

Love is the Meaning

Summer Saints Sermon Series: Julian of Norwich (July 26, 2020)

Friendship Presbyterian Church

One thing I asked of the Lord,
that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the Lord,
and to inquire in his temple.

For he will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will set me high on a rock.

Now my head is lifted up
above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in his tent
sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the Lord.

Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud,
be gracious to me and answer me!
“Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!”
Your face, Lord, do I seek.

(Psalm 27:4-8, NRSV)

In a beautiful place like this, it's tempting to forget all the troubles in the world. But of course, that can't be sustained. COVID-19 ... civil unrest ... political divisiveness ... it all goes on, and under other names and with different faces, it always has. But God is with us, and as we still reel from the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, churches all over the world are seeking new ways of engaging in worship and ministry. While we would never have chosen these circumstances, they have in God's grace been an occasion for a tremendous birth of creativity – changes that will long survive this pandemic.

These times have also been an occasion for us to look to the past and draw inspiration and strength from those who have trusted God through their own hard times. Nearly 700 years ago, a pandemic swept through populations with terrifying speed, leaving in its wake a staggering death toll and severe economic dislocation. It was called the Black Death, and it devastated Europe in multiple waves in the 14th century. And in response, churches had to adapt. They faithfully pressed on in the midst of so many troubles, and found ways to proclaim and embody the gospel.

Today, we conclude our 2020 Summer Saints series with a brief look at one who saw and knew the Black Death all too well ... the 14th century English mystic and visionary Julian of Norwich. During her lifetime, Julian experienced the first (1348-50) and second (1361-62) waves of that dreaded disease in England, which historians estimate to have killed 40 to 60% and 20% of the population, respectively. Resulting turmoil from the plague was a major cause of the Peasants' Revolt in 1381, which ended with suppression of the rebels by King Richard II.

Little is known about Julian's real name or background – the name "Julian" was not actually hers but that of the saint to whom her church was dedicated. We don't know for sure if she was ever married or had children, but many scholars speculate – on the basis of clues in her writing – that she had lost both a husband and a child by the time the second wave of the Black Death had ended.

We do know that she lived practically all her adult life in Norwich, an important center for commerce that also had a vibrant religious life. We also know that she wrote the earliest surviving book in the English language written by a woman, *Revelations of Divine Love*.

In 1373, at the age of 30, she fell so seriously ill that a Curate was called in to administer the last rites. As he held a crucifix above the foot of her bed, she began to lose her sight and feel physically numb, but gazing on the crucifix she saw a vision in which the figure of Jesus began to bleed. Over the next several hours, she had a series of fifteen visions of Jesus, and a sixteenth on the following night.

In time, she recovered from her illness and wrote two versions of her experiences, the earlier one being completed soon after her recovery, and a much longer version, today known as the *Long Text*, being written many years later.

It is possible that she was a lay person living at home when her visions occurred, as she was visited by her mother and other people shortly before, but it is certainly known that for much of her life she lived in consecrated seclusion in her room attached to St Julian's Church in Norwich. There she lived a quiet life of prayer, with one window to the church and one to the outside world, while also offering spiritual direction and counsel. She died sometime after 1416.

For someone who only rarely left her room, who did live a secluded life, her writings have proven to be a divine gift to a church trying to live faithfully in the midst of the chaos. She lived in a time of almost unimaginable turmoil, but her theological vision was one of cosmic optimism – of a God of boundless love and compassion, by whom "all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."

In the medieval age when the *wrath* of God was so emphasized, when the threat of Hell was so often used as a weapon by church authorities to enforce obedience, Julian saw in God no wrath at all ... that the divine wrath the church had long imagined has been projected entirely from the twisted human heart, but that God forgives even this in us, and that “wrath is nothing else but a perversity and an opposition to peace and to love.”

Far from being angry with us or eager to throw us into Hell, God loves us, Julian says, but not just that: God *loves* loving us ... God *loves* being our God:

I saw that God rejoices that He is our Father, and God rejoices that He is our Mother, and God rejoices that He is our true Husband and our soul His beloved Wife. And Christ rejoices that He is our Brother, and Jesus rejoices that He is our Savior. These are five high joys, as I understand, in which He wills that we enjoy; Him praising, Him thanking, Him loving, Him endlessly blessing.

And from this deep insight into the joy God has in loving us, Julian relates what may well be the most memorable of her visions:

I saw that [our Lord] is to us everything which is good and comforting for our help. He is our clothing, who wraps and enfolds us for love, embraces us and shelters us, surrounds us for his love, which is so tender that he may never desert us. And so, in this sight I saw that he is everything which is good ...

And in this he showed me something small, no bigger than a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand ... I looked upon it with the eye of my understanding, and thought, “What may this be?” And the Lord answered, “It is all that is made.” I marveled how it might last, for I thought it might suddenly have fallen to nothing for its littleness. And I was answered in my spirit: It lasts and ever shall, for God loves it. And so have all things their beginning by the love of God.

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. But what did I see in it? It is that God is the creator and protector and the lover. For until I am substantially united to him, I can never have perfect rest or true happiness, until, that is, I am so attached to him that there can be no created thing between my God and me.

It may go without saying that church authorities would likely have had some issues with her views, if they had known about them, which is the best reason for supposing that they *didn't*. It is likely that she kept her writings with her in her room, and perhaps only shared them within a small circle of other women. After her death, her manuscripts were carefully preserved by Brigittine and Benedictine nuns, all the scribes but one being women. We are richer today for their faithfulness.

From the time she first received these visions, she often wanted to know *Why?* Why were they given? What was the Lord's meaning in granting them? More than 15 years later, she was given the answer. In her spirit's understanding, she received this word:

You would know our Lord's meaning in this thing? Know it well. Love was his meaning. Who showed it to you? Love. What did he show you? Love. Why did he show it? For love. Hold on to this and you will know and understand love more and more. But you will not know or learn anything else — ever.

And as this vision of boundless Divine Love transformed Julian, may it also transform us as we seek to know this Love, and learn this Love, and live into this Love – that God may be all in all. Amen.