes Royce, who was influential on Marcel saying, "There is only a person in as much as there is acceptance of a certain task assigned by the absolute." This idea of in that moment, that event of me telling my friend and making that promise, it's like a task assigned to me by the absolute. And so I become a person when I live in fidelity to that.

Jim Finley: That's right. Thomas Merton said, "I finally come to realize what I must do is come to accept myself." Because there's very little chance I'm ever going to be anybody else, but just me that I am. But who am I? I'm a thou. Because if I don't live my life, nobody will. And so what is my life and what is the depth of my life that's concretely present and shining out here and there in these thou moments?

But also, how can we become habitually sensitive to the thou nature of the unfolding, of the incidentals of daily life itself this way, to be an ever more present person, an ever more compassionate person, an ever more vulnerable person, an ever more humble person, an ever more, how can I be helpful kind of person. I'm being myself. I'm on the journey of my unfolding self.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. I find this quote helpful from Marcel, "Only by accepting contingent circumstances as a gift from the transcendent can I see them as anything but absurd. I recognize them as mine insofar as I acknowledge them as participants in a vocation to which I am called." And that vocation would be the thou, to discover the thou.

Jim Finley: That's right. And I'll put it another way too to the listeners listening to us, insofar as this way of speaking speaks to you, that insofar as you sense that it's beautiful and you know it's beautiful because it's true in unexplainable ways, insofar as you come to this place... Otherwise, you wouldn't be listening. How has it come to pass? You've become such a person. And is it not so it hasn't always been this way with you? This is why sometimes it's really true.

You can pick up a certain spiritual book, you can't get through the first paragraph. What's that mean? Pick up the same book five years later, you have to sit down. You're like, "Oh my God." We're on a path not of our own making, just like the winding path that's brought us to a series which makes it providential that we're together this way with Marcel. His deathless presence, like all these mystics, is inviting us to be more present to the mystery of our own presence and our oneness with each other.

Kirsten Oates: And this is why our practice, our daily rendezvous, you call it, is so important because it's this reflective way of being and thinking that enables us to discover, to even look back on the winding path and see the ways that God has brought us to this place. And it helps us, this idea of not breaking the thread, that we become more and more attuned to the resonance of those experiences.

Jim Finley: That's exactly right. We're touched by this, and we're touched by it because this is where like Marcel is *Lectio Divina*. We're in the presence of this presence, this presencing itself, and echoing in these words that echo in our heart and we're moved by it. But here's the point, the complexities of the day's demands like a coup d'état carries me away. And therefore, I have to be faithful to a daily rendezvous in which there's no agenda but this.

Thomas Bernhard said, "With God, a little sincerity goes a long, long way." And so we sit down with childlike sincerity and we open ourselves to this and we listen to this. That's why you can listen to these reflections over and over. It's not redundant, just like poetry in blank verse. It touches a place. So that's the Lectio. The Meditatio, you might journal it out like, how would I say it? What questions does it raise in my mind?

Just where you're bringing it to thought, thought that was received this way, and then the prayer has helped me with this. So as you go through your day, you ask for not to break the thread. And you'll notice it breaks many times, but now you're aware that it breaks. But your faith is knowing from God's end, it never breaks. Why? Because the moment you get your bearings back, it's there waiting for you. It was also one with you when you went away. It's the lost sheep. It's just the constancy of this presence with us. And over time that deepens.

Kirsten Oates: And that's the mystery. It's mysterious that we can't make it happen. It's mysterious the way the interplay of us and that illumination. I love this line. This is going to be one of my big takeaways from Marcel, "The Self," and he uses uppercase, so the Self or the thou using his language, "The thou that exists through fidelity is a creative discovery and not an automatic fact." And that's the encouragement to be in our practice.

Jim Finley: It's an event like a light shines out like a creative, and it's creative. And here we want to make this distinction this way. He's saying it's that it creates itself, but we would say, but it's implicit in him. We would say, it doesn't create itself, but rather it renews in time who God eternally knows us to be hidden with Christ and God before the origins of the universe. And so who God eternally knows us to be is we're co-created. What's given to us in eternity flashes forth in our body in time. And so he's saying that his creation in that sense.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. I did want to talk a little bit about making promises because this idea of the promise that I made in the hospital and then how do I live in fidelity to it. And what Marcel's really pointing to is this event, like you're saying, this creative discovery of the thou and living in fidelity to that. Because often we make promises and it might not be out of that thou dimension.

And so Marcel's not saying, every time you make a promise or every time you say you're going to do something, you must stick to your word. And I'm thinking in particular of how sometimes people out of fear, they agree to keep a terrible secret for someone and they make a promise to them, but it's really done out of fear. And those kind of promises, that's not what Marcel's talking about.

Jim Finley: That's a very important insight. It's also key to therapy too. Say we make the promise, and then after the moment's over, we think about it and you say, "It wasn't right that I did that. I can't promise that." But then fidelity comes in the introspection that follows, why do I do things like that? What happens when I burnt something out? And it's not coming from the depth of myself. It's coming

from an internalized protocol often to internalize traumas and abandonments like survival strategies. We're acting out a certain play. How am I going to get past this, this way?

But so then the fidelity would come in that sense. See? And then you would have to go back to the friend and say, "I need to apologize to you. I will be with you interiorly, but I can't. And the reason I can't is I have a child terminal at home this way, and I can't leave because my wife's very distressed. My heart goes out to you, but I can't be coming and leave that. Just so you know, it doesn't mean that I don't care about you at all. It just means that I wasn't honest with myself by saying something I had no right to say." But then the secondary reflection of that kind of honesty, that would be fidelity.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yeah. I felt forced to keep a secret for someone who didn't recognize the thou in me. And at some point, I might come up on my own now and realize I need to tell.

Jim Finley: Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: That's true. Because sometimes we get caught up in a relationship with someone that they can tell they don't see us, but we're also afraid to be alone. And the reason they don't see us is there's a certain way we don't see ourselves.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: But something in us doesn't sit well with us. And see, that's fidelity. See, how do I then listen to this discomfort like a voice inside of me? And what's that asking? Because the price paid for that kind of fidelity is high, but the price paid for not doing it is higher because the price paid for the half-lived life is bitter. So fidelity is very bound up with the question of integrity and very bound up with humility. And this key to this too, I think.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. It's always tricky once you move into the realm of true religion and of the mystics, because it's not prescribed. We'd love to just say, "Okay, I'll always be a person of my word. I'll always do. If I follow these rules, that'll be what I'm looking for." It's never prescribed like that. I love this quote from Marcel.

"In no case, however, is fidelity tied to a specific dogmatized version of the absolute. Insofar as it remains adherence to a presence, it always overruns our attempts to delineate its object. For the more effectively I participate in being, the less I am able to know or to say in what I participate."

Jim Finley: Yeah, that is so good. I also love this sentence. He says, "The more our unrationalized response," that is the response that can't be reduced to a reason or an explanation, "the more our unrationalized response to being takes

cognizance of itself," see, that's thought, "the more perfect becomes our conception of the being that evokes it." And then he says, "And this is why perhaps it's more helpful to first be grounded in this so we can then turn toward these configurations of this in each world religion without slipping into proof texts, flipping back and forth like fundamentalism."

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, or rules to live up to.

Jim Finley: Or rules to live by. Because if you look at Jesus in the gospels, the people that argued with the most were the Pharisees. They quoted scripture to him.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: Ironically. Yeah, exactly.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Yeah. Well, what a beautiful deep and also quite practical approach to this path. I so appreciate you sharing Marcel with us in this discussion about fidelity.

Jim Finley: That's right. I want to end with a final note too then on this. How could we, in taking this to heart, learn to be more watchful of the ways that we're buying into the outcome of the situation as having authority over the condition state of our heart? And how can we in seeing that understand it and accept it, but to realize that there's something infinitely bigger to transcend the circumstance and is riven through the circumstance? And how can I, by a kind of secondary prayerful reflection, be more sensitive to it in ever more habitual state of how I live my life?

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Because no matter how big the problem we're facing, and we face really big problems, like the friend who's dying, there's something that's transcendent and true and real and internal.

Jim Finley: It's always there. It's like John of the Cross said, "I have no light to guide you except the one that burns in your heart." So the burning is the fidelity of God. It burns with this love. And so what's incremental is the variations of our degree to which we're aware of it. And we're also trying to be aware that God's infinitely aware of us as precious in the degrees of our unawareness, because it all ends in mercy. See, it all ends in how do I walk my walk and pass it on to other people? So anyway, yeah, they're beautiful.

Kirsten Oates: To recognize that God always sees the thou of us even when we can't see it or experience or know it.

Jim Finley: Merton says, "It's because it's that in us, it belongs completely to God." We don't belong to ourselves. You can't increase it because it's infinite. And no matter how badly you betray it, you cannot lessen it because it's sovereign. And we're trying to find our way to that fidelity. Beautiful.

Kirsten Oates: Amen.

Jim Finley: Praise the Lord.

Kirsten Oates: Thanks so much, Jim. See you next time.

Jim Finley: Well, thank you. Yes.

Kirsten Oates: And thanks to Dorothy and Vanessa and Corey, who support us so wonderfully in the background. 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.