

**Everyday Mysticism:
Experiencing God in All Things (Julian of Norwich)
Psalm 91 Genesis 28:10-17**

New sermon series for the next 5 Sundays: everyday mysticism. Before I go any further, I want to demystify the word mysticism. Because as soon as we start talking about mysticism and mystics, the stereotypes of what we assume that means might cause us to tune out. Or we'll start planning our Seahawks pre-game lunch plan. I understand the excitement!

When we hear the word mysticism, or identify a person as a mystic, we probably think of someone who has strange otherworldly visions, who is super spiritual, or we might picture a person, deluded or dreamy, who lives apart from real life and other people, isolated or sequestered somewhere with their crystal ball. And all of that is wrong. Which is why I want to demystify mysticism and mystics. Because... everyone here, and anyone anywhere, can have mystical experiences and be a mystic. And many of us already are; you just don't know it! There is no special category of person with the title mystic.

So let me encourage us, and demystifying mysticism by defining it. Mysticism simply means *experiential knowledge of spiritual things*—in other words, *experiential knowledge of God*. In contrast to exclusively book knowledge,

secondhand knowledge, or even church knowledge. Mysticism is when we move from our heads to our hearts; from intellect alone, to experience of God. We can have those experiences anywhere, and everywhere. In our kitchen while cooking, while on a walk, while reading, or listening to music; while at work, or when gazing at the Olympic Mountains at sunset. We can *seek* mystical experiences and create an intention and expectation for them, and sometimes *they find us* and the Spirit of God surprises us when we don't expect it.

It's simply a matter of being open to the experience—or, more accurately, being open to *God* in our everyday experience—and not living in our heads all the time. Which can actually keep God at a distance.

Here is a good story and illustration from Howard Thurman (a little preview; we'll learn from Howard Thurman more in two weeks) ...

As a graduate student in Boston, walking home late one night from class, he noticed the sound of water. He had taken this walking route many times, but almost always during the day, and he had never heard even a drip of water. The next day Thurman discussed his observations with one of his professors, who told him that there was a canal that ran underneath the street. But because the noises of streetcars, automobiles, and passersby were absent late at night, Howard could discern the sound of water.

Later, in writing about his experience, Thurman equates these sounds to the chatter within our minds that prevents us from being aware of God's presence—inwardly and outwardly. Quieting the surface noise in our minds is what opens up the possibility of hearing, seeing, and experiencing the Spirit of God, in us, and around us.

That's mystical experience: quieting the mind, paying attention, opening our senses, and reaching out with our hearts, and not just analyzing or thinking, which often contributes to the chatter and noise in our heads.

Every person has had some kind of mystical experience in their life. Everyone. Maybe the seas have not parted for us, and maybe we haven't walked on water, but there have nevertheless been momentous, or maybe even startling but wonderful, experiences in our lives, if we reflect for a moment. We just haven't shared those experiences in community, because we don't feel comfortable sharing them, lest we be thought of as... a bit off. But once we take courage to share them, others will begin to say, "I've experienced that too."

And I'd go so far as to say that this is what God desires for us, because *experience* of God helps us to *know* God. A pastor (Bruce Larson was his name) whose wonderful sermons I had the joy of listening to many years ago shocked the congregation one Sunday morning when he said, "God doesn't care about

theology.” You could hear the collective gasp in the sanctuary as the serious Presbyterians in the room thought their pastor was becoming a heretic. But then he explained that the word ‘theology’ means ‘the study of God’ and he said, “God doesn’t want to be studied; God wants to be known. God doesn’t care about theology any more than I care about Bruceology. Don’t study me, know me. I don’t want to be studied; I want to be known.”

Whether he was aware of it or not (I’m guessing he was) he was inviting people to become mystics. Who don’t just *study* God, but *know* God and *experience* God. It’s that simple. And, it’s not scary! More to come on that last statement! Because what ALL of the mystics have in common from their experience of God, without exception, is God’s goodness. Nothing but goodness and belovedness.

