

Turning to the Mystics



St. John of the Cross: Session 3

with James Finley

Jim Finley: Greetings, I'm Jim Finley. Welcome to Turning to the Mystics.

Jim Finley: Greetings everyone, and welcome into our time here together, turning for guidance to the Christian mystic, Saint John of the Cross. And we're in the midst of exploring his teachings of our journey to perfect union with God in a passage through a dark night. And we left off last time introducing *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* on what attitudes we can foster to cooperate with this dark night that brings us to this deep union with God. And in this session, we're going to be reflecting on Chapter 13 of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel: Book One*. And in this session, I've asked Kirsten to join me. And so as I go through the chapter, pause at each section so that she can ask any questions that come to her as kind of representative of the kind of questions that might come to you. And I'm doing this because this chapter is kind of very poetic and kind of intuitively dense.

Jim Finley: And therefore it can be discouraging to like, how do I get at this? How do I get to... But once we get inside what he's saying, it's the kind of thing you can return to over and over again as a kind of a grounding place. So that's the nature of this session. And Kirsten and I will hopefully be helping you to gain access to graces that are in this chapter. So I'll begin with article one, Chapter 13. He says, "*Some consoles are in order that the individual may both know the way of entering the night and be able to do so.*" And he goes on to say that this night, which is this purifying process in which we're brought into the light of God, has an active aspect and a passive aspect. The passive aspect is what makes it essentially mystical and that it comes from God.

Jim Finley: And we started to look at that when we started with the three signs of entering in the dark night in meditation, of the loss of consolation, the loss of clarity, and to see that God's weaning us off our capacity to experience finite ways of experiencing God, to prepare us to experience an infinite way of experiencing the infinite presence of God. In this chapter, he's looking at the active aspects on how we cooperate with that. How do we cooperate with that? Article three, he says is a place to begin. He said, "*First, to have a habitual desire to imitate Christ in all your deeds, by bringing your life into conformity with his. You must then study his life in order to know how to imitate him and to behave in all events as he would.*" So this is the kind of talk that we're used to, I think, as a follower of Christ, we prayerfully read the gospels.

Jim Finley: So we want to live as Christ lived. Any situation, how would Christ understand the situation? What would Christ attitude be towards it, how would Christ act in the situation. And so I'm called to be like Christ. I'm called to be loving and compassionate and patient and humble and so on. And we're used to that. Next he says, and this is the surprising thing, and here's where we'll be turning to Kirsten. We'll be dialoguing together. So far that makes sense. Then he says this, which is kind of surprising, "Second, in order to be successful in this imitation, renounce and remain empty of any sensory satisfaction that is not purely for the honor and glory of God. Do this out of love for Jesus Christ. In his life, he had no other gratification or desired any other than the fulfillment of his father's will, which he called his meat and food.

Jim Finley: For example, if you are offered the satisfaction of hearing things that have no relation to the service and glory of God, do not desire this pleasure or the hearing of these things. When you have an opportunity for the gratification of looking upon objects that will not help you

come closer your to God, do not desire this gratification or sight and so on.” So this is kind of a surprising turn on how can I practically apply this to my life? And so Kirsten, before I venture into this, any initial impression about the direction he’s heading in here?

Kirsten Oates: Well, I do appreciate some practical guidance, even if it is a little confusing. I find it challenging to live in balance of knowing that grace comes from God, but that there is a role for me to be open and cooperative and to hold the right tension around that.

Jim Finley: Exactly. Yes. And here’s somethings too I thought of to kind of help us where I think we all experience the dark night of John of the Cross’ sense that we might not as yet experience in the fullness of the mystical sense with God, but the mystery of the dark night is very much a part of our life. I think I’m going to give some examples. Let’s say that you’re going through a struggle with something and it really is very difficult and it’s ongoing. It is taking its toll on you, but in the midst of the hardship, you get a glimpse or a sense of being mysteriously sustained by God in the midst of the struggle.

Jim Finley: So as you go through the struggle and let’s say you come out the other end, it has a kind of a resolution, it resolves itself. You begin to realize a certain longing to abide in that depth of God’s presence that was given to you in the midst of the struggle. Another example would be that someone you love very much is struggling with something, maybe caring for a dying parent or, I mean, whatever struggle it could be. Anyone you love very much is really having a hard time of a situation, of an uncertain outcome. And out of your love for them, it burdens you, and you’re with them, you’re working it out. But then in the midst of it all, you get a sense of how mysteriously God is present and how precious this loved one is to you. And precious in a way it’s not threatened or diminished by the outcome of the struggle. They might end up dying, but their death does not diminish the presence of God that was revealed to you in the struggle and also revealed to you in their death.

Jim Finley: A third example would be things are going really well for you. You spark on, you’re so lucky in terms of security and relationships, and I mean all the good things of life. But in the midst of it all, you realize that something’s missing. That somehow you’re longing for something more. Not more of this. I mean not more of what can be gained or lost, but somehow sensing wanting that which is infinitely more than the sum total of all that can be gained or lost. Like a certain longing for a kind of a boundaryless fulfillment that alone can put to rest the restless longings of your heart. So it’s a very subtle thing here. He’s talking about a certain kind of inner fidelity to a certain sensitivity of our heart in the midst of things. And he’s trying to guide us into how to be more aware of that and more faithful to that. Does that make sense intuitively?

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. What’s coming to mind for me in my own experience is just that the sense of moments or times in life where you feel that nothing but God’s presence can help. Or nothing but feeling God’s presence in the midst of the situation could help. And in my experience of those times, there’s a certain level of desperation in the not knowing. The desperation comes from not being clear, not knowing how to find God’s presence in the midst of the situation.

Jim Finley: Yes, exactly. And I think another thing he’s trying to help us see here is that, see what happens when our finite ego with the layered interiority and poverty of ourself and ego consciousness, the human experience, what happens when that’s our base of operations?

That's the level that has the final say in who we are and who we're called to be. And because the ego is a sense of self that's conditioned by condition states, there's a certain precariousness in all of it. And so we feel a certain longing to find our way to a depth of presence that transcends the precariousness. Because even if it's going very beautifully, we know we could lose it at any moment. You could lose the beloved, the beloved could die. The child could... you have no control over much of anything, really. And even in the precariousness, you sense this like John of the Cross to have no light to guide you, except the one that burns in your heart. There's a burning of a light your finite eyes can't see. But you sense it's sustaining you, so then you say to yourself, "Well, how could I be more habitually, unconsciously grounded in that depth, which is so elusive to me in my ego consciousness?" And he's trying to help us find our way to that.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, that's beautiful. The experience that comes to mind for me is I've talked before on the podcast about not being able to have children naturally. And as you're talking, I wasn't actually looking in the beginning for something more stable and deeper than the questions I was wrestling with about fertility and those kinds of things. But that's where I eventually landed. So initially the questions were much more, "God, give me an answer. Should I do this or should I do that?" I was really reaching out to God for certainty with decisions of the ego, I guess. But in the end, I didn't get any clear answers to those kinds of questions, but I did drop into an experience of comfort and consolation that everything was okay, whether I had answers or not.

Jim Finley: Yes. And another thing on that, and then we'll move on to the next slide, but another issue as an example, let's say there's someone for whom the maternal instinct is very strong to have a child. It's a very deep thing for some more than others. Some people it's very deep. And so for someone for whom that's very strong and they can't conceive, the loss goes deep. But if they stay with it, they begin to see maternal energy is emerging in their life. So out of the very inability to conceive a child, physically, it all heightens their maternal fulfillment and kind of a mothering or nurturing presence in the life of someone or to a community or so-and-so, keep it with Theresa of Avalon or later, we'll look at Julian of Norwich and other women in those seats. In a way she's mothering us. She's mothering us. She has a very deep maternal intuition. And she was a woman who had no child physically. She had no child, but has many children. And so it's interesting how... And so John of the Cross is trying to help us find our way to those kinds of things. Yeah.

Jim Finley: And so on these examples that he gives, about if there's something... The pleasure through hearing, but if it doesn't add to the glory of God, don't desire the pleasure or tasting whatever it is. Here's what I think how I would interpret it. How do we interpret this? I would say, let's say we're seeing something beautiful, like a mountain scene or the storm or flowers, something very beautiful. And we would say God created the beauty of that. God created my capacity to see the beauty of that because it is of God. And if it helps me then to be grateful for the divinity of life, for the holiness of life, but to know that the finite pleasure of that beauty is something I could have.

Jim Finley: I realize in so far as I could have it, that gratification being finite is infinitely less than

my deep longing for an infinite union, with the infinite, that alone can gratify me. So I hold my heart in a balance that as I don't move in on it to have closure by trying to have the beauty or the experience of the beauty, I let it wash over me, but to remind myself it's an echo of the infinite beauty of God. And I think that's what he's talking about here. I think he's talking about the appreciation of the pleasures of life through the senses. Seeing the goodness of God through the body, through those pleasures. But knowing that in so far there's pleasures or something we can try to have, or hold on to, then that's infinitely less than the infinite pleasure that God has in mind for us, which is God. And that's the kind of subtlety I think in those.

Kirsten Oates: And this is the sense of active cooperation with God's presence in the world. And so then you're trying to drop into the graced event of seeing the mountain and knowing that it's God's presence.

Jim Finley: And that's what makes it active. See, because I have to choose to do that because it's subtle. And if I just skim over the surface of things like the next TV show, the next thing, the next thing I miss the subtlety, and it leaves my interior heart longings unconsummated. So I have to choose to recalibrate my heart to this kind of fidelity, to this very delicate interior thing, to keep the aperture of my heart open to the more see, and he's trying to invite us to have that kind of sensitivity, I think is the path. Yeah. Next, Article five. "Many blessings flow from the harmony and tranquility of the four natural passions, joy, hope, fear, and sorrow."

Jim Finley: And I think it means this about the passions, is to know that there is the joy of joyful things, but there is the joy that's fulfilled in learning to find our way into the joy of God. And therefore, I appreciate the joy of joyful things, but I know those joys are echoes of my heart's desire to enter into and to participate in the joy of God, which is God's destiny for me, is God's own joy. And I also know that my hope is that when death comes and I pass through the debate of death, I will not be annihilated, but consummated, and I will be eternally in the joy of God is my destiny. And I also hope that with God's help, I'll recognize God's joy reverberating in the joys of my life and in the sorrows of my life. Kind of a quiet joy.

Jim Finley: Likewise, my fear is that, "Oh, I'll miss this." That's my fear. Sees that I'm not careful, that which is essential never imposes itself. That which is unessential is constantly imposing itself. But by a higher order imperative of the awakened heart, I have to keep my heart open for what I know to be essential, which is this infinite union with the infinite presence of God. And so my fear is that it is halfheartedness. My fear is I'd get seduced by the intensity of the day-by-day and lose my way. And my sorrow then would be that I would be given over to that half-hearted life. I also could say, we can understand the sorrows of the world. The sorrow is that collective disconnect from this. And so the four passions then like the passion of your heart is this kind of another set of images to help us understand the sensitivity that he's trying to, not just in meditation and prayer, but habitually throughout the day, like an underlying set of sensitivities for these passions.

Kirsten Oates: And Jim, would you say that the way he's describing the passions, the way you just described them is dropping down to the depth of the passion because there's,

especially around the word hope and fear, I think at a different level of consciousness, I mean, there's a lot to be afraid of. Corona virus, death and I have hopes for my family and hopes for my life.

Jim Finley: Yes, exactly. See as human beings take the virus for example, you see not just within ourselves or family and our loved ones, just collectively as a society, as a human family, there's so much fear because something so threatening and overwhelming and it blindsided us, we didn't see it coming. And it is fearful. So we're not talking about not being afraid when fearful things happen, because Jesus was afraid. In the garden of Gethsemane, he sweat blood, meaning he saw crucifixions, he saw they were brutal executions. He knows, "If possible, let this cup pass from me, not by my will, but as you will." But it's not being afraid of being afraid. It's telling her not to be afraid of being afraid because we're a human being. But to know who we're trying to find is no matter how scary the scary thing is and how it turns out we are being unexplainably sustained in the midst of the scary thing, regardless of it's outcome, including even if it ends in death.

Jim Finley: I mean, sustained in death because God's the infinity of death. Because the mystery of death is sister death, Saint Francis says. And so it means that we do our best, just the normal human response to nurture and be protective and remedy. But we're trying to find a piece that is independent on the outcome of circumstance, because it's the peace of God on which everything depends. We're trying to find a grounded-ness and that gives us the courage to be present to all of these things, without them tipping us over.

Kirsten Oates: That's really helpful. And Jim, I don't know if it's my personality or not, but starting with fear, and what you just said helps me tap into the hope, joy and sorry you described. So if I can not be afraid of my own fear, then my hope lies in death not making me afraid of my own fear, suffering not making me afraid of my own fear. My hope lies in the peace of God being something that can help me, support me in not being afraid of my own fear.

Jim Finley: Exactly. And with me too. And in my work with trauma people in therapy, myself and trauma, we're starting at age three years old with severely... So intense fear was very early on. So basic to my life traumatizing fear. But I was somehow sustained in the fear. And so sustained in the fear has helped me not to be afraid of fear. I respect it and I seek to be as safe as I can and help other people be safe as I can. But I know precisely because it got so dark, you can see the light that shines in the darkness, but doesn't grasp it. And so fear becomes like a teacher because there must be something greater than the fear, or we wouldn't be here. The fear would have done us in and it didn't. So it's strange, it's like that I think.

Jim Finley: Next, article six. Guidelines for a happy life. "Endeavor to be inclined always not to the easiest, but to the most difficult. Not to the most delightful, but to the harshest. Not to the most gratifying, but to the less pleasant. Not to what means rest for you, but hard work. Not to the consoling, but the unconsoling. Not to the most, but to the least. Not to the highest, the most precious, but to the lowest and most despised." There you go. Follow that and you can't go wrong.

Kirsten Oates: That's fabulous.

Jim Finley: Really? So what do we mean? What's he saying here? I'm going to insert the critical phrase.

I think, you know what I mean. “Endeavor to be inclined to always not to what is easiest to the great lie within yourself about yourself, but to what is most difficult to the great lie within yourself about yourself and what is the great lie? That anything less than an infinite union with the infinite presence of God will be enough for me. Furthermore, it’s also the great lie that, that infinite presence of God is already infinitely giving itself to me, breath by breath, heartbeat by heartbeat. And I’m learning with God’s help to recognize it and live by it.” That’s the key, I think. Because as soon as we settle for what’s less than that, pretending it’s enough, see, then we fall into the great lie that if anything, finite, condition and fleeting can consummate who I deep down am and I’m called to be, and he’s trying to cultivate that sensitivity in us.

Kirsten Oates: And Jim, so do you think... Just reading through these again with that lens in mind it’s not rejecting, not trying to live inside a world where you’re trying to make everything happy, pleasant, delightful, gratifying, restful, but to recognize that God’s present in the entirety of the world. So not to reject the distasteful or the less pleasant or the hard work.

Jim Finley: Yes. Now let’s say someone who’s say emotional in maturity could be functioning purely at the level, and this maybe helps to understand the nature of addiction too, is to be gratified by what gratifies at an immediate sensory way. And so you end up going from gratification to gratification to gratification. But then you discover it’s exhausting because the endless round of gratifications don’t gratify. But when you love someone very deeply or say the artist or the poet or someone who serves the poor, their gratification is coming from a deeper place. So it isn’t that there isn’t the pleasurable and the pleasant, it is, you appreciate that. But you’re learning to function at a qualitatively richer, deeper level that eventually opens out on God, is present to us and when we live this way.

Kirsten Oates: Which is to be open and present to what exists in life, which is the just delightful and the distasteful, which is wanting something and not wanting something. It’s to open ourselves up to the whole experience that God bodies forth into the world.

Jim Finley: Yes. Another way I put it as all things considered, what’s the most loving thing I could do right now for my body, my mind, this person, this child, this community, the earth? And the most loving thing might ask something of me. Sometimes there’s nothing less than everything really, to be faithful to that. And I think it’s that kind of integrity is asking us to live by.

Kirsten Oates: That’s helpful.

Jim Finley: Next part of that is... This article six has two parts, to the second part of article six. “Endeavor to be inclined always not to wanting something, but to wanting nothing. Do not go about looking for the best in terrible things, but for the worst and desire to enter for Christ into complete nudity, emptiness, and poverty in everything in the world.” He’s a bottom line kind of guy.

Kirsten Oates: And Jim, he was talking to people who this was their vocation.

Jim Finley: Well, yeah. There is. These are-

Kirsten Oates: They’ve made vows, they’ve-

Jim Finley: Poverty increases close friends, he was a cloistered nun and he was a Carmelite friar and there was this asceticism to the light. So we're trying to translate well, what's a universal principle that applies to all of us, in trying to live a contemplative way of life in the midst of the world? So how can we get at the core of how does it incarnate in our vocation? I put in the critical phrase this way. Endeavor always not to wanting something as if I could have that thing I'd be happy. We're in the Merton reflections. Merton was saying, "Whenever I wanted something very, very much, and I get it, it ends up being just one more thing that I wanted very much." Because of the very fact is something is finite because it's finite, it won't be enough for me either. So not to wanting something as if they're having something... Look at the society to the consumerism. In fact, you can just buy this and have this you'll be happy. And it carries us like a carrot on the end of the stick. The next thing we're trying to have, but to wanting nothing. Meaning to want no thing as if I could have that thing, it would make me happy. Likewise, to know that guarded in this deeper place, knowing even when I lose that thing I wanted so much, the loss of it won't make me unhappy.

Jim Finley: And so is that attitude again, he's trying to get to this deep attitude. And I think too, not for wanting the worst of temporal things, I think for us, that would be a rough, not the worst, kind of find on the ugliest chair you can find in the store. Because you want to be holy. But I think he's saying to be grateful for what we have and not to be attached to external levels of things. We can appreciate that something is more beautiful than another. We can also see the poverty of all material things, and we can see how God's present in that very poverty and just not being attached, not functioning at that level, be going deeper in appreciation of things.

Kirsten Oates: This section really reminds me of birth and death, the way we come into the world and the way we leave the world and a consistency of attitude with the birth and death of all things.

Jim Finley: Yeah, it's very good. I think that's really true. I mean, let's say birth and death are filled with lessons. So for the baby being born, it's not a walk in the park seriously. And the first thing they do is hold you by your heels and give you a whack and welcome you aboard. And you're in for quite a ride. And at the other end, it's no walk in the park either. It just is that the hospice is not a joy ride and in between, bumpy ride. But there's something beautiful about it. Something precious, something ultimately divine, really. So I think it's really true because in daily life we could consider hundreds of little breaths and deaths throughout the day. And if we cling to the birthing part to avoid the death, we can fall into confusion. If we get taken down by the death and not see the birth that shining out of it. So how can we ride the waves of birth and death of gain and loss as a kind of a providential quality to our path? I think it's really true. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: And those three, the nakedness, emptiness and poverty seem to be a part of-

Jim Finley: Poor and naked meaning I'm a poor person, I have nothing, I give you my heart, there was a hymn like that. And so it's like you're ravaged by the generosity of God, sustaining you in an empty handed poverty, see. That is kind of a deep sense of things I think that we try to live by.

Kirsten Oates: I will say all participants in this podcast are wearing clothes.

Jim Finley: Yes, probably. But realistically not. I mean, some of them are. I mean, the fans, some of them

at the physical level are not wearing clothes as they listen to this podcast. And all of us are wearing our clothes to some degree, either the good sense, where we need our clothes in a good sense. But also in the sense we need to outgrow, we need to lose our... We're holding on to certain things because we've not yet had a point where we can let go of imagining as long as I can be clothed in this appearance, as long as I can be clothed in this thing. And it's a lifelong process to be through love, to have that kind of dissolve and all of it. Yeah. I think that's true. Yeah. Seven, "You should embrace these practices earnestly and try to overcome your repugnance of your will towards them." Those he admasses. In other words, the ego does not easily give up its claim to having the final say in who we are.

Jim Finley: If you sincerely put them into practice with order and discretion, it's like prudent, courage. See. Be discreet, you're just a human being. There's no rush. You'll be dead about three seconds anyway, don't worry about it. You don't kind of try to, "How can I do this as quick as possible so I can get onto my next project?" It's an underlying deepening attitude of self-acceptance in the presence of God in the day-by-day. Because you're feeling to what it would be like to have St. John of the Cross as your spiritual director. To sit with him, you get the feeling, he'd be a very compassionate, insightful, present person to meet you where you are with this and help you move on to the next place. And it kind of shines through the way he talks and how he sees things.

Kirsten Oates: I think so, too. And in touch with the whole of life. He's very sober to life. He's very...

Jim Finley: And when you read his poetry too, just how it's so central and eloquent and full. You'd be in the presence of a deeply alive person, very present. And when you sat with him, you'd get a sense that he could see in you what you're not yet able to see and he could help invite you, he could draw it out so you'd be more aware of that and share it with other people. And that always comes through with me with all these mystics really, I think. These consoles, if truly carried out are sufficient for entry into the night of the census. One would hope so [inaudible 00:33:53] But that we give abundant enough console, "Here are some more you can try on." So he's on a roll, you know what I mean? He's kind of is into it. Okay. First, number nine, here's another winning stand for a happy life. "First, try to act with contempt for yourself and desire that all others do likewise. Second, endeavor to speak in contempt of yourself and desire that all others do so. Third, try to think lowly and contemptuously of yourself and desire that all others do the same."

Kirsten Oates: This isn't sounding like the most loving thing at this point.

Jim Finley: Yeah, not really, does it? However, there's a lot of people in therapy they say, "I already do that. I'm trying to get help not to do that." So let's put it in the critical term. Okay. Again, try to act in contempt for the great lie within yourself about yourself that is anything less than an infinite union with the infinite love of God will ever be enough to put the rest of the longings of your heart. And that's what he's really saying with each of those things. And-

Kirsten Oates: So when he says this of yourself, he's talking about the ego self.

Jim Finley: Yeah, that's right. The ego self-

Kirsten Oates: Having contempt to the ego.

Jim Finley: Yes. The... go ahead.

Kirsten Oates: Not to be mean to yourself, but to be cautious and not believe what the ego is trying to tell you that you need this, or you need to do that to be accepted, or you need to be a certain way.

Jim Finley: Yes, I'd put it this way too. See, I think it's an ego consciousness we come upon within ourself, that transcends ourself. So we're going along and ego consciousness through our senses and thoughts and memories and feelings and emotions. And we come upon that which transcends us that we're touched by the holiness of life or the presence as it gives itself to life. And then on being touched by it, we're given the grace to abide in what's beyond our finite ego and beyond what the ego can attain. But the dignity of the ego is the ego with God's grace must freely cooperate in the demise of its illusion about having the final say in who we are.

Jim Finley: But in doing so in a way that's worked to the dignity of the ego, but it's also the dignity as it does this, to realize the God-given dignity of the ego itself. The holiness of my body, the holiness of my breath, the holiness of my thoughts, the holiness of my longings, the holiness of watering the house plants and looking out the window and taking a walk. And it comes full circle back to the divinity of my ordinariness, like Christ's consciousness of myself. The ego has been liberated from this estrangement. And so it can live in the divinity of itself and there's nothing that's without God with a sense of gratitude or amazement or inner freedom. I think it's like that.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. So John of the Cross is speaking to the unliberated ego at this point.

Jim Finley: Yes. I think he's saying this, it's a center kind of thing. He's speaking to us in so far as we've already been awakened to the more, or we wouldn't be reading this, or we wouldn't be listening to the podcast. Unless we already sensed here, intimations is something beautiful that we've tasted or desire and that bears witness that we're already emerging. So there is that. And then there is that, that is realizing it. And there is always that in me that doesn't realize it yet. See, and so my job with God's grace is to endlessly circle back around and be there for the part that doesn't realize it yet. And then it's like Christ's consciousness towards myself. And then I can do the same for other people. There's that and then it sees this, the goodness or the light and then with all of us, there's that in each of us that doesn't see it yet. And so we're all trying to help each other out, not push each other down. And yeah, I think that's my sense of it.

Jim Finley: Now in conclusion he's referring here to a drawing and in the collected works, I don't know if Cory can make this fill up to the students or not. I think it's on page 66, 67 of the collected works. And on the left-hand side he wrote it by hand that's in his handwriting. Then it's typed on the right-hand side of the page of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*. Which is the ascent towards God. And he says, "In the ascent towards God, natha, natha, natha, natha, natha, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing. There is nothing to hold you back, nothing to hit, just let go of everything, but God," and then he says, "And then when you finally get to the top and reach the top natha, nothing." So what types out there, what's written there is what he now gives in this chapter, which is the conclusion with this chapter, and it's in three parts. First part, The verses are as follows. "To reach satisfaction in all desire

is possession in nothing. To come to possess all, desire the possession of nothing. To arrive at being all, desire to be nothing. To come to the knowledge of all, desire the knowledge of nothing.” I’d like to walk through that and put it in a phrase.

Jim Finley: To reach satisfaction in the all that is God. Desire is possession in no thing, because everything is finite and infinitely less than God. In other words, it’s not that there aren’t the pleasures of things, but to try to possess satisfaction to the possession of anything. To come to possess the all God’s infinity. Desire the possession of no thing. I think I mentioned it in the talk I was on this, I think he says, I once stood amazed speaking to one of the friars, the monastery. On Palm Sunday, the Catholic blesses the palms for Palm Sunday. And so there’s a kind of a devotional thing where you keep some of the blessed palms from Palm Sunday. I remember my devout, a French grand Catholic grandmother, when there was a violent thunderstorm, she would always burn some blessed Palm on a candle to protect the house from being struck by lightning, which was nice. I liked that. She also kept a rosary over her back door knob to keep the demons out because the demons would come there and see the rosary and turn off. Something like that.

Jim Finley: As soon as possessiveness of heart, this is what he’s really talking about, not to have closure in the finite. In order to arrive at being all of God, that’s our destiny. To be as much God, as God, is God in our nothingness without God. That’s divine union and that’s heaven, but in mystical marriage, how on this earth can we experienced that? He’s leading us along a path of being married to God, in which we can become all that God is, than our nothingness without God is divinization through love. And so this is the path that leads to that fulfillment. Try to being all, desire to be nothing. I think being nothing means desire, no title, no status in your own eyes or the eyes of others to stand on.

Jim Finley: No credentials to prove. It’s having the final say in who you are, anything. The next part of the last section. “To arrive at the pleasure you have not, you must go by a way in which you enjoy not. To come to the knowledge you have not, you must go by a way in which you know not. To come to the position you have not, you must go by a way in which you possess not. To come to be what you are not, you must go by a way in which you are not beginning. To come to the pleasure you have not, you must go by a way you enjoy not.”

Jim Finley: So the pleasure you don’t have is the infinite pleasure, it could be attitude in God. And since you’re lacking that infinite beatitude, that infinite pleasure, you must go by a way in which you enjoy not. In other words, you must go by a way of not trying to find anything less than the infinite presence of God that will be enough for you. So it’s very strange. You are pleasure. There is pleasure. But the pleasure is washed over you. You’re grateful for all of them, but you’re keenly aware there are intimations of an infinitely greater pleasure that alone is enough for you. And that each of these little couplets has that same very, very subtle point. To come to the knowledge you have not, you must go by a way in which you know not. And what we don’t know is God’s infinite knowledge.

Jim Finley: We don’t have God’s own infinite knowledge of God in ourself and others, in all the things we don’t have that. And therefore, to find our way into knowing all that God knows God to be, and all that we are, we must go by a way in which we know not, that is, we don’t like playing to any conclusion and conceptual thought. We mean, we see it as an insight. This is going to be huge than Meister Eckhart on a virgin mind, in the cloud of unknowing to

cloud of forgetting. It's not having closure in conceptualizations of God or myself. And so like, "Pardon me, I don't speak English." Back in the good old days when I was Holy, it was so clear that for quite some time now I've become perplexed. Everything's boundaryless and vast in all directions. I appreciate the relative clarity, a conceptual, because we're using it. Now, we're talking in conceptual thoughts now, but this is conceptual thought in the service of the realization of the trans conceptual. It's like everything Jesus says, it's like that too. It is conceptual. You can grasp it, as in you can land in the beauty of it, but it's words in the service of that which transcends words. And he's always inviting us to habituated to that.

Kirsten Oates: I like the way you said to not have closure. So it's not to reject insights and understandings that you have, but to not have closure around them because God is listening to us. And so to be open to having our minds changed, to deepening the experience, to not clinging to a memory of something, to be open to the new-

Jim Finley: Exactly. For example, and I look at John of the Cross, look how orderly his mind is. We're only on page 105 and he's going to do this for 679 pages. So this is a guy who thinks a lot and he knows what he thinks. But if you were to walk in to see him for spiritual direction, with underlying passages and explain that to me, explain that to me, explain that to me. I think he'd suggest a different approach to everything that he's saying. Why don't you prayerfully sit with it and share with me something that comes to you in silence. And let's meet there together because everything he says has that evocative invitational call to the deeper place like that. Yeah.

Jim Finley: And last section of the last section. "When you turn towards something, you cease to cast yourself upon the all. For to go from all to the all you must deny yourself of all and all this." There's one more section of this. Let's take this one next. Okay. "When you turn towards something to focus on or habit, or get it like this. When you focus, when you turn towards something, you cease to cast yourself up on the all is infinitely more than that, and is itself the very reality of that, and it's nothingness without God. So it's just another way of putting closure to keeping the aperture of our mind and heart open to everything in a boundaryless clarity of God. So we can see that God's the reality of everything. It is nothing is without God. I think that's the paradox of the whole thing.

Jim Finley: For when you cease to cast yourself of up on the all, that is you throw yourself upon the mercy of the infinite depths you're powerless to attain. So that in casting yourself in his mercy on you, is finite to attain the infinite. The infinite gives itself to you completely in the finite poverty of your heart. That's the great paradox like that. The granting of it all. For to go from the all, is the sum totality of all things, to the all that is the totality of God, you must deny yourself of all pleasures and attainments in all things. So you end up being empty. It's all empty. It's all impoverished compared to the infinity, but then seeing how impoverished it is and giving yourself to the infinite, through these attitudes, the infinite then shines out through everything. And it's nothing that's without God, including yourself and everything right.

Jim Finley: And when you come to the possession of the all, that is the all that is God, you must possess it without wanting anything. So when you finally get there, mystical union or bust, I did it. You have to reach it. No, you dare turn towards it. To have it, you fall out of it. You have to let God reveal to you that God is the reality of all that you are. See, and you're in the flow of

that generosity of God. And you're grateful for it. You ride the waves of it. You're blessed by it. But every time, because you're just a human being, you turn to have a little bit of it. In the very turning the have it you follow... This is also true in our love for each other as human beings. There can be a great love. In the little ways, people in a loving relationship can try to turn to have it on their terms.

Jim Finley: It is a perpetual, helping each other to let go of having in order to let love carry them to even deeper places like that, and I think it's out there. So the conclusion then, the grand finale. Air ago, therefore, because if you desire to have something in all, in other words if you still desire to have some thing in the all that is God, so when you pass through death and you say to God, "As I cross over it, can I take my iPhone with me?" God goes, "No, you can't actually. You can't take anything... The gate is so narrow, nothing less than God can fit through it. See, it's paradoxical like that I think. Because if your desire to have something in all, your treasure in God is not purely you all.

Jim Finley: In this nakedness of the spirit, in this nakedness, the spirit finds its quietude and rest, for in coveting, nothing raises it up and nothing weighs it down because it is in the center of its humility. When it covered something by this very desire, it is wearied. In so far as I've given over to this unexplainable blessedness, no matter what I attain in my own eyes or in the eyes of others or possessions, it doesn't raise me up because I know the infinite love of God is infinitely giving itself away to me as my body, my breath, my life. And likewise, when I lose something, nothing pulls me down because no matter what I lose, it's infinitely less than the one thing alone, which is this infinite love that sustains me in the midst of the rising and falling of gaining and losing and gaining and losing, which is the story of our life on this earth, really, like this.

Jim Finley: And then we're in the center of our humility. That's a great phrase, like the zero variants. They did in God and with God on everything, absolutely everything from all that God is by the generosity of God. And without God, I'm nothing. Absolutely nothing. And so I'm the center of humility, because as soon as I catch myself and I do because that's my teacher, that's my frailty. Because myself coveting something mainly I catch myself thinking as long as I can reach this or keep this I'll be okay. Or if I don't find this or lose this, it's over for me. As soon as I fall prey to that absolute ties of the relative and relevant ties in the absolute. And so I have to recalibrate my heart and return back again to this love path, to ask God to help me stabilize in it. So that's the chapter. It's quite a chapter.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Jim, can you repeat that last little teaching you offered that was so helpful about if I'm thinking of finding-

Jim Finley: Yes. And I said because we all do it, so we're catching ourself in the act of doing it, to ask God to help us to learn. So like the thorn in the flesh, God leaves it there as our teacher, I catch myself imagining that as long as I can find my way to something, or if having found it, I can hold onto it and not lose it, I'll be okay.

Kirsten Oates: And that could even be gone-

Jim Finley: Yeah. It could be gone on my terms. And that's what we're seeing in the dark night of faith is that God takes God away. Okay. That we're attached to God, insofar as God's like an

extension of ourself. So God then impoverishes us, which is the night of faith. Likewise, I think then as I can get past something that's burdening me, as long as it's going to turn out okay the way I want it, I think I'll be okay. But if it doesn't, I'm finished. And I catch myself from those two, but I realize that the love of God transcends, utterly permeates and is itself the reality of the rise and fall of all that comes and goes. And I'm trying to ride the waves of circumstance to see the divinity that sustains me in a breath by breath by breath.

Jim Finley: And so turning to St. John of the Cross for guidance. See he's guiding us in how to cultivate this habit. And we can see too, we can't do this obviously, that's the passive part. We foster a willingness to cooperate, but then we turn to God to help us do this because without God, it's impossible. Jesus said, "With God, all things are possible with us it's impossible." So that's the chapter. And I thought, that's why we should dialogue about it, because you can see it's so... Each thing is so something to sit with. And then through the rest of the book to see he's talking about this. So the whole book he's talking about this, he explicates it with more examples and helpful... Yeah. And so on.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Each teaching has paradox built into it, which is so hard for our minds to sit with. But that's the teaching, isn't it? To awaken us to paradox and awaken us to ministry and not knowing, and-

Jim Finley: See because the paradox is an apparent contradiction. It's a paradox. And so in the paradox the sequential mind comes to an impasse. Jesus teaches like this a lot. The first shall be last, the last shall be first, more should be given more. And so we sit in the impasse because then in an impasse, God teaches us. You know what I mean? The heart is instructed by God in the impasse of the paradox or the divinity of the infigurable, which is ourselves. We can't figure ourselves out. We'll never figure ourselves out.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Well, thank you for helping us make what sense we can out of this chapter. That was incredibly helpful because reading it myself in preparation that phrase, it makes no sense. So this has been incredibly helpful to me. I'm sure to everyone listening-

Jim Finley: I'm glad we did this together like this. It'll help them, I think.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you for listening to this episode of Turning to The Mystics, a podcast created by the Center for Action and Contemplation. We're planning to do episodes that answer your questions. So if you have a question, please email us at podcast@cac.org or send us a voicemail at cac.org/voicemails. All of this information can be found in the show notes. We'll see you again soon.