

## Everyday Mysticism: Living in the Present (Thomas Merton)

Matthew 18:1-5

Psalm 16

Our series is everyday mysticism. And I hope it's become clear that you don't have to enter a monastery to be a mystic. You don't have to renounce chocolate or forsake your favorite music. It is not necessary to make vows of some kind and then beat yourself up when you inevitably fail to uphold them. These are static and limited notions of what it means to be committed to the life of the soul and Spirit. To be a mystic is not about separation or renunciation; it is about *intention*. It's all about setting our intention. Which means choosing to see differently.

There's an old saying that goes: "Sometimes heaven is just a new pair of glasses." It's all around us, but we miss it because we're not seeing, or not seeing clearly. But once we choose to put on those new glasses, wow.

If you wear glasses you know what it looks like when you wipe a lens clean of smears and dust. Or when you get a new pair of glasses that actually work! And you also know how it feels to bump into things when your vision is fuzzy.

When we say yes to cultivating a mystical gaze, the ordinary world becomes more luminous, infused with flashes of beauty and moments of meaning. God

and God's world respond to our intention to behold the sacred by revealing almost *everything* as sacred.

This morning our everyday mysticism reflection is on living in the present; or, practicing presence. Living in the now. Listen for the present-focused aspects of this prayer of David...

## **Psalm 16**

Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge.  
I say to the LORD, 'You are my Lord;  
I have no good apart from you.'  
As for the holy ones in the land, they are the noble,  
in whom is all my delight.  
Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows;  
their drink-offerings of blood I will not pour out  
or take their names upon my lips.  
The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup;  
you hold my lot.  
The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;  
I have a goodly heritage.  
I bless the LORD who gives me counsel;  
in the night also my heart instructs me.  
I keep the LORD always before me;  
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.  
Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices;  
my body also rests secure.  
For you do not give me up to Sheol, (the place of shadows)  
or let your faithful one see the Pit.  
You show me the path of life.  
In your presence there is fullness of joy;  
in your right hand are pleasures for evermore.

This is the word of the Lord.

When our kids were little, we went camping pretty regularly during the summertime. I have a vivid memory of one trip where, on the day we were to pack up and head home I started to give some instructions about what needed to get done to pack up, and when that needed to happen, and where the camping gear and personal stuff needed to go.

While sharing this very helpful and necessary information, I noticed that one of our daughters was down on all fours, intently focused on something on the ground. She was crawling this way and that, touching something on the ground, then sitting up, then bending down again. Smiling, making giggling sounds, then looking a little more laser focused. And I thought, she's not listening to me. So I said to her, "You're not paying attention!" And her reply was as brilliant as a child-like response can be. She said, "Yes I am paying attention. I'm paying attention to this bug that's crawling around!" While I was concerned about what needed to be done a few hours in the future, she was giving the present moment—and one bug on the ground—her full attention.

We may say that children don't pay attention, but we're usually wrong about that. They *are* paying attention; just not to us when we want them to! Their attention is focused on an activity they're absorbed in.

When Jesus says to us adults, “Unless you change and become like a child you won’t see the Kingdom of God,” this is what he was talking about, in part. We could do an hour-long seminar on what child-likeness means and looks like for us, because there are many things that children can teach us about faith and trust, and humility in particular. For this morning, we will focus on one of those aspects of child-likeness: living in the present moment. One of the delights of watching a child at play, or any activity, is that they become totally absorbed in the moment.

And Jesus tells us that this is how we experience God, how we access the Kingdom of God: by becoming attentive to the present. Luke 17:21 gives us a good example (Message): “Jesus, grilled by the Pharisees on when the kingdom of God would come, answered, ‘The kingdom of God doesn’t come by counting the days on the calendar. Nor when someone says, ‘There it is!’ or, ‘Look here!’ And why? Because God’s kingdom is already among you.’”

In other words, heaven is just a new pair of glasses! Not out there somewhere, or off into the future, but here and now and everywhere.

In all of this is the invitation to live in the present. Because, that’s where God is! God isn’t in the past, or the future. Only the now, the present. When God revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush, and Moses asked, “What is your name?”, God replied, “I am.” Not, “I was.” Or, “I will be.” God said, “I am.” One

way to translate that from the Hebrew is, “I am the one who is now.” It’s a present-tense verb name that connotes pure being in the present moment. God’s very *name* is an invitation to live in the present, where God is.

Psalm 16 is a great example of a reflection and prayer about this, as David looks around with his new glasses and sees goodness and abundance, delightful people, satisfying provision, even the presence of God at night. Did you catch that? He says, “Even at night, my heart instructs me.” Because he knew/trusted that God’s Spirit was there, with him, in his heart. If I were composing this Psalm, verse 7 would say, “Even at night... my mind wanders.” But he says, “Even at night, my heart instructs me.” And the very next line, verse 8, explains why; he says, “I keep the Lord always before me.” In other words, being present to God, in the now, is my intention.

