

Turning to the Mystics



Teresa of Avila:
Listener Questions (Part 1)

with James Finley

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Jim Finley: [music] 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. We're coming to the end of Season 2 of Turning to the Mystics where we've been turning to the 16th-century mystic St. Teresa of Ávila and her beautiful book the Interior Castle. We have two more episodes this week and next week. And in both episodes, we're turning to questions from our audience. So, we're so grateful for the questions, and I think you'll see, they draw a lot of wisdom from Jim. So, thank you for those people that sent them in.

Let's get started. Welcome, Jim. Good to see you. We've come to the end of the beautiful work by St. Teresa of Ávila, the Interior Castle. And today we're taking questions from listeners. You've read through a lot of the questions. Do you have any just initial, overall reflections about what you've been seeing?

Jim Finley: Yes, I read them all. I thought they were very good in the sense that what she's saying here, she's really writing this as spiritual direction, for guidance for those who are drawn to move toward these more contemplative ways of experiencing God's presence. And these questions that people are asking are the kinds of questions people ask. Like, "What about this?" and, "What about that?" either around the prayer itself or these grace states of consciousness, or as it applies to events in their life because it touches things that we've gone through or things we're presently going through. So, the questions just sounded like they were real questions for people trying to walk this walk.

Kirsten Oates: It's so nice to get them at the end of the season, isn't it?

Jim Finley: Mm-hmm (affirmative). It is.

Kirsten Oates: To know how it's been reaching people, and yeah. So, the first question is from Lynn and she says—she's in the first dwelling of the Interior Castle where it says, "Unless these souls strive to heal their profound misery, they will be turned into pillars of salt, just like Lot's wife was changed when she looked back." And she wondered what that meant.

Jim Finley: You know, the reason in this series we started with Thomas Merton is because he's contemporary. So, a lot of his language and the way he words things, he's a spirit of our age. And so, partly when we read these classical mystics, one, we're getting to the depth and beauty of their teachings, but we're also getting into the language of a previous period of history and the things they refer to in Scripture, the images that they use. And it's like learning a new language in a way, kind of the spirit of the age and how the mystical gift runs through all the ages, but each age incarnates it in its own language; it has its own ambience to it. And so, the story of Lot's wife, you know, turning to look back and turn into a pillar of salt as a punishment. So, really, it's a kind of a metaphorical story that it's not wise to not humbly do God's will, you know?

So, I think for Teresa, we need to understand when she refers to things like this, we always need to see them in the light of her foundational principle, that God is love, the God who is love lives in the innermost center of your soul. And the whole reason God creates you is for God to give himself, to give herself to you in love. So, it's the spirit of the Gospel. It's the spirit of love. So, any interpretation contrary to that is contrary to her intentions. And so, I think it's seen in that way. She's using it, I would say, as a poetic metaphor to be very careful about being indifferent when it comes to the matters of the love of God. Just like in a marriage, be very careful about taking each other for granted. Be very careful, to not intentionally do anything to hurt each other. Be very careful because if you're not careful, you turn into a pillar of salt. That is, you know, it'll go dead in the water on you if you're not careful. I think it's more like that.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you, Jim. The next question, from Corey, refers to your experience of being a psychotherapist. And he's asking you about a particular form of psychotherapy that he's come across called Internal Family Systems and wondering if you heard about it.

Jim Finley: Yes, I am aware of that. And I've used, in my own trauma work, I've used a variation of that, which really has to do with understanding subsystems of the personality that are formed in trauma and how one learns to work with those aspects of the self that are still caught in a traumatized state, moving toward an integrative, more reality-based way of living. It can be a very helpful way of helping people work through internalized trauma. And then the person points out this fascinating affinity with that to some of the implications of these mystical teachings. And so, this is really, this is the book I'm writing now on contemplative dimensions of healing.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you, Jim. This is really central to your teaching, bringing together the spiritual, the psychological, the trauma, the healing. Yeah, that whole-- So, thank you for sharing that. So, Jim, the next question is from Ayu from Indonesia. I hope I'm pronouncing your name correctly. So, I'll just read her question, "I often feel guilty whenever I don't do ministry outside of my family life. I'm a wife and mom with two sons, twelve and six years old. Recently, due to COVID and online learning, my husband asked me to stop working as a part-time teacher to simplify life and reduce stress." And so, her question is, "I know ministry has to be born out of the silence and spaciousness and not a tool to feed our ego, but how do I navigate these things? How can I be grounded in the presence of God within and perhaps from there comes something or perhaps nothing and be okay with it?"

