

Turning to the Mystics



Turning to Teresa of Avila
with James Finley

Jim Finley: Greetings. I'm Jim Finley.

Kirsten Oates: And I'm Kirsten Oates.

Jim Finley: Welcome to Turning to the Mystics. [bell]

Kirsten Oates: Welcome, everyone. Jim and I are so excited to be launching season two of Turning to the Mystics. In this podcast, Jim uses the ancient practice of Lectio to help us turn to Christian and other mystics for trustworthy guidance on what matters most. In this episode, Jim will be introducing us to the mystic we'll be turning to in season two, St. Teresa of Ávila, a 16th century, Spanish Christian mystic. Then we'll be returning to the practice of Lectio using Teresa's text The Interior Castle. So, Jim, can you let us know why you chose Teresa as our second mystic?

Jim Finley: I would say, first, I began this series with Thomas Merton. I chose him first because, one, he was my teacher at the monastery and, also, he's contemporary. He speaks our language; and, therefore, he's more accessible to us in terms of a mystic teacher in the Christian tradition.

And then having finished the series on Merton, I thought Teresa would be a good one to follow to next, because one, it would be good to move from a man, Thomas Merton, to a woman mystic. And, also, Teresa, because she's one of the mystics that has had a very a deep effect on me in my life personally. And, therefore, she's just really a good resource to have in terms of trustworthy spiritual guidance in following this path. So, I'm choosing her next for those reasons.

Kirsten Oates: And now will you give us a bit of an introduction into who Teresa was and the book of hers that you are going to focus on and explore with us?

Jim Finley: That's right. Yeah. I'm going to begin first then, as we'll do with each of these mystics, with a brief little biographical sketch of who she was historically to help us begin to understand who she is spiritually; and so, very briefly then who she was in time. Teresa was born in 1515 in Spain where she lived her life until her death in 1582 at sixty-seven years of age.

As a young woman, she entered the cloistered Carmelite Convent of the Incarnation just outside the medieval walled city of Ávila and lived there as a cloistered nun. In her life as a cloistered nun in the monastery, she began to experience graces in prayer, like being drawn into these more mystical states of a Christ Consciousness or oneness with God in prayer. And, for example, she writes in her life, her spiritual memoir, that she was at one point caught up in a political conflict that was going on in the monastery. The nuns were divided and

Jim Finley: conflicted over something. While she was in prayer, she heard an inner voice, God saying to her, "Teresa, why are you concerned about such things? Seek me."

And so, she records a series of moments like this where she was drawn into this very deep state. And so, when the sisters there in the community sense this depth in her and her obedience, really, to write, like, "Help us so maybe you can help us to experience what you're experiencing." And so, she wrote her life, her memoir. She wrote a second volume called The Way of Perfection in which she further refines how to discern these deepening states of

consciousness, grace consciousness in prayer, and how to cooperate with them, and so on.

And then toward the end of her life, she again was asked under obedience to write a third book on prayer, union with God in prayer, which is the book we're going through now, *The Interior Castle*. So, it's significant because it's toward the end of her life, so she's at the heights of her powers, really, as a mystic and as a kind of a well-seasoned mystic teacher in the Christian tradition. And so, *The Cloud of Unknowing* is one of the great literary masterpieces, a classical work in this Christian lineage.

Also at the time this was going on, or right around the time of the writing of the *Castle*, she was also feeling called to bring about a reform of the Carmelite Order that she was in, and basically as a return to a more primitive observance of prayer, poverty, and simplicity. And this is where she then asked St. John of the Cross, who was just newly ordained at the time, to join her so that he could reform the men, the friars, Carmelite priests, and she would reform the sisters. And, of course, John of the Cross went on himself to be a great mystic teacher. And so, they were close friends in real life, but, also, they are two great teachers who lived side by side each with their own teaching, their own gifts to offer us.

And so, that's Teresa. That's her life. She died in the midst really of founding one of the reformed houses. She was in the midst of forming these foundations in Spain around Ávila. And that's the life of Teresa historically.

In terms of the text, *The Interior Castle*, to say that what we're also doing here is we're kind of modeling a contemplative *Lectio Divina*. That is, we're kind of modeling how to read a mystic, which should really be a way to model how to read Scripture. With this idea, by learning how to read a mystic, it can help us to learn how to live. And so, we kind of walk through it as a spiritual path where the reading itself as a kind of a prayer. And so, what I'd like to do is share with you and carefully walk through chapter one, how she starts her book, *The Interior Castle*. She begins, "While I was beseeching Our Lord to-day that He would speak through me, since I could find nothing to say and had no idea how to begin to carry out the obligation laid up on me by obedience, a thought occurred to me which I will now set down in order to have some foundation on which to build." I'd like to start there.

Jim Finley: Teresa realizes that she's being asked to speak of something that's very hard to talk about. It's not hard to talk about because it's theoretical or academic, it is hard to talk about because of the intimacy of the subject matter because the subject matter really is the intimacy of her own subjectivity being transformed by divine love into the love of God. And the radicality of that, the intimacy of that, how do we then find a language then to convey and to explore such things in a helpful way? And so, she's kind of pondering, like, "How do I do this? How can I find some overarching metaphor under the auspices of which we might be able to communicate with each other about this?"

"I began to think of the soul as if it were a castle made of a single diamond or of very clear crystal--" So, what dawns on her searching for this language is to begin to speak of the mystery of the nature of our own soul. And by her soul, by our soul, she means what our faith reveals us to be by God creating us in the image and likeness of God. So, our soul then is our God-given godly nature is our soul. Our soul is who we are because God says so. So, the real issue here, she's starting to raise right at the very beginning, is that our sense

of ourself, our identity, is much richer than what we tend to think of today as our identity, because we tend to think of ourselves as psychologically, like, who we are in our personality, who we are in our story, and we are that. But it's through that finite personality that we're awakened in a faith consciousness to the mystery of our ultimate identity in God, which is our own given godly nature, which is our soul. And she starts there by reflecting on this.

And the mystic, in being awakened in this mystical consciousness, the consciousness of the mystic then transcends the cultural setting in which the awakening occurs. But in order to share with us what they've been awakened to, they draw upon the images and language of the culture in which they're living. And since she was living in Spain where there were castles, she comes up with the metaphor of the castle. And so, she has a soul then created by God in the image and likeness of God, she likens it to a castle and to a castle of a great immensity and elegance that's made of a single diamond or crystal. So, the soul now, this lovely kind of spatial metaphor, that our soul is this vast, spacious, crystalline castle, is a soul.

And in this castle, she says, "--in which there are many rooms just as in Heaven there are many mansions." I'd like to reflect on this. She's not comparing the soul to heaven. If we think of heaven as where God lives the "Our father who art in heaven," if heaven is where God lives, and she says it's revealed to us that God whom the whole universe cannot contain is inside of us, "The kingdom of heaven is within you," since God creates a soul in God's image and likeness, and since God creating the soul in God's image and likeness lives inside of us in the depths of our own soul, then we are God's heaven. See, if heaven is where God lives, then your soul is God's heaven.

Jim Finley: And we might say then that the soul is the landscape of heaven in miniature. That is, if we by studying the nature of the soul, we can learn the landscape of the celestial fulfillment that is our destiny, which is the infrastructure of the intimacy of our own soul created in the image and likeness of God.

I'd like to suggest something else here about the mystic, and she's going to begin to touch on this fairly early on in the book. As we listen to this language, we're not used to thinking about ourselves like this, we're not. And we can see how our present society lets us down in a way, we're given a scientific worldview, a historical worldview, a political worldview, an economic worldview, but a spiritual worldview. And so this is kind of the classical, spiritual worldview of contemplative Christianity, really the Christian vision, reality, Christ Consciousness.

And so, already to sit with her, we're being healed of an impoverished understanding of ourselves, exiled from this God-given godly dignity and stature of who we are. Really, it's the innate value of what it means to be a person. "No, if we think carefully over this, sisters, the soul of the righteous man is nothing but a paradise, in which, as God tells us, He takes His delight. For what do you think a room will be like which is the delight of a King so mighty, so wise, so pure so full of all that is good? I can find nothing with which to compare the great beauty of a soul--" So, since God then is creating our soul in the image and likeness of God, and since God is freely choosing then to dwell in the interiority of our own soul, then we're invited to reflect. She says,

“If we think very carefully about this, sisters,” and this is why this calls for meditation, it’s why we can’t skim read the mystic. This is how we have to sit very, very quietly and let this soak in, walk with it, reflect upon it, try to internalize this. What are the far-reaching implications about what she’s telling me about myself? And if I could learn to see myself in this way, what effect would that have on me, the way I see myself, and how would it affect since everyone around me has a soul, how would it affect how I see everyone else around me? So, already we can start to feel the beginnings of the transformative effects of the contemplative *Lectio* that’s inviting us into this broader, more spacious or richer understanding of ourselves. She’s says I can’t think of anything to compare this all to, it’s incomparable. It’s incomparable.

“In fact, however acute our intellects may be, they will no more be able to attain to a comprehension of this [that is our soul] than to an understanding of God; for, as He Himself says, He created us in His image and likeness. Now if this is so—and it is—there is no point in our fatiguing ourselves by attempting to comprehend the beauty of this castle--” In other words, what she’s saying here, she’s raising a deep question about self-knowledge because if we think of ourself in these terms, the implication is that we are a mystery to ourself.

Jim Finley: We’re a mystery to ourselves because our finite comprehension and ego consciousness is infinitely less than the infinite mystery of the depths of our own soul. I put it, you can’t get the ocean and do a thimble, but you can drop a thimble into the ocean, and we are that thimble. So, we cannot gather up the immensity of God giving herself away in and as the majesty of our own soul. Our little mind can’t grasp it. But what we can’t grasp, we can realize if we surrender to it, that we can intimately realize the intimate immediacy of what we cannot comprehend, which is spiritual understanding. And you can feel then, in the rhythm of her voice, also, when you read her out loud to yourself, you get this feeling, the kind of quiet confidence that she has, that she’s not saying this on hearsay. She’s speaking out of the depths of what she kind of vividly knows for herself to be true. And she’s sharing this with us so that we might know it, too, in a kind of clearer way, and set out on this path she’s inviting us to follow.

She then says, “--as He himself says, He created us in His image and likeness. “And if this is so—and it is—there is no point in our fatiguing ourselves by attempting to comprehend the beauty of this castle; for, though it is his creature, and, there is therefore as much difference between it and God as between creature and creator. The very fact that his majesty says it is made in His image, means that we can hardly form any conception of the soul’s great dignity and beauty.” I’d like to reflect on this subtle point.

When she speaks this way about the divinity of ourself with God pouring herself out or presence-ing herself in and as the very presence of our soul, she’s not saying that we’re God because she was also simultaneously asserting the mystery of creation, that the distance between the infinite creator and the finite creature is an infinite distance. That is to say, if God were to cease loving you into the present moment at the count of three, at the count of three, you’d vanish completely, for you’re nothing, absolutely nothing, apart from the infinite love of God pouring itself out and giving itself away

as the very reality of yourself, others, and all things. And this is the great paradox about the soul, about ourselves, is that our very nothingness without God makes our very presence to be the presence of God.

And so, this is the mystery of the soul. And this great mystery then is also the mystery of all things. We saw this in Thomas Merton, too, with the cosmic dance, the world and time of the dance of the Lord in emptiness. So, this is the divinity of all created things, that the world is God's body, and it embodies forth the love. It utters it into being. But the difference between us, and stones, and trees and stars, that we're empowered by God to know that, which is the soul, which is what it means to be a spiritual being, which is religious experience habituated as faith.

And so, our destiny then to be this creature without God, we are nothing but our nothingness is the presence of God. We're endowed by God with the

Jim Finley: capacity to realize that which is our awakening, which she's inviting us to the essence of the Good News, the Gospel of faith. And then in awakening to it, we're called to surrender to it because love is never imposed, it's always offered. There has to be a free mutuality of self-donation for in the mutuality of self-donating love, our destiny is fulfilled.

And so, these are just the first two paragraphs of the whole book. It helps you to see, how should we put it? She's one of these people for whom every word counts, every word counts. It's endlessly evocative. And we can sit with it and sit, with it, and sit with it, and we sense that it's beautiful, and it's beautiful because it's true. And it's really the gift of the mystery of God-love being poured out as our breath of our breath, life of our life, see, the divinity of ourselves and our nothingness without God. And this is, we might say, is experiential self-knowledge born of faith.

Then she says, "It is no small pity, and should cause us no little shame, that, through our own fault, we do not understand ourselves, or know who we are." And that's our estrangement, that we are sadly exiled from the God-given, godly nature of every breath and heartbeat each passing moment of our life. Jesus said, "You have eyes to see and do not see." There's your God-given capacity to see your God given-godly nature, and you don't see it. And that blindness, that estrangement, the Buddha called it ignorance, that estrangement is the source of all of our sorrow, is the source of all of our fear, is the source of all of our confusion. And so, she's inviting us to understand the origins of suffering, this kind of primordial confusion about our exiled state from this infinite generosity of love that alone is ultimately real.

And so, she then says I am now going to take you, and I'm now going to paraphrase, I'm now going to take you, I'm going to invite you to join me, and I'm going to lead you into a kind of guided tour to the mystery of your own soul, into the innermost center, hidden center of your soul, where God's waiting for you in there to give you a big hug, like homecoming, homecoming like this. And then she says, which is another subtle point, she says, "But how can you lead us into our own soul, since, as you just said, we are our soul?"

She says, "Understand, there's different ways to understand what it means to be in a place." So I would say for us here right now, I'm in my room right here in my home saying this to

you, and you're sitting in your home or in your car, wherever you're listening to this. So, each of us, we are where we are. But the degree to which, and the extent to which we're aware of and sensitive to the depth and beauty of what's being shared here varies greatly from person to person.

So, now she raises the question about many rooms again, like, "In my father's house there are many mansions." Only now she's speaking of mansions as grace states of consciousness, which refer to qualitative degrees to which we are aware of and responsive to the God-given godly nature of ourselves, others, and all things.

And what helps me to see this, to visualize this, is imagine a soul's a vast circular spaciousness. And there are seven like targets going out, like circles, concentric circles going out. The outermost circle, the first mansion, is the initial state where we were first awakened to the interiority of our life. And that's where we're going to start in our podcast or in our reflections. She says there are some people that don't even know they have a soul. The centrifugal force of the momentum of life spins them out to the edge of themselves, and they get so caught up in it, it never dawns on them that if my life has an outside, it must have an inside.

And then she says but what's that like, to find your way into the first mansion of your own soul? And she then helps us discern the signs of the way of the beginner, first mansion. And then she talks about the transformations that happened there, the graces that happened there, the limits that happen there, which then leads into the second grace state, the third, the fourth, the fifth, the sixth, and then finally the seventh one, which she describes in-- She's one of these nuptial mystics, which she speaks of as being married to God.

So, we might say, to use this kind of nuptial imagery, see, there are some people who know about God. There are other people who have a kind of distant relationship with God. There are other people who are drawing more intimate with God, and they start dating God. Other people, they're dating God, God proposes, and they get engaged to God. And then she says it's possible to be married to God, because from all eternity, God is married to you. And that marital consummation of the kingdom, realized in the depths of yourself is the mystic way, and she's inviting us to proceed in that way.

I'd like to end here then with a little story I share about myself. I first got into Teresa when I was at the monastery with Merton, and I was going to him for spiritual direction. He led me to St. John of the Cross first. I was just drawn there first for some reason, and continue to be; Teresa, too, all these people. And so, I started reading Teresa and *The Interior Castle*.

So, when I went in for my session of spiritual direction, I was eighteen years old, maybe nineteen at this point. I entered right out of high school. So, I came in to see Merton for my session, and I had my copy of *The Interior Castle* with me, and I had little bookmarks in it. So, I told Merton, I said, "I'm reading *The Interior Castle* and reflecting on these different mansions." I was very sincere about it, I said, "The way I see it, I'm in the fourth mansion." And then I told him, "But if you think I'm only in the third, I want you to be honest with me, I can handle it." That's what I said. And he told me, "It's none of your damn business what mansion you're in." He said, "Isn't it interesting, the spiritual life should free us from a preoccupation with ourself, and all too often it just becomes another way of being

preoccupied with ourself? I wonder what mansion I'm in?"

Jim Finley: He said, "However, understood in the right way, it's immensely helpful." Why? How can I begin to comprehend what's happening to me in the poverty and simplicity of the sustained attentiveness infused with love in my prayer and in my life? And that's extremely helpful because of the subtlety of it, we can be getting in our own way without even realizing it. And what we think is an obstacle is actually the sign we're going deeper. And so, this is trustworthy guidance in this ever-deeper transformative state toward divine union, which is a foretaste on this earth of our eternal destiny in heaven, and also as a kind of a ministry to the world that the anonymity of this path in prayer touches the whole world in ways that we don't understand.

And so, this then is our work. This is what we're going to be looking at together. And the modality that we're working in, these little thirty-minute snippets, it really doesn't allow us to try to even begin to do justice to the castle. We can't do that. The online course from CAC gives it an opportunity for my kind of extended look at that, which can be pursued further. So, what I'm going to be doing instead is taking soundings. We're going to start with the first mansion. I want to prayerfully walk through a paragraph or two with you to take soundings as something that you can be invited to sit with in meditation for the week, and so on. So, by the series of soundings, we might start to get a sense of attunement with the beauty of the Castle, and also what it would mean to turn to Teresa for guidance and deepening our experience in response to God's presence in our lives. [music] This then will be our journey we'll be making together.

Kirsten Oates: Jim, thank you for that beautiful introduction. I'm even more excited about what's ahead in this season. Thank you so much. I'm curious to know what Thomas Merton thought of Teresa. Was he a fan? Did he read her?

Jim Finley: I would say, I mean, this is my sense of Merton, is this is what makes him so significant, too, is that when we read Merton, and then we go, say, read Teresa, what we're really doing is we realize his voice is echoing, the mystic voice echoes in the teachings of saints and mystics down through the ages, back to Christ spending whole nights alone in prayer. It's a lineage and an ongoing continuum of mystical consciousness into each age.

And so, Thomas Merton is kind of embodying—and I think Richard Rohr with the Living School, this is what the Living School's all about. It's the embodiment of the, "Oh beauty, ever ancient, ever new." It's the perpetual newness of the mystical wisdom of the Christian tradition in concert with the mystical wisdom of all the world's great religions. So, in essence, he was very aware of her. He spoke highly of her, her down to earth, pragmatic clarity, and so on. And so in that sense, he had a familiarity with these people. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: So, what I'm hearing in that, Jim, if someone's listened to your first season on Thomas Merton, even though Teresa was 16th century, that there'll be a lot of resonance and reverberation of the same sense of—

Jim Finley: Yes, but there's something to be aware of here, I think. Let's say that we're turning to these mystics, and we want to pursue it on our own further, and so we get a copy of The Interior Castle or St. John of the Cross' Dark Night of the Soul, I mean, whatever. Eckhart's one.

When you read Teresa and these other mystics, you need to realize that although Merton is contemporary, Teresa isn't contemporary. And she's writing out of the cultural milieu of her time. And therefore, she'll say certain things about women, comparing women to men in terms of we women, we're weaker. We women are more-- We women are more-- She'll make comments like that.

She makes a lot of comments about demons and spiritual beings, and so on. So, we need to realize that we're listening to her kind of cultural assumptive horizon, and we're critiquing it in a view of our own assumptive horizon. So 500 years from now, someone's going to read Richard Rohr or Thomas Merton going, "I don't get this guy. Why would he say something like that?" You know? "Why would he say something like that?" It's so weird.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jim Finley: So, you need to just be sensitive to that, but to know that really, the purity of it echoes within those cultural assumptions, they're not co-opted by them, but they're innuendos around the edges of it, and I think it's good to see that. It's good to have more than one layer, like a sense of history in the language of an epoch. You just need to just take that in stride and ride with it, and so on. So, that's something to consider. Because it can be discouraging otherwise because you have to be willing to be humble and go very, very slowly.

Jim Finley: I often suggest to people that they read it, and what gets to you is the one-liners. She just says something and you want to underline it and write it out. And a lot of stuff in between you don't know what she's talking about, but if you keep reading it over and over and over you start connecting the dots, and it does a number on you. You start soaking it in, and you start to internalize, and that takes time to do that.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). And Jim, that really points to this ongoing nature of being a human being, which is to have the divinity of the soul, but also this humanity that's in time and contextual and even mystics that may have made it all the way to the seventh mansion still had those contextual kind of hangovers. And so, we can have compassion for ourselves.

Jim Finley: Yeah, that's right. I want to share something with you, just to share something. In the book, she has a little forward. Here's the foreword to her book, "Few tasks--" and she's writing this as a seventh-mansion person. You have to realize this was just before her death, so she's a full-blown mystical. "Few task, which I have been commanded to undertake by obedience have been so difficult as this present one of writing about matters relating to prayer: for one reason, because I do not feel that the Lord has given me either the spirituality or the desire for it--" I don't think I have the grace to do it, and I don't care to necessarily want to do it. "--for another, because for the last three months I've been suffering from such noises and weakness in the head, that I find it troublesome to write even about necessary business." She had ongoing struggles and health problems, and a lot of—The Inquisition was going on, a lot of the politics, she has ongoing health problems. And so, she's really struggling under the labor of just everyday realities in her life.

"But as I know the strength arising from obedience has a way of simplifying things--" That's a great statement. "--which seem impossible, my will very gladly resolves to attempt this task although the prospect seems to cause my physical nature great distress." And I think by

obedience, I think she means this—that no matter how difficult something is, if we believe in our heart God’s asking of it, asking us to do it, that God gives us the strength to do what we can’t find within ourselves to do. And it’s so touching then, to hear.

So, being a mystic does not mean you don’t get sick. Doesn’t mean you don’t get frustrated. It doesn’t mean you’re not overwhelmed. You’re still just a human being, but the frailty of human nature no longer has tyranny over your mind and heart, for the very frailty is infused with the love of God sustaining you in your frailty. And I think there are a lot of places in the Castle where she talks that way, and she invites us to be that way too. Yeah, we’re a work in progress.

Kirsten Oates: I did want to talk about, because like you say, she can come across a little bit—and especially in this older version of *The Interior Castle*—a little like sounding a bit submissive in the way she talks about women and men. But she was actually quite a radical reformer, a leader, and very active in making big changes within her setting.

Jim Finley: Well, there’s a side about this, too, part of this you have to understand, too, a part of it has to do with the tradition of the Evangelical consoles—poverty, chastity, and obedience because as a religious, she took a vow of obedience.

And so, Thomas Merton, once in the monastery, he was speaking about one of the stories about the Desert Fathers, the Desert Mothers, and he said this one monk in one of these community of hermits, 2nd or 3rd century, is coming to this spiritual master. And the master takes a stick, takes him out into the desert and puts a stick in the sand. He said, “Every day under obedience, I want you to come and water this stick.” And so, every day the hermit takes a little cup of water, walks way out into the desert and waters the stick. And he said, one day he went out to water the stick, and here’s a reward for his obedience. It had bloomed, full of roses.

And when I was in the monastery, when we were eating, we all sat with our hood up eating bread and cheese, whatever. And when you were done, you were to scrape your crumbs up off the table. You could either eat the crumbs or put them in your little wooden spoon. But when the abbot gave the knock [knocking sound] to stand, we would process down to the church for chanting after meals. This one monk, he says in the middle ages, he scraped the crumbs in his hand, he was about to put it in his mouth, and the abbot knocked. So, under obedience, he didn’t put the crumbs in his mouth, he held them in his hand. He chanted down the cloister walk, went into the church and came out of the prayers after the meal, and he opened up his hand to eat the crumbs and here to reward him, God had turned the crumbs into diamonds.

So, there’s a certain idea about—Merton called it, “stick-watering obedience,” which is not true obedience. He often fought with the abbot. He said, “But in the end you have to obey.” In the end, you have to obey, which is really the death of your own will. But it doesn’t mean at all you’re not forthright, and she was very much that way. She was no one to fool with. You know what I mean? She knew what she was. She knew what she was about. And so, we need to understand this obedience language with cultural issues, but also understand these mystical, spiritual Evangelical console issues, and we need to understand it in the light of the true obedient person who was so courageously forthright in carrying out the will of God.

Kirsten Oates: Could you tell us a little bit about what she was passionate about in her reform? You talked in your introduction about reviving this more primitive observance. What do you mean by that?

Jim Finley: Here's what I mean by it, my sense of it. Thomas Merton once said in the monastery, he said, "All reform of religious faith communities is returning to the fire of the founder." And the fire of the founder was a person who was utterly consumed by the love of God. So, for example, with the Franciscans, Francis goes into this little church, he has this mystical experience where Christ speaks to him from this crucifix. He takes off his clothes, puts on a burlap sack and goes heading out across the road, kind of ravaged by the poverty of God. Someone was so moved when they saw him that way, and they come up to him, and they say, "Frank, what happened? Jesus Christ, you were fine yesterday, but I don't know what it is, I can tell when I'm near you, I'm near God. And if you don't mind, I'd like to get a burlap sack on." And pretty soon, we had hundreds and hundreds of people in burlap sacks walking up the road to be with Frank.

It's the same with Benedict in the 5th century, he was a hermit in a cave. He had one of these experiences and he kind of came out, was kind of radiant with this. They saw that in him. And they said, "Ben, my God. What are you smoking in there? What's going on? Jesus Christ. And do you mind if I move into a cave next door?" And pretty soon you had a whole mountain full of people wanting to live near Ben. And he said, "I better write a rule for these guys." He goes to his word processor, the Rule of St. Benedict. So, someone said, it worked fine until the Franciscans started. It worked fine until the Benedictines started.

And there are forces of empire, there are forces that institutionalize the original fire. Now, that transformative metanoia, the radicality of the gospel, takes place in the heart of each person. I do that, you do that within the community. But some people are called to do it in the transformation of social structures, see? They recognize that they feel a prophetic call to engage in the transformative work. But returning to what? Ultimately, it's to Christ. It's referring to the original orthodoxy, which is love. And so, that's really what the reform is.

So, what she was really adamant about was, in her rule as a cloistered nun, was a commitment to prayer to be a man or woman of prayer, to a poverty and identification with the poor of the world, and spiritual poverty and bereft, "Without God, I'm nothing, absolutely nothing," and simplicity. And that's what she was adamant about.

And so, when she wrote the reform for the rule, she wrote a rule to kind of embody that trend. And to this day—I got to go to Ávila twice with Carolyn Myss, which was an incredible experience—and the convent that she founded inside the walled city of Ávila, there are still nuns living in there following the Rule that she wrote. And they're still chanting the Office seven times a day. It's an anonymous, hidden, mystical, contemplative life, like Merton lived at Gethsemani. And so, you have the Carthusians, and you have Camaldolese, and you have the Poor Clares. You have the Carmelites. And you see, also, these traditions in Buddhism and Hinduism. It's really an enigma in the world, the radicality of a hiddenness that deeply moves the hearts of people, where they're kind of moved to go on pilgrimages to be there.

Jim Finley: T.S. Eliot says in the Four Quartets, "in little getting to kneel where prayer has been valid."

And so, she was so committed to that. And so, what we're speaking of now, how do we live it in the world? See, how do I, how do you, give ourselves over to this poverty and to this love and kind of obediential fidelity? And that's how Teresa, I think, speaks to us. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Jim, what was it like to be in Ávila?

Jim Finley: I was very moved by it. It's so mysterious to be where a mystic lived. I mean, it really is because it's like she was radically faithful to something she didn't see coming, like this, and she surrendered to it. And it just broke wide open for her. When I was in Ávila, we got to go to her cell in the monastery where she lived, each nun had their own little cell.

And she was also having visions. And so, a story of Teresa is that she's in her cell, we were right there in the cell where this happened, and the Christ child appears to her. And her name in religion life was Sister Teresa of Jesus, that's the name that she took, Sister Teresa of Jesus. And so, she turns, and she sees this child in her room, and the child, who's Jesus, says to her, "Who are you?" She says, "I'm Teresa of Jesus. Who are you?" He said, "I'm Jesus of Teresa." She says stuff like that it's just, "Ahhhh." You feel the authenticity of what she says, the depth from which it comes inside of her. And that's what she lived. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: And what was it like for you to be in that cell?

Jim Finley: I was moved by it. I got to kneel in the confessional where John of the Cross heard her confession, and to be with her. Similarly, they have the copy of *The Interior Castle*, it was the first draft, handwritten. She wrote out an amazing prayer, really—

Kirsten Oates: Wow.

Jim Finley: --stunning. You're sitting there looking at this text, it just came pouring out of her. It kind of amazed me. And I saw the room she died in. You could sit in the doorway, they had it roped off, you could see the bed that she died in. And it was just, the holiness of the light. In the Celtic tradition, they talk about "thin places," and it's just places where the divinity shines bright because of the radicality of the person who lived there and changed the world. I mean, I was very moved by it. I was so grateful to get to go there. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). I think hearing about her life in combination with reading this book and understanding the seven mansions, is both inspiring but also challenging because the deeper she gets into the mansions, she doesn't disappear from the world the more she moves out with radicality into the world to reform the world towards the love she's experiencing internally.

Jim Finley: It's true. And I think she did that consistent with her vocation as she moved out into the world, but to found cloistered monasteries where people never left, and where she preferred to be because she didn't want to leave either. And so, same with Merton and his hermitage, when he went to Asia and then he died. And not only did he live in cloistered silence in the monastery, but then he became a hermit in the woods at the monastery.

So, she went out into the world and touched the world in fidelity to this solitude. But the point is, though, we do that according to our vocation. And so, what she's asking us to do in the radicality of this prayer, which is really our poverty in the presence of God, deeply

accepted, deeply surrendered, then it kind of transforms and radicalizes the way we're present to our husband, to our wife, or our little boy, or our little girl, or the neighbor next door, or to the pandemic, you know, it kind of radicalizes. It's a light that transcends the world that radicalizes our committed presence in the world, which is how Christ lived.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). And she ends with a question on that, doesn't she?

Jim Finley: Yes, she does, which is very interesting. She gets to the very end, this sublime state of being married to God. And then she says for such a person, it's come to this, she said, there's only one question left: How can I be helpful? And that's how it ends. It's a great way to end. She also says, she says, you know what, we need to pour our hearts out to the beauty of the broken world that Christ walked in and came to be with the brokenness of the people in the world. And she said when we pray for the world, sisters, we need to be careful not to have some kind of cosmic prayer for the world. It has to do with how you treat the person you eat next to every day. We have to always keep concretizing the path and the intimate edges of the relational realities that we're all living in. See, how do I treat this person and then how do I treat myself? How am I present to the preciousness of myself and my brokenness?

Kirsten Oates: I did want to unpack a little bit, Jim, you mentioned the nuptial mystics. And for those of us who haven't grown up Catholic this idea might be new. And this idea of being married to God. Other denominations might have a bit of more of an icky feeling.

Jim Finley: In the Torah, the prophets during the Old Testament, there is the Song of Songs. And in the Song of Songs, it's very erotic imagery of the person going out and becoming God's lover, and God loves Israel. So, it takes marriage as a kind of a sacrament, as a sacramental sign for the ways in which God communes with us physically, emotionally in the totality of ourself. So, in the light of that, which in Judaism is really the deep respect for family, and for marriage, and the holiness of married life, and so on.

So, the mystics, then, the nuptial mystics, are the mystics when they try to search for words that can best convey what they were experiencing in the presence of God. They saw it as being married to God. And so, they speak of spiritual betrothal that is this phase, kind of like being engaged to God, and then this marriage state of divine union. So, really, it's a Biblically based metaphor for the holiness of human intimacy as a sacrament of the intimacy of God's loving communion with us, like this, which is eternal.

Kirsten Oates: That's really helpful, thanks, Jim. I just wanted to help people understand the version of the book, what version of-- Who wrote or translated the version you're using?

Jim Finley: I use two versions. I have two, there's two. They're all readily available. They'll be told about this, too. One is by Alison Peers, P-E-E-R-S, the one I read in the monastery. It has a nice little introduction to it, he goes to each of the mansions and then kind of lays it out. It's in paperback. And the other one is, there's a three-volume set on Teresa put out by the Institute of Carmelite Studies, which is in Washington, D.C., ICS Publications, Institute of Carmelite Studies. The second volume is the volume that has The Interior Castle in it.

So, sometimes I'll be referring to the ICS translation, but almost always I'll be using Peers, just because I'm used to it. It's the one I've read all my life and I'm just comfortable with it. But I've very much also used and like very much-- And sometimes, if you really want to get

into it, you can look at translations, so you could take Peers, and the ICS translation, and Mirabai Starr's translation and do a cross-reference on how these texts are like that. But those are the two that I'm using.

Kirsten Oates: Thanks, Jim. Peers, the language is a little old-fashioned, poetic and beautiful, but Mirabai Starr, who's a friend of the CAC, she tries to translate into more contemporary language, so if people want a different lens—

Jim Finley: That's exactly right.

Kirsten Oates: --that's a good suggestion.

Jim Finley: To be honest about myself, I haven't really read anything contemporary in ten years. I don't read anymore. I read these texts over and over and commentaries; I just don't read anything. I'm just immersed in this, I guess, because I'm old-fashioned and romantic at heart. I walk around with it, it's ballast, keeps me afloat, keeps me upright in the water. No, but it is really good to do that, you can look at a more, a contemporary voice. And by the way, ten years or fifty years, someone will write another one, because we're always incarnating it. That's how we do this, really.

That might be a nice practice for some people, is to do a cross-translation just like when you do deep Bible study, too, you look at the different translations with commentary.

Kirsten Oates: Our wonderful producer, Corey, always puts a transcript of these podcasts in the podcast notes, so the reading will be in the transcripts and they're

Kirsten Oates: beautifully designed as well, they're a real gift to anyone listening to the podcast. So, look for that there.

Jim, the format will be similar or the same as what you've done with Thomas Merton, where it's a Lectio practice—

Jim Finley: That's right. I'll begin by selecting a passage. I'll slowly read the passage, then I'll prayerfully walk through the paragraph with people, kind of sharing what I see in it, inviting them into what they might see in it, like this kind of prayerful immersion in this sounding in what she's saying. Then I always end with a way to pray, how to translate this into a way to pray, either as reflective prayer, a Lectio, and then we'll see as we move in towards the fourth mansion, how that starts to become a wordless, contemplative prayer. And then we'll do a sitting. And so, each one will follow that same liturgical format.

Kirsten Oates: Wonderful. Well, they've been a real gift, and I just want to encourage people that this is a unique kind of podcast that I've found it helpful to listen to each Lectio more than once, up to every day of the week until the next one comes out. And it tends to go deeper and deeper and deeper, and I hear things I didn't hear the first time. It's really helpful.

Jim Finley: I think in that sense, it's poetic. Like you read Mary Oliver, T.S. Eliot, whoever, Emily Dickinson, and every time you go through it again, there's another layer that comes up at you, and Scriptures like that also. That is Lectio, that's the real, that's the Word, that's the Living Word.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative), absolutely. And I really feel, with a Lectio like this, with Teresa, you'll be going through each of the seven mansions, Jim?

Jim Finley: I think what I'm going to do, again, there's disparity between the time available and the size of the castle. My plan at this point is to, in the very first one, speak of the first three mansions. And the first three mansions are kind of where, it's really the life of initial phases of interior conversion, and a life moving towards psychological, spiritual maturity. And then the listener is invited to listen to that, like "Where am I with this?"

Then the fourth mansion I'll spend more time on, because then it starts to become more overtly mystical. And how can we learn to be discerning within ourselves? Merton once said in the monastery, he was speaking of John of the Cross, but it applies to Teresa, he says— And by the way, an interesting thing about Teresa is a lot of these mystics, they don't start at the beginning. So, St. John of the Cross, for example, he assumes you're well-seasoned in Lectio in daily life, and so on, and Eckhart's this way, too, he kind of assumes a certain being acclimated, he says "This is for a wise and learned souls."

Teresa's so good, she starts at the beginning. Matter of fact, she starts before the beginning, even before you knew you had a soul. And the other book that's

Jim Finley: like this is Guigo, The Ladder of Monks, and Lectio. They start at the very beginning, so that's another reason Teresa's very helpful that way, the holiness of the beginner, the efficaciousness of that, and then how to look for the signs that were being quietly being led in the more wordless, modeless ways of oneness with God, yeah.

Kirsten Oates: So, you may spend a little more time on mansions—

Jim Finley: Yeah, exactly.

Kirsten Oates: --four to seven, unpacking them a little more slowly.

Jim Finley: And I'm not going to try to cover a lot of ground, it would defeat the purpose to start talking fast to get all the material in. But if we can do, I call it soundings, if we can get a taste of it, then based on our inclinations, we can pursue it on our own and sit with it because the idea would be to see that in the beginning, these texts are very beautiful, but they're not easy. But once we get acclimated to what they're saying, once we get interiorly aligned, then we can start to see the inner consistency of everything they say, and we can develop a certain kind of comfort with the mystics, a certain kind of familiarity with the mystics, which is a great thing.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Wonderful. Well, it's exciting with Teresa because these podcasts will be online forever, and we can come back to her mansions and kind of do a check-in. Which brings us to the end of the podcast, and an important question for me, which is, Jim, which mansion do you think I'm in?

Jim Finley: I would say, [laughter] based on the quality of your presence to me, drawing out responses that will help the listener, you're fairly well into such things. I would put it that way. And then if you had asked me what mansion do you think I'm in, I'd say "Pardon me, I don't speak English." Once I asked Merton what mansion he thought he was in, and he told me

again, “It’s none of your business.”

Kirsten Oates: Yes?

Jim Finley: It’s very interesting about Merton, unlike Teresa, in the journals, he’s very self-disclosing. But in his classic, contemplative writing, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, he really doesn’t, the depth and beauty of what he says conveys himself there. And another thing about the mansions is, I think we tend to be habituated in one, but there’s a long vapor trail under both, so under stress, we kind of revert back to earlier stages. Then we get little intimations of what’s to come. And so, it’s not some kind of linear, strict thing, it goes back and forth in a constantly evolving process. That’s closer to what it’s like, I think, because we’re right on the edge of spiritual direction here. That’s what matters, is we are at the crest of the wave in our life right now, that’s what matters. Okay, good.

Kirsten Oates: Since I’m here asking questions on behalf of people listening, where do you think our listeners are in the mansions?

Jim Finley: I think the very fact they’re listening bears witness that, in some way, they, too, are already on the path or inquiring into it, or they wouldn’t be drawn to listen. And that’s a deep question for each person to ask: “What is it that even prompts me to do this?” The way I put it, you put out something like this with a title like this. How I put it, it draws a certain kind of bird out of the underbrush. In other words, it draws out a certain person who feels in the very topic, a taste of what they’re looking for because think how many people heard about this and said, “I’ll pass on that, I think.” [laughter]

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jim Finley: “I’m just not there.” So, even to be drawn to it already bears witness that we’re already, in some way, on this way together.

Kirsten Oates: Well, thank you so much, Jim. I really thought you were going to tell me it was none of my damn business, so— [laughter]

Jim Finley: No, I wanted to be more polite.

Kirsten Oates: [music] Well, thanks so much for this wonderful introduction to Teresa, St. Teresa of Ávila and her Interior Castle. I’m very much looking forward to the Lectios to come. We just also invite people to send in questions along the way, and at the end of this season, we’ll have a question-and-response session, and we look forward to hearing from people.

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