At the end of the psalm he describes the great benefit from living in the now, by saying to God, “In your presence there is fullness of joy.” In God’s presence, which is in the present, is joy. That’s the great benefit of living in the now, in the present. Not just joy, but *fullness* of joy!

Before I go any further I want to be clear: this is not escapism! When we set an intention to live in the present, this doesn’t mean we disengage from important matters, or social concerns, our work or our to-do list for today or for

this coming week. It does mean that we disengage from obsessing about things, past or future, especially the things that we have no control over; that we focus on the now, and let the answers come to us in time.

A wise guide for us in this practice is Thomas Merton. Some of us may have heard of Thomas Merton, or may have read some of his writings, even if you didn't know that what you read or heard was from him. He was a prolific writer on the spiritual life, which he believed was his calling/vocation.

Briefly, Thomas Merton was born and raised in France in 1915 to parents who were both artists (they met at art school there) and who ran an art studio in France. His father was a New Zealander and his mother American. When World War 1 broke out they moved to Queens, New York, to live with his maternal grandmother. After the war they intended to move back to France, but Thomas Merton's mother got sick with cancer and passed away. Thomas was 6 years old, and his siblings even younger, so they stayed in New York.

Note: many of these mystics, like comic book superheroes, were survivors of childhood tragedy (Howard Thurman's father passed away when he was a boy, like Teresa of Avila's father, Julian of Norwich likewise losing many of her family to the bubonic plague). There is something about loss and tragedy that shaped who they became as persons, and especially shaped their faith.

When Thomas Merton finished high school his father sent him to England to study modern languages, but after two years he became unhappy there so he returned to New York and enrolled at Columbia University in Manhattan, where he studied English literature. It was during those years that he met Buddhist and Hindu leaders visiting New York, from southeast Asian countries. And there was one encounter with a Hindu monk that changed his life. Merton was impressed by this monk and wanted to follow his religion and practices, but much to Merton's surprise the monk told him to read classic *Christian* books like St. Augustine's *Confessions*, and Thomas a Kempis' little book, *The Imitation of Christ*. He recommended these because he told Thomas Merton that he needed to reconnect with the spiritual roots of his own culture. Which Merton did, being an earnest young learner.

After he read those books, he began to explore Catholicism, and started attending Mass daily in New York, and was baptized Catholic within a year of attending. In the following years he attended graduate school, and began to sense a call to live a life of quiet monastic contemplation, out of which he would write.

Long story short, after three years, in 1941, Merton applied to become a novice at the Abbey of Gethsemane in Bardstown, Kentucky. He was accepted, became a monk and lived at the Abbey until his death in 1968. In those 27 years

Thomas Merton wrote 50 books(!) and other assorted articles that changed the landscape of modern spirituality and spiritual practices in the United States.

That's no exaggeration!

Most notably, Thomas Merton resurrected the practice of contemplation, and silent prayer. When we learned from Teresa of Avila a few weeks ago I mentioned that she created a system of mindfulness and contemplation, but it got lost during the culture wars of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the protestant reformation's deep suspicion of anything that looked or sounded like Catholicism. Well, Thomas Merton is credited with bringing those practices back, in an ecumenical and interfaith way, and reminding us of how essential they are. Not for reasons of personal piety, but as a way to help humanity heal from the madness of war and violence, and to help us become the peaceful human beings that God created us to be. Which, for Merton, meant that we abide in God's love; that we know and live in God's love.

He, like Howard Thurman, saw this as the way out, and the way forward, from social ills, and personal ills too. Like Thurman, Merton believed that people need to know peace in order to achieve peace, and the way to have peace and make peace is to know and experience our belovedness, and the way to know and



experience our belovedness is through quiet contemplation, and being present to God in the now.

Thomas Merton didn't just write about this and teach it. He experienced it. Here is his famous (to those who follow Merton) mystical experience that he had while visiting Louisville on March 18, 1958, in his own words:

*"In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of self-isolation... This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud...*

*It was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor even self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is **in God's eyes**. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time!*

*I have the immense joy of being human, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now that I realize what we all are. And if only*

*everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun."*

Isn't that beautiful?!? (picture of marker in Louisville)

This kind of experience, Merton believed, could be experienced by *anyone* who chose a path of contemplation and presence, not just monks or nuns or special "saints." Because...