As part of our learning the practice of everyday mysticism, I’m going to bring in some everyday mystics from history to guide us, because each one has something to teach us from their life and their experience. Some of them are more well-known and some are lesser known than others, but that’s the point. Anyone and everyone can be an everyday mystic. We’re starting with two women from the late Middle Ages in Europe: Julian of Norwich, and Teresa of Avila. Then we’ll fast-forward to the 20th century in America and learn from Howard Thurman,

and Thomas Merton. Then we'll end the series on Oct.6 by going back to the 13th century to learn from Francis of Assisi, because October 4th is St. Francis day—or, if you have a Catholic background, the Feast of St. Francis.

Here is a wonderful text from Genesis to start us off, about Jacob's first surprising experience of God.

Genesis 28:10-17

10 Jacob left Beer-sheba and went towards Haran. ¹¹He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. ¹²And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³And the LORD stood beside him and said, 'I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; ¹⁴and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. ¹⁵Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.' ¹⁶Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!' ¹⁷And he was afraid, and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.'

This is the word of the Lord.

If there was ever a statement that says, "I just had a mystical experience!", this is it: God is in this place, and I did not know it! And to state the obvious,

Jacob did not have this experience in a temple, shrine, or church building. It happened outdoors, using a rock for a pillow (ouch!), while having a dream. Based on Jacob's response, it's clear that he expected God to only be in a certain place, probably a dedicated religious place, but not other, ordinary places.

This is but one of the multitude of stories about mystical experiences that are told in the Bible. And it's worth noting that they almost all take place outdoors, which tells us—in the words from an old children's song—"There is no spot where God is not." This is one of the threads that runs through the experience of all the mystics/experiences.

I'd like to introduce Julian of Norwich to us. Anyone been to Norwich? It's a city we can visit today in South-east England (north and east of London) with a wonderful castle and cathedral and other historic sites, but let's go back to the time when Julian lived.

It was the time of the late Middle Ages (the mid 1300's), and if we think we've lived through tough times the last few years, here is what Julian and the people of Europe were experiencing at that time. The first wave of the bubonic plague (aka the black plague), was sweeping through Europe. The first wave of the plague came to Norwich when Julian was 6 years old, and it took the lives of $\frac{3}{4}$ of the population of Norwich over 3 years. The plague was a painful death that

swept through and killed, some historians think, up to half of the European population by the time it passed decades later. In addition to the plague, it was the beginning of the hundred-year war with France (which actually lasted 116 years). During this time, the Archbishop of Canterbury was murdered—the main leader of the church in England and, since there is no separation of church and state in England, this was practically a political assassination. During this time, the church had three popes: a Roman pope, a French pope (apparently the French wanted their own leader of the church in France), and those two popes created a deep schism, so a special council was formed to come up with a solution, and their solution was to elect a third pope to preside over the mess and fix it. But (go figure) that didn't go over so well, so each pope excommunicated the other two popes. Which left everyone asking, who is really in charge?

So... church schism, assassination, devastating plague, and the start of a long war. Julian saw all of this. She was deeply aware of the pain and suffering of the world. And in the midst of pain and suffering, Julian writes this:

As truly as God is our Father,
so just as truly is God our Mother.
In our Father, God Almighty, we have our being;
in our merciful Mother we are remade and restored.
Our fragmented lives are knit together.
And by giving and yielding ourselves, through grace, to the Holy Spirit,
we are made whole...

All shall be well, and all shall be well,
And all manner of things shall be well.

“All shall be well” is Julian’s best-known saying, but we could be forgiven, perhaps, for responding, “Really?!? You must be joking.” How can anyone who is aware of the reality of life—in the 14th century or today—say that all will be well? Christians are sometimes guilty of offering a kind of superficial comfort that says, “Don’t worry, things will get better.” Experience tells us that they may actually get worse. Julian lived at a time when there were many challenges to well-being, and things *did* get worse, and she was realistic about that. She knew, as we do, that it can be a struggle to hold on to the belief in the goodness of God, and the possibility of wholeness and wellbeing, when there is so much around us to challenge our belief in God’s goodness.

Yet she did have that belief, which came from her experience of the deep love of God for her, and for everyone and everything. She had a series of experiences, she called them “divine revelations,” which affected her so deeply that she could see nothing but the goodness of God everywhere. She tells of one of these experiences where she is reading in the gospel about Jesus being nailed to the cross and being mocked by his executioners, and she says that she was so filled with the love of God in that moment that she couldn’t even see the Roman

soldiers or those who were mocking him. To her inner eye, they weren't even there. There was such an absence of judgment and vindictiveness that all she could see and experience was the heart of God toward all humanity and toward all suffering and pain as God, in Christ, suffered with us.

And this is where Julian can be especially helpful to us—because we're so aware of the traumatizing age that we live in, a time of political strife and contention, the brutalities of war (literal and figurative wars), the violence of prejudice, and threats to the environment. We're aware of these things, so how do we then learn to experience God as healer, as Julian did, and then in turn be a healing presence in the midst of a traumatized and traumatizing world? How can Julian's insight into the mystery of God's loving presence with us help us to stay grounded and present in the midst of the suffering, and not cause us to be easily tossed about or overwhelmed by it?

Well, in the midst of our time, in our situation and circumstances, Julian reminds us that there exists a place deeper, a deep-down place, in unity with God's sustaining grace and presence with us. Deeper than pandemics or plagues, deeper than political rancor, or even political *ideals* and political solutions, deeper than conflicts between people or countries, deeper than... church!—in all of its beauty and its contentiousness. There is a deep-down place.

That deeper place is in our experience of God—in Julian’s words—as Father *and* as Mother. That’s unbelievably progressive (radical) for the 14th century. But, that’s mysticism for you! Experiences and insights that transcend human-made labels and categories and either-or thinking, leading to the spaciousness of both- and harmonies.

It’s in experiencing God as Father and Mother, and it’s in yielding to the Spirit, as she puts it, where we are renewed and made whole. Yielding to the Spirit... what a wise and life-giving phrase! Let me plant a bug in your consciousness: every time you’re driving and you see a yield sign on the road, let it remind you of yielding to the Spirit... Yield sign—yielding to the Spirit. There’s a good everyday mysticism practice for us. And for safety on the road!

Julian, though she became a Benedictine nun, did not tell people to go to church. She told people to go find God in their everyday life, in the beauty *and* in the suffering of life. And of course, we find and experience God through church, but, as Jacob discovered, God is found in *all* places. Seek God and know God in all things, and all shall be well, no matter what happens. Because we are held by God, and protected and nurtured by God. The language and poetry of Psalm 91 speaks to this beautifully.

Although she herself was committed to the church, Julian experienced the church as deeply flawed and troubled and, as is true today, she saw that the church sometimes was *creating* trauma instead of healing it. Not just through schism and division, but through the trauma of bad theology and preaching that declared that the plague and war and all the other problems in the world were a sign of God's wrath and displeasure.

It's remarkable that Julian's experience of God was exactly the opposite: the more intense the suffering, the greater God's love is made manifest. Her view of wrath is that it's a *human* emotion and expression, and we project that onto God.

In the midst of a traumatizing time, she herself experienced God as nurturing and healing, so full of grace and peace, and she guided people toward experiences of God that were also nurturing and healing and grace-filled.

Her experiences of God—her mystical experiences—were not super ecstatic or strange. Sometimes they came through ordinary everyday things.

Julian writes that, while on a walk one day, that God showed her a hazelnut. So she took the time to stop and reflect on it. She writes, "In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it, the second is that God loves it, the third is that God preserves it." This experience revealed (confirmed) to Julian God's character as Creator, protector, and lover of all things, and people.

And that's a mystic for you! Looking at a nut, and experiencing God and God's heart of grace and love. I'll say it again: anyone and everyone can have these experiences! It's a matter of being open, of slowing down (mostly inwardly), of taking time, and expecting the unexpected.

And when we have those experiences, we might just end up saying to ourselves, "God was in this place (or this thing), and I did not know it!" After which we can respond: all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.

New song, set to an old tune: Through the Love of God our Savior