Jim Finley: Yeah. She's bringing up this issue about how does a person in a marriage with children, how do they balance the realities of their marriage and parenting with their career especially if their career is a part of their identity and, also, it's a form of service to people. And so, I think it's like a marriage therapy question in a way, but I want to add a little spiritual caveat to it. It's for she and her husband to stay in ongoing dialogue with each other, you know, that he is being honest with her, that he thinks it would be in her best interest, especially as he has some evidence that she is stressed. And then where is she at and what it would be like to give up the work that she does, and is he attentive to that? And is she attentive to him and his concerns and how by ongoing lovingly dialoguing back and forth, you know, how they kind of find their way towards sorting that out.

A little thought, she makes about feeling guilty about quitting, where she's not being

helpful to the community. And there can be truth to that. I think people, in forms of service to the community, there's the spiritual meaning of that to them that enriches their life by enriching the lives of others. But I think spiritually, especially from the standpoint of the mystics, you know, Teresa of Ávila, she says that God does not see the magnitude of the work that we do, but God sees the love with which we do it.

And so, to be home for the quality of the marriage, to be home for the quality of the parenting and to be home as a kind of a contemplative married person in that, then there's a value to that. And maybe as they sort it all out, too, it doesn't have to be either/or, you know? It's a very practical kind of life situation question. How does she discern it? But her prayer then, is in prayer, asking God for guidance, like, shed light on this for me. Like, all things considered, how do I kind of find my way here, through this? Help my husband and I to kind of do it in a way that rings true, in your will. And, I would add, too, to that, that this is what I mean by talking it through, where it's not necessarily either/or. For example, because of COVID and because of those children learning at home, if she would go to the school and say, if I would temporarily take a leave of absence, not work as a part-time teacher, could I be assured of getting back in, or am I running the risk of not getting rehired, for example? Or, could I do part-time, like a substitute and cut down my number, just that kind of practical step-by-step way of settling into something that feels right, and how to ground the whole thing in prayer, asking for God's guidance and wisdom.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. So, to move beyond the guilt or the sense of meaning that she has into the practicalities and then come back to the prayer with some more practical—

Jim Finley: Yeah. I think very often this is where spiritual direction touches therapy. Often, the tripping point isn't in the practical details, it's the guilt.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

James Finley: And then the question is where's the guilt from? Where's that coming from? Like, am I good enough yet? Am I helpful enough yet? Am I doing enough yet? Or maybe is the guilt just how meaningful it is for her to realize the role she's playing in the lives of the children that she teaches. So, anyway, those things, it's therapy, spiritual direction, kind of practical, real-life questions.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. I really find it helpful, Jim, when you do your teachings on just a reminder that God meets us no matter where we are. So, in each aspect of her story and the guilt, God's right there in the sense of meaning and her job right there, in this sense. So, how can you find God even in the places where it feels like God's not present?

Jim Finley: Yeah. And I'll say something else here too. I thought often this way, what these people are saying, it's very difficult to do this really. How can I learn from God not to let the conditions and circumstances that I am in determine the foundational condition of my heart? How can I have my heart grounded in this deepening intimacy with God's infinite love for me as the basis out of which I work with the constantly shifting circumstances of my life? Because if we lose that taproot, it absolutizes the circumstantial. But if we can find a taproot that transcends it, but as the light at

which we discern the circumstantial, that's helpful, I think, to learn that art.

Kirsten Oates: Very helpful. Thank you. The next question from Janice is asking about the word "righteous," and she says that she was in a Twelve-Step program and that through that program, she feels like the use of the word righteous is arrogant and judgmental. So, can you explain how Teresa might be using that word?

Jim Finley: Yes. You know, it's good with AA, too, or the spirituality of AA, this is a very deep contemplative connection between AA and the steps of AA and on this path. And see, let's say what AA is helping people focus on is self-righteousness through your self-righteous. And very often the addict will have a self-righteous attitude and be in denial of their addiction or be in denial of the effects of their addiction on the loved ones in the family. And they get indignant about it, like self-righteous. And so, a lot of the deeper layers of sobriety, through inventory, and amends, and conscious contact with God is the healing of that into a stance of humility, a stance of admitting, a stance of-- Because what Teresa means by righteousness is the gospel meaning of righteousness. You know, it's the righteousness of love; that it is righteous because we're established in God's infinite love for us as precious in our brokenness. And we stand in the mercy of the righteousness of God through a humble-like faith. That's a very different meaning.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Wonderful. Thank you. The next question from Bill, he says, "As I learn more about the false self and the letting go of all striving for spiritual experience in my interior life, I'm thankful that my God has arrested me from the spirit that Merton expresses in his prayer, I'm not sure if what I'm doing is correct. I know my desire to seek my Beloved is pleasing to my God. I'm wrestling with such a basic question. I'm almost embarrassed to ask, why does God want us to pray for others? And what is the ask? Even as I type this question, it is so hard for me to put into words my question."

Jim Finley: Yes. Sometimes, I'll say people aren't, you know, the best questions are the dumbest questions because they feel dumb because we're not used to struggling to find the words to express subtle things. You know? So, there's nothing dumb about it. It really raises a very deep question. It has to do with the prayer of intercession, praying for people because at one level, God is infinitely in love with everybody. How I put it is let's say your Aunt Mildred is dying. And so, you pray to God, "Dear God, please help Aunt Mildred." It isn't as if God says silently, "Dying? I didn't even know she was sick! [laughter] "I'll get over there right away. Thank goodness you told me! Why am I always the last one to find this out? How is that possible?" God knows that Mildred's dying, for God's sake, and she's doing fine. I mean, what's this death business about? You know, she's come to this? Who's to say? So, what I think it is, is this; two things. When we pray for people it's deepening our God-based love for other people. See, we're weaving into our love for God, our love for this person. And really in a way, the prayer of intercession is helping us to be more attentive to the mystery and the presence of God. And what we're really praying for is that they're open to God's will, that if it is your will that they get better, they recover. They can get better so they can die later because everyone's dying. But they hope they get better because maybe it's sad. Maybe they have children. Maybe it's sad if it is your will, but what I'm really hoping for is that whatever is done that she be restored to health, but if not, that she

accept your will, that her life is in your hands and her death is in your hands like mine. And I would hope that she would find that peace, which is acceptance in death.

There's another mystery to this though, too, that there's power in intercessory prayer. See, there's a certain efficacy in our graced interconnectedness with each other. See? And so, the very urgency with which someone prays for someone might be the urgency that stirs the presence of God in that person's life. So, it's kind of woven into the interiority of the incarnational interconnectedness with each other, like the mystical body, we're all woven and connected into each other.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). I think the challenge, too, with that mystical connection that you're talking about is sometimes people pray and the thing doesn't happen. So, my nephew, who prayed that his mother, every second his mother was in ICU, that she wouldn't die, and she died. And that confused him, you know? And so, how to hold that it's not your fault if the prayer doesn't come through or the--

Jim Finley: I think that's very understandable by the way, especially, let's say someone whose mother is dying, or father is dying, or spouse is dying, and they don't know how they're going to handle it. They don't know how they're going to bear it. So, it's so human that they would plead like, "Please, please, please." And then if the person does die, then they're dismayed by it. Or, you know, "You didn't hear my prayer." So, it's so human to first endorse the humanity of that. But what we're really looking at is this: It's really Jesus "Not my will, but thy will be done. Into your hands, I commend my spirit," that it's your will that's trustworthy even if I'm hanging on the cross in the process of dying. Your will is trustworthy because you're unexplainably taking care of me and drawing me to yourself, not my will.

So, I want to hand my will over into an acceptance of your will, which is the trustworthy nature what's happening to my mother. And, also, that it's your will that I go through the grieving process if she dies. It's my will that you understand you're helping me grieve her loss because as I come out the other side of the grieving, I see the sense that she's not dead at all. She's just no longer with me in the way she used to be with me. But everything is forever. She's in glory. I mean, everything is forever, and I'll be with her soon enough. And so, help me to learn from this loss because the world's like this. I think a lot of wisdom comes from being touched by death and touched by loss and not being embittered by it but kind of going deeper, see? God is taking care of me and maybe I don't understand what that means that God's taking care of me. And so, anyway, I think sensitivities to things like that help me.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. That's very helpful. I think that's a moment people can come back to when they're struggling to pray, to relisten to that. That was really helpful for me Jim. Thank you.

So, a question from Sarah. So, she says, "Before I was even aware of the existence of contemplation, I experienced what you described in the last episode as the sense of God's presence within. I don't actually remember ever not feeling it. I was so confident in this gift that I could not believe there would ever be a need for it to end. Then grief struck our family. And just when I assumed that relationship with God as it was, would stand firm and support me, it was ripped away, just as you described those times of aridity in the third Mansion. What followed was five years of darkness and confusion, anger, resentment."

“And, I finally realized, fear, once I recognized that I had let fear control me for so long, I confessed it and asked for forgiveness, and I felt a release into a period of rest as though I was being required to step back and allow God to do the work of healing the wounds from those years. At some point in the middle of those five years, I was praying, and it seemed as though I was being asked the question is it God I love, or is it that sense of his presence? I felt very strongly at that point that I needed to offer my love as an act of will rather than being based in feelings about God. And I promised that if I were never to feel anything toward or about God again, I would continue to love and serve him through my actions.” And she says, “I don’t have anyone with experience to talk to about these things, so I wanted to ask you. If it does happen, that feelings do arise and they have more so in the last few months, how do I know when it’s safe to let them back in? I try to trust God for discernment, but any thoughts or advice you may have will be most welcome.”

Jim Finley: Yeah, she’s raising, really, a significant number of things here, I think, really. First of all, when we look back at the path we’ve traveled so far that had brought us to this point, often it’s a circuitous path, and one of the patterns—it follows different patterns—and one pattern is that we were graced with a sense of the presence of God. And not only that, but sometimes we’re graced with it in kind of an abiding way, you know, it’s just there. And we’re grateful for that. And as well we should be. And then our life is turned upside down. We’re thrown into turmoil, and in the intensity of the pain, we lose that sense of the presence of God. And not only are we suffering from the turmoil, but we’re suffering from the loss of the presence of God that would sustain us in the turmoil. And we lose that. And that struggle can go on for a while.

And then the insight comes. Is it really you that I love—talking to God—or do I love my ability to experience your presence? And can I love you without the feeling of your presence? St. Bernard of Clairvaux calls this disinterested love. It’s the highest form of love. It’s not the love that circles back and has its basis on what we gain, but *amo quia amo*—I love because I love—like, I give myself completely to you in love because you give yourself to me in love. That insight, it’s also related, if in January, we look at John of the Cross on *The Dark Night of the Soul*, at the core St. John of the Cross’s teachings is that God sees that we’re attached to the ability to experience his presence, the consolation, the reassurance, which are really finite ways of experiencing infinite love.

And so, what God lovingly does is takes away the capacity to experience the finite experiences of the infinite love of God. Like, we show up for our prayer and God doesn’t show up for the meeting. Like, where did God go? And sometimes this dark night, this deprivation of consolation, is the openness in which we learn to trust completely on the mercy of God, and we can qualitatively break through into a deeper place that maybe we never would have come to had we not gone through the deprivation like that. But then there’s another thing that comes along. All of a sudden, you’re going along. You come to this state of transformed aridity and clarity, and like, oh, here come some more consolations. See, like getting the warm glow again, and how do I know I’m not going to slip back into clinging to them like that? And it’s understandable. It is.

So, what I think it is, this is what helps me to see it. Let’s say in the return of the consolations the insight would go like this: If the consolations are one way that you grace me with the experience of your presence in my life, but I’ve learned by experience that

these experiences of your presence are infinitely less than your presence, but it doesn't mean that you're not incarnate and present in these experiences; therefore, I'm to let them wash through me, I'm to open myself to them, like, have your way with me, you know, like this kind of cataphatic path of being kind of taken up into the love of God and so on, because I've already learned my lesson because the moment I turn to cling to it as mine, I fall out of the richness of your presence that's in it. And in that kind of detached equal mindedness in the presence of consolations or the absence of consolations, I think then we're kind of established in the presence of God. That's my sense of it.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you. Thank you, Jim. I'm sure that will help Sarah very much. That's a delicate teaching you're offering there.

Jim Finley: It is. It is. Yes, it is.

Kirsten Oates: So, Tina has a personal question about you. She's asking if you would talk to us about your Enneagram type and your personal strengths and what resonates for you.

Jim Finley: Okay. Well, Kirsten, since you teased the Enneagram, some session, you could have a session with me and record it. You'd unpack my perceptions of myself on the Enneagram, kind of like refine my insights. My understanding is that the one that means I most identify with or relate to is a Four on the Enneagram; it makes the most sense to me. And just the wisdom of the Enneagram-- I was listening to Richard again recently, a talk he was giving on the Enneagram. He gave it a few years ago, and what a profound teaching it is. It's really a deep teaching. And my personal strength, what would I say about my personal strengths? For me, I would say personally, is that my experience was the opposite of the previous person. Instead of a time being in the presence of God, then I lost it, I started out at three-years-old, traumatized.

And it was in the midst of the trauma I experienced the presence of God while the trauma was still going on. And the presence of God in the midst of the trauma led me to the monastery. And then the monastery then led me to all of this. Six years in the monastery; that's where I got in all of this. And so, I would say it's the presence of God that sustained me in the trauma, led me into the monastery, and then it wasn't until after I left the monastery that I could integrate the mystical experiences that were given to me in the monastery, that I could use them to bring them to bear on my unhealed trauma, or my dissociation, and so on. It really led me and that's where I learned it myself and how I worked with people in therapy that I could even though the mystical union transcends the darkness of this world, it doesn't transcend it to deliver us dualistically from it, but to radicalize the way we're present to it, touching the hurting places with love in ourselves and in the world. And that integrative process of circling back around to bring the mystical dimensions to bear on the grieving work of trauma and integration is kind of a way of expressing something on my path, I guess.

Kirsten Oates: Beautiful. And remembering your watch, is that a strength?

Jim Finley: Oh, you know what? I lost it again. [laughter] I keep losing my wife's Christmas present. She used to buy me watches, those little glow watches. And I thought, "Oh, no, not again." And I don't leave the house either. [laughter] I've searched high and low, honest to God. Closets. I

just can't. I don't understand it. Well, I do understand it, but it's my [crosstalk @ 29:38]

Kirsten Oates: I'm glad I asked. You need a watch if we want you to be on time.

Jim Finley: Yeah, I used Maureen's then, which meant a lot to me because she had one too. And then the battery ran dead on hers, so I keep it by her chair. And so, I thought, "Well, I have to search my room." Anyway, we got off into wrist watches.

Kirsten Oates: Ah, that's sweet though. You and Maureen had matching watches. Okay. So, this is a question from Sharon. "I feel as if I have outgrown the nourishment I previously received from the liturgy, Scripture, and other church offerings. I crave simplicity and honesty. It is both sad and freeing. How did the mystics continue to stay with organized religion so faithfully throughout their lives? Does this happen to others?"

Jim Finley: Yes, it does happen. You know, for me it happened to me because when I was in the monastery, I was very Catholic, in this kind of this Catholicism, this mystical contemplative, but it was liturgy and Eucharist and that whole ethos was just part of the way I grew up in. So then when I was sexually abused at the monastery and left and had kind of a breakdown, I left the church. I remember thinking, "I don't see how God could buy into an outfit like this." And I was more consoled by the Dharma. I'd learned the Dharma from Merton on Buddhism, and it was refuge for me and, also, the Sufi ways, and so on. And I learned to work through all of that. I learned to work through all of that. And what I had done then, and not just with religious life, the monastic life, but just humanity, just the broken nature of humanity, seeking Christ in its brokenness and all of that.

And then I came back into my Catholicism again in terms that I keep the Eucharist here in my home, and icons of Mary, and devotions to the Sacred Heart, and so on. But I'm not active in my parish at all. I don't go to Mass. I haven't been to Mass in a long time. When I would give silent retreats, often if a priest was there to celebrate the Eucharist, it would always be contemplative liturgy. So, I'm very much internally sensitive to the beauty and the reality, the mystery of it all as my lineage, my tradition, open to all traditions, but I don't-- But what happens with some people-- And also I got disheartened because I would go and I'd listen to the pulpit, and I never heard this mentioned. I never heard this mentioned. You could tell when someone's bearing witness to this, like out of the depth of their heart about this union, and so on. And I was just so disheartened by it.

And then I saw those priests that really were bearing witness to this in terms, like, deeply pastoral, loving priests. The pastor of my parish here at St. Monica's has been very supportive of me, my contemplative prayer group there. And so, it's the church, you know? So, it's home base for me. But what happens with some people is-- And the mystics, that's how they saw it. Teresa of Ávila was living in the Inquisition, you know. St. John of the Cross, when they asked him to stop the Reform, they captured him, put him in a cell, and whipped him. And those are his theology professors teaching him like this. So, they were very aware of the brokenness of the Church, but they saw in it something deeper. This is the microcosm of humanity infinitely loved by God that's ritualistically celebrated and lived. But some people don't experience it that way, "I just can't do it." And then I say, "Don't." And there's a certain loneliness in that, but through the mystics, and so on, you can find a certain inner connection. There are connections, and so, to your own self be true. And maybe down the

road that'll change again, or it might not change. So, I think we're each following our own gifts and inclinations and staying open to what God might have in mind around the next corner.

Kirsten Oates: How does doing the Eucharist impact you, Jim, when you do it at home?

Jim Finley: Well, for me, what the Eucharist is-- What's so profound about it to me first of all, there's something very mystical about this idea about God becoming present to us as our food: "Take this bread and eat of this. This is my body." It also means like to receive Holy Communion, it's not to receive Holy Information. It's not the little prayers inscribed on the host, but actually, it turns into our body. It also is very meaningful to me that if I would sit after Mass, being inside the church, metaphorically I was inside a God who in the Eucharist was inside of me to be sitting in the presence of God in the presence of me, felt like a very unitive kind of experience to me.

And I also find it very meaningful to when I would go over to the church where I saw people in therapy, they gave me a place there to do therapy. I'd walk over every day and sit in the back of the church there, like the architecture of it. Like it's a state of consciousness in stone and the mystery of the Eucharist and the presence of it all and sincere people coming in to sit and pray. And the statue of Mary right outside, the divine feminine and that. And I just, I find it consoling and it touches me.

Kirsten Oates: It sounds like you're able to bring that mystical, contemplative, unitive sense of the rituals, the buildings in with you, then it didn't need to be coming from the priest.

Jim Finley: And I know other people do other things with it. You know, they stop at that level where the fundamentalistic Catholicism, you know. They, people do all kinds-- That's their business. But I think to take it, what it's really meant to be, you know, there's a whole kind of ethos, that's metaphorically expressing.

I'll share a little story about Merton. I'll share it. I don't know if I did it in the Merton thing or not, about devotional sincerity, is that I was a monk in the monastery. I worked at the pig barn. And when I'd go in to see Merton, he'd always start off by asking me, "How's it going? What's going on?" And I said, "Well, I'm painting the pig barn." I worked at the farrowing house where the sows have their litters. And he said, "Oh, what color?" and I said, "Blue," and traditionally blue is the color for Mary. And then he said to me, Thomas Merton said to me, "In honor of our Blessed Mother?" And I said, I laughed, and said, "No. It's the only color they had." I went and that's what I said, "I need five gallons of paint." Blue is the only thing they-- And he picked up that I laughed. He said, "The problem is," he said, "you're suspicious. You're not childlike enough to paint it blue in connection to the interconnected mythic ethos of the symbolic touching of sensitivity." Like, the sincerity with which we bow or which we bless ourselves. When these things are done with devotional sincerity, there's a kind of liturgy of the body that expresses itself through these simple gestures and acts, and so on. [music]

Kirsten Oates: Thank you for sharing that. Turning to the Mystics will continue in a moment. [music ends]

Sharon asks, she said that she caught something in the transcript from a podcast that holds so much truth, "But it's your very nothingness without God that makes your very presence

to be the presence of God.” And she says that “For I do feel I am nothing. And in my fear in the face of that, I had asked just previously about God’s action in the world on his creation, does he only act through us? Does he act upon disease? No one knows, of course, but just asking the opinion of someone so close to the divine.”

Jim Finley: Well, this is very mysterious, what she’s asking, you know, and it requires reflection. Because there’s these questions she’s asking, they have long histories to them, like, how do we reflect on these things? But reflecting on them itself can be a way to pray. So, let’s say, well, when we get to Eckhart, too, we’ll be talking a lot about this. Let’s say that poetically, we’re saying that our faith teaches the Creation. God said, “Let there be light, let there be stones and trees and stars,” and so on. Let’s say one way of looking at that is that the infinite presence of God is “presencing” itself and pouring itself out as the intimate immediacy of our very presence, the presence of others, and the presence of all things, see, which is the divinity of the manifested order of all things. But this is not at all to say that we are God.

To the contrary, it’s to simultaneously affirm our absolute nothingness without God. For if God would cease loving us in this present moment at the count of three, at the count of three, we’d vanish because we’re absolutely nothing apart from the presence of God, presencing itself as our presence. And that’s the paradox. See, it’s my very nothingness without God, that makes my very presence to be the presence. And to realize that, I think, is the mystical experience. See, I taste my nothingness, but you are the infinity of my nothingness. That is, you’re the presence that it’s manifesting and permeates thoroughly, my nothingness without you, like this, see? But there’s something else that comes with it. Thomas Merton called this dread and compunction, is that the survival instinct is very strong, and we sense imminent annihilation. Really, it’s a fear of disappearing and not being. And, therefore, the sensitivity of nothingness can give rise to this fear.

And part of the prayer is living with that fear. You’re walking with it, listening to it. And so, in a way, the ego’s right about its nothingness, but it’s confused about it. The ego’s only confused about the nothingness of itself as it imagines itself to be real without God. But as it realizes it’s not at all real without God and it’s nothingness without God is actually the divinity of the ego too. You know, it’s the holiness of my ordinariness. It’s the holiness of standing up and sitting down. It’s the holiness of my life. And so, this is a very subtle thing that she’s raising here about this which Merton called-- And then he talked about faith. He talked about communal dread. He said contemplative communities gather for what no one in the community can do, because if we could do it, it would be us.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: And so, in our dread is our absolute dependence God, see?

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jim Finley: And in that dependence on God, God flows through us and God’s present to us and in our being, and God’s also present in the mystery of a fragmented and broken world where things are fleeting and filled with suffering and brokenness. God inspires us to be nurturing, protective people. God inspires us to do what we can to heal suffering wherever it occurs. And God inspires us to have an inner peace that isn’t dependent on how any of that turns

out because if death comes, death is trustworthy. So, it's a very mysterious-- She's raising-- There's just subtle things here.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. And there's a lot in there that is hard to grasp with the logical mindset that we usually learn things with. You kind of just have to sit with it slowly and poetically.

Jim Finley: That's a big thing that you're saying. You know, there's a saying you can't get there from here. So, the idea is the mind that stands back and says, "Explain this, explain this, explain this," that's the mind that is transcended in realizing what we're talking about. Because if it comes to us as information, we can write it down and say, "Thanks for the answer. I have another question. I have a whole list of these questions. I'll check them off." But when we sit in meditation it gets quieter and quieter and quieter, more subtle, evermore delicate, evermore refined, less and less able to put words to what's happening to us, see?

And it's in that meditative state that the realizations of these things-- This is what Teresa means in rapture. She says we're taken into these deep states. And in that state, God grants us the awareness of the things of God in God. But after the rapture is over, we can no longer put into words in explanatory terms to explain it someone what we know, but unspeakably in God we know. And so, anyway, this is the subtlety of consciousness and reality.

Kirsten Oates: Ironically, the next question is, "Do you think God interacts on the physical plane?" And I don't know if you can hear my-- I tried to lock my dogs out this time, and they're squealing in the background that they'd like to come in. [door sounds]

Jim Finley: Are they coming in? Okay, good. Okay. [laughter]

Kirsten Oates: Oh, dear. Okay, so, was that God, Jim, knocking at the door wanting to hear you more clearly?

Jim Finley: It was! That was! Yeah. Yeah. We were rudely interrupted by the dog., or is God the infinity of the mystery of the barking dog? And it's both, it was both an interruption and at the same time, it was God. There you go. All right. Anyway, back to--

Kirsten Oates: Does God interact on the physical plane?

Jim Finley: Well again, it's a very deep question. I would say in the kind of divine cosmology, like the philosophical theology of this question, I want to get back to the thing. It isn't just that God acts on the physical plane, but rather God is the reality of the physical plane itself in its nothingness without God. Also, to use another term here, God creates all things and maintains all things according to their nature. God creates all things according to their nature. And God knows the nature of all things and contemplates the nature of all things in Christ. The word through whom all things are made. As Thomas Aquinas says God is more an oak tree than an oak tree could ever possibly be because God is infinitely the essence of what an oak tree is. So, when God says, "Let there be oak trees," God creates the oak "tree-ness" of God to put it another way.

In ego consciousness, we don't see that, but if we contemplate a tree, we begin to see the divinity of the presence of the tree. Meister Eckhart says, "I honestly believe," in effect, what he says, if you could see just one tree and like really, really, really, really see all the tree is,

you'd never have to hear another sermon again. Because every creature is like a book full of God. He doesn't mean that you wouldn't hear sermons again, but if we could be struck by the divinity of the material world, the world is God's body that is bodying forth the love of God. And in contemplative sensitivity, we can see, which is by the way, the spirituality of ecology. It's the spirituality of stewardship with the earth, and so on.

Kirsten Oates: This is very related to Richard Rohr's lineage, Francis of Assisi.

Jim Finley: Yeah, very much so, Brother Sun and Sister Moon, you know, the moon is our sister and death is our sister. And the sun is our brother and giving sermons to the birds and to the wolf.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: And there's a lovely Irish story. This is also big in Celtic spirituality. There was an Irish saint, a mystic, I forget who it was right now, but it says he was sitting out in a field and he was dying, and he was in a wheelchair, or something. He had a blanket over him, out in this pasture, near the monastery where he lived. And it says, as he was sitting there out in the sun, he died. And when he died, a horse came over. [laughter] A horse came over and put his head in the saint's lap and wept. I love that! You know, that interconnectedness, sometimes we feel that with animals, too, a presence or a-- Cardinal Newman once said, "Animals are more mysterious to us than angels because angels are immaterial persons." But the consciousness of the animal, what is the divinity of animal consciousness? What is its holiness? We can sense its holiness and this mystery.

Kirsten Oates: I bet we have some horse lovers listening that would be able to tell many stories like that one you told, yeah. Beautiful. What tickles you so much about it, Jim?

Jim Finley: I love stories like that. I love these stories. It's like *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*. It's filled with these little stories. Yeah. So, on one level they're extremely childlike, but childlike in a way that bypasses logic.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: And the heart in hearing it causes joy because it bears witness to something unexplainable and precious. And in Merton's words, it helps us not to be suspicious, that everything is unexplainably holy in all directions. And it's the ability to be disarmed by the incomprehensible stature of simple things. And so, these stories are like that to me, you know, I think they're a source of joy, really.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. The joyful laughter, the joy in the presence of God in the—Yeah. I love it.

A question from Hillary, and she's been reading the book *The Interior Castle*, and she asks a question that I've heard asked by other people. So she says, "After reading the first couple of chapters, I'm having trouble with some of her ways of talking about herself and about women, calling herself stupid several times and saying we women are slow and need instruction in everything." And so, she's just wondering about that.

Jim Finley: Yeah. She does do that. She'll say, you know, "We women are emotional, and we need—"She

talks like that about herself. And there's a good example of culture. Because that was a cultural assumption. This is why St. John of the Cross writes to one of the nuns of Carmel who was having these mystical experiences and he says, "I know that you don't understand this theologically." And he did because he was in seminary. He was a priest, and she didn't understand because she wasn't allowed to study theology, and Teresa wasn't either. Unbelievable, the patriarchal—

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: That was their world that they lived in.

Kirsten Oates: Terrible.

Jim Finley: But what was interesting about Teresa when you read her Life, she would do that because she knew how to stay under the radar of bishops and priests in power, who think she's getting uppity.

And then you just read her writing, she was a very forthright, clear-minded person. And when you read the writings on the foundations and the politics of it, you know, and the stories of her life, she said one of her biggest crosses was having to put up with priests who were so clueless about this. It's been, she said, it's been one of her biggest-- She was very direct about people who don't understand this, and they don't get this. And so, I think both of those are going on with her. She was very smart that way. She knew how to play the scene, come under the radar and be true to herself contextually.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Because she may have written a little like this so when the writing was in front of the Inquisition, she didn't get whipped, but she didn't act this way. Her life spoke a different story about someone confident with a lot of power, a lot of influence.

Jim Finley: Yeah. And, also, she bears witness on the anima and animus, which was the masculine and the feminine, and she's very clear that power's qualitatively deeper than force. And power is richer and more efficacious than force. And, anyway, good question.

Kirsten Oates: Well, Jim, now you've admitted you're a Four on the Enneagram. You Fours are very emotional.

Jim Finley: We are. We actually, we are. But if you're an introverted Four, you don't let anybody see it, except under special circumstances. You'd be very stoic about everything, but inside, oh, man. This is why I think I'm so big on Bhakti love, or devotional love, the heart center. I feel it much more coming from the heart center like the nuptial mystics. I so relate. Bhakti yoga, also, or Sufism is this way. I experience it as a love energy or as a love presence.

Kirsten Oates: So, Kirsten asks, "Can you guide us on the use of social media in the context of the contemplative approach? Sometimes social media and contemplative spirituality seem almost mutually exclusive.

Jim Finley: Yes. Well, first of all to be on this path, we need to be kind of prudent and discrete about social media because we can get addicted to it, tied into it, and kind of monitoring other people's opinions to our latest thing that we put on Instagram. And how many likes do we

get on Facebook. You know there's all that. We need to be very careful not to get into that.

Something else that's just amazing with even my talks, if you put on James Finley videos, there's just tons and tons of videos that I gave over the years. And if you put in Teresa of Ávila, just beautiful lectures on Teresa, on John of the Cross, on Thomas Merton, on Dorothy Day, on Rilke, on these different teachers. So, if you go to those sources, if you go to those sources, the internet can be really-- We're using the internet now. We're using it now. So, I think if we use the source as a form of a modality of Lectio Divina, you know, a modality of contemplative instruction, it's very providential because it lets us do this in a way that we couldn't do without it. And so, I think it's a matter of using discretion of what you watch and don't watch and just become aware of this. Know how to just keep searching out through word searches and just see what this means.

Kirsten Oates: I think it comes back to your teaching, too, Jim, where you talk about the contemplative ways, realizing that only God has the last word on who you are and how you're seen and how you're loved. And, I think social media can really, powerfully try and have the last word. Or you look to social media to have the words to give you the confirmation. And so, the contemplative path, if you could detach from that, that piece of it is--

Jim Finley: Yeah, Thomas Merton once said in the monastery, he was talking about the cloistered monks in the community and contemplative-- And he talked about people interiorly called to follow a path. I think he was thinking of his own calling to live as a hermit and people can have a calling. And he said, the contemplative community supports the prophetic calling of an individual in the community. He said we need to be very careful not to buy into the ideology of the group the collective assumption of the norm as having the final say. There may well be a norm that the community follows. There may be a lineage or a tradition there that we need to see all that with respect, but we always need to realize that sometimes we're called to something, we're called to be faithful to something in a way that might be quite new or different than the people around us are used to.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yeah.

Jim Finley: And so, we have to really discern is this self-will or do I need with the grace of God, like prudent courage, to see what's asked of me? So, what happens with mass media, we buy into it at the most superficial level. So, if we get a lot of collective dislikes, we're devastated, and realize it's not based on anything and we're addicted to it, and so on. And so, it's good to be sensitive to this and the grace of something, but also the things to be careful of.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yeah. I'm so grateful for that question. Well, Jim, I think that's probably plenty of questions for our first session, but it looks like we're going to need a second one. So, we'll look forward to going deeper into listener questions. It's been a great set of questions today, so, thank you for answering them.

Jim Finley: Yes. Very nice.

Kirsten Oates: I should reiterate that each and every one of these questions offers gratitude for you and all you're giving us through the podcast. So, thank you again, and we'll look forward to next time.

Jim Finley: Thank you. I'm grateful I can do it. It blesses me too, so, thank you. [music]

Kirsten Oates: And big shout out for Corey who manages getting these questions put together so helpful for us to go through. So, thank you, Corey.

Jim Finley: Yeah, it makes it possible.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you for listening to this episode of Turning to the Mystics, a podcast created by the Center for Action and Contemplation. Please consider rating it, writing a review, or sharing it with a friend who might be interested in learning and practicing with this online community. To learn more about the work of James Finley, please visit jamesfinley.org. We'll see you again soon.