Merton advocated for a contemplative *worldview*. Not just contemplative prayer, as one activity a person does separate from everyday life—although he taught clearly and compellingly about the need for contemplative practices, as we carve out special times during our days to quiet ourselves and pray and rest in God. Mostly, though, Merton wanted people to see contemplation as something they infuse all their daily activities with, something they not only *could* do, but *must do everywhere*. To put on those new glasses and wear them all day, everywhere! Along that line, listen to what he says about prayer:

"Prayer is as simple as breathing. It's something we all do, every moment of every day. Prayer isn't a sacred activity, and other activities secular. Just like breathing isn't sacred or secular. It just is; breathing is life."

And so, he, like so many others who teach about prayer, teach us to pay attention to our own breathing in and breathing out as a form of prayer, which

helps keep us in the present moment. It can save us from spending unnecessary time in the past, or worrying about the future.

Merton wrote daily in a journal, and his journal entries and personal reflections are as lovely and instructive as his books. I use his book, “A year with Thomas Merton” each day as part of my morning contemplation—it contains daily reflections from his journals.

Here are two excerpts from his journal, which to me are classic Thomas Merton. The first reflects his wrestling with the question “What am I doing here?” Or, simply, “What am I doing?” If any of you wonder about that, hear these wise and gracious words:

“What am I heading for? Where am I going? The answer is: I don’t need to know. All these troubles come from mistrusting the love of God. Shall I start asking myself all those same old questions all over again? God knows what He wants to do with me. Rest in His tremendous love—to know the savor and sweetness of God’s love expressed from moment to moment in all contacts between God and your soul—from outside, in events, and from within yourself by the flow of actual graces. Rest in that union. It will feed you, fill you with life. There is nothing else you need... Leave it all to God. Live in the present, and live in love.”

Here is another journal entry from the Abbey, which reflects his connection with nature (his journal entries are filled with these kinds of entries, as are the writings of all of the mystics). From one morning, during the change of seasons:

“Early mornings are now completely beautiful—ever-changing freshness of woods and valley, with the moon in its last quarter high in the blue sky. The first chirps of the waking birds of the dawn, a moment of awe and inexpressible innocence, when the Father in silence opens their eyes and they speak to Him, wondering if it’s time to “be.” And He tells them “Yes.” Then they one by one wake and begin to sing.

With my hair almost on end, and the eyes of my soul wide open, I am present, without knowing it at all, in this unspeakable Paradise, and I behold this secret, this wide-open secret which is there for everyone, free, and... no one pays attention. Not even monks, shut up under fluorescent lights and face to face with big books and with one another, perhaps no longer seeing or hearing anything in the course of the festive services.

O paradise of simplicity and self-forgetfulness—such liberty, and peace.”

After reading reflections like this (and the poetry of Mary Oliver, whose poems sound much like this), I wonder what difference it would make in every person’s life if they just went outside for 15 minutes each morning and just

noticed things, and wrote them down. Just anything: the feel of the air, cloud formations, critters scampering along the ground or in the trees, spider webs (especially at this time of year!), the daily gradual change of color in the leaves. A bug on the ground! Just notice things, and write about them.

This is part of the child-likeness that Jesus calls us to. Again, not to escape or avoid anything, but so we can engage the world and act from a place of love, of peace, out of a deep connection with God.

And it's here that I need to say this about Thomas Merton (I would do him a big disservice if I didn't say it): Thomas Merton was very much an activist—he was outspoken about societal issues, and deeply critical of the Vietnam war; he cared about racial reconciliation and especially about interfaith understanding and collaboration. Though he spent almost half his life living in a monastery, he believed his activism was best expressed through his calling as a writer, a teacher, and a spiritual director.

Maybe calling is too strong of a word, because I'm not sure that Thomas Merton had a clear calling to do or be anything specifically, except perhaps to be present to God in all things, and do what he believed was right. Which leads to my favorite quote from Thomas Merton, also from his journals:

“It seems to me that I have greater peace and am close to God when I am not “trying to be a contemplative,” or trying to be anything special, but simply orienting my life fully and completely towards what seems to be required of a man like me at a time like this.”

Sometimes, for us, what seems to be required is an important thing, like volunteering somewhere, or helping someone, or giving of our resources in some way. And sometimes what is required at a time like this is... to take a nap. To rest. We each need to figure out what that is for ourselves, but I have found that quote to be enormously helpful, especially as it helps me live one day at a time, in the present moment during the day.

From time to time, you’ve heard me say that if you don’t know what else to do, just do the next right thing right in front of you. I got that from Thomas Merton, from what I just read. That’s my distilled version of it. I am at peace when I’m not trying to be anything, but simply orienting my life toward what seems to be required of a person like me at a time like this, or in any moment. In other words, just do the next right thing right in front of you.

And that right thing will lead to the next right thing, which may lead to the next right thing, and before you know it, you might find yourself fully immersed in something you never expected. With great joy, because... in God’s presence is

fulness of joy. And, in God's presence is knowledge of our belovedness in Christ,  
of which we now sing.

O the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus