

Turning to the Mystics



St. John of the Cross: Session 6
with James Finley

- Jim Finley: Greetings, I'm Jim Finley. Welcome to *Turning to The Mystics*. Greetings, everyone, and welcome to our time here together, turning for guidance to the teachings of the Christian mystic, Saint John of the Cross. In this session, I'm going to go back to the beginning, and summarize in my own words, my own understanding of *The Dark Night*.
- Jim Finley: And from there also in my own words, to move on into *The Spiritual Canticle*, and *The Living Flame of Love* to introduce this understanding of the mystical awakening that emerges out of this dark night. That as we go through this transformative journey that we've been following, and it comes to a point where flowers or blossoms into this mystical communion with God. This God's infinite oneness with us in love, and realized in this loving knowledge with God. And then for the lectio part of turning to a text, I also then want to turn instead of the John of the Cross directly, to Thomas Merton, where he summarizes St. John of the Cross himself, as a few very succinct statements, and his ability to make this more accessible to us, on what this mystical union is. This union of infused contemplation.
- Jim Finley: So, hopefully, this will help make these teachings more accessible. I know they're challenging, but they're also deeply rewarding, but the more we can get into the wavelength, like get tuned in to kind of an intuitive resonance with what's being spoken of here, and the light it might shed on our own experience, and our on ongoing search for God in prayer, and in daily life. That's our goal here.
- Jim Finley: And then in the next session, which will be my last session on John of the Cross, I'm on a turn to continue on with mystical awakening, but I want to turn to passages in St. John of the Cross. And so, my own reflections and Merton's reflections. What are the ways that... Sorry, what are the ways that St John of the Cross, in his words speaks of this mystical realization of communion with God?
- Jim Finley: And then I think there'll be two sessions after that. I believe with Kirsten on dialoguing back and forth in a way that will hopefully bring to light the questions you've been presenting, and some of our own questions to make this even more accessible, as a way to bring this John of the Cross series to a close. And we'll take a break, and then move on to our next mystic. So let's look at this together, by the way, there's noise on next door. They're rebuilding this condo next door. On the ocean side of the house it's quiet, but my equipment's in here. So if I get overwhelmed with noise, we'll just shut this down, and wait, and go with the flow. We'll see what happens, do our best. Okay, so we'll begin.
- Jim Finley: John of the Cross is assuming, and all these Christian mystic teachers are assuming this, on the importance of our life, a devotional sincerity, and living the Christian life. And in living the Christian life, assumes some personal ongoing relationship with God in prayer. And that relationship with God in prayer then spills over into an habitual underlying Christ-like attitudes towards ourselves, towards others, towards the earth in our day by day life. And he's assuming also then that this life of ours is this Christian life efficacious under holiness. It is important to understand how limited it is. It's real and efficacious, but limited compared to the union that awaits us when we pass through the veil of death, into eternal glory. For on this earth, our experience of, understanding of, and response to God, in devotional sincerity is... We experience the infinite presence of God in our finite faculties illumined by grace.
- Jim Finley: So for example, when we sit in prayer, when we go to God in prayer, and other times during

the day, we're graced with constellations, or graced sometimes with a sense of inner warmth, or a sense of the felt sense of the presence of God sustaining us in our life. And we're grateful for that. So this... Because the gratification that we receive in these ways is a gratification through our finite abilities to be gratified, it's a finite way of efficaciously experiencing the infinite presence of God in our heart through constellations, through effect, through love. Likewise, what we know of God in the reading of scripture and reading spiritual books in the insights that we gain through the reading of scripture. It's the infinite knowledge of God received into our finite understanding of ourselves. Illumine by faith, that, that our finite abilities is just finite human beings.

Jim Finley: Illumine by faith. There is this finite modality of efficaciously experiencing the infinite presence of God, and so on. And this is our life. This is our life. And we walk this walk, and we live this way. And that way of experiencing and responding to God in our daily life, as in a mirror darkly, as St Paul says, or as an obscure certainty in our heart, is there a faith that the measure of this faith is love? And then we live by hope that when death comes to me pass the veil of death. They will move from God being mediated, or incarnate in finite ways of understanding the infinite presence of God, in finite ways of experiencing the loving union with God, will cross over into glory, into infinitely realizing the infinite presence of God. Sharing in God's own life, as perfectly as God shares in God's life, in our eternal nothingness, without God in the full light of glory.

Jim Finley: And this is the picture, but this is the understanding of our life and our Christian life, and so on. Notice at this point, the St. John of the Cross enters the picture as a mystic. See if we turn to the mystics for guidance, what kind of guidance are we expecting to get? We're expecting to get mystical guidance, and what kind of guidance is this? It's a guidance that assumes everything that I've just said. It assumes that we've done our homework, and our day by day life, seeking to follow Christ and to live as Christ lived. And through our reflections, into our insights, into our constellations, and reassurances and so on. It assumes that efficacious under holding us as a pass of veil of death into this infinite glory union with God. Well, St. John of the cross is saying, is it was happens to some people.

Jim Finley: I put it this way, is that God decides not to wait until we're dead to begin to infuse into us. Oh, how shall we put this, to infuse into us God's understanding of God. And God's understanding of who we are in God, hidden with Christ and God forever. Infused into us, and given to us as our divinized understanding. And God decides not to wait until we're dead to infuse into our heart. The consummation of our ultimate desire, this love... this loving union with God, that it... How do we experience God's love for us? How do we experience the infinite love that God is? Being infused by God, into us, into our own heart, so that the infinite love that God is starts becoming the way we realized our heart is being transformed into that love.

Jim Finley: And that this divinization through grace does not mean in so far as it occurs. And that we were in the earlier talk on married love, that occurs to some degrees in all of us in married love, in our love for our children, and solitude, and art, and poetry, in service or echos and intimations of this. But in this fullness, that John of the Cross is speaking of, that doesn't mean then that we're holier than those that are not graced with these infused states of contemplation. It's the charism of realizing within ourself, who God realizes us to be. As God's beloved, as the one whom God creates me, as the one to whom God can give himself,

give herself completely as the beloved so that we in seeing her unexplainably loved, we are, might in turn and being so quickened by this love. By being moved to give herself in love to the love that gives itself to us, which is mystical union, as a vocation or as a calling.

Jim Finley: It's all of our vocations to some degree. And this is, this is the setup here. This is where this switch on the cross is talking about. And he's talking out like all these mystics he's talking, what he knows is true, because he's experienced it. And in being a spiritual director, he has sat with people in whom they were being led by God along this path. And he understood, and being with his people and with himself, how hard it is to understand this, because it unfolds in the midst of our limitations. It enfolds in the midst of the unresolved matters of our heart. It kind of quietly pours into us and grants itself to us unexplainably in the midst of the day by day can be very bewildering. How to, how to see this interior light. This could actually pertain to us. And how do we cooperate with it?

Jim Finley: This is where John the Cross is coming from, The next point in John of the Cross is saying to this, is that this influx of God, this unmediated infinite presence of God infusing itself in giving itself to us, God's consciousness of God, pouring itself out, and transforming our consciousness into this divine consciousness, and this loving union. This cannot occur as long as our finite ways of experiencing with God to insight, to reflection, to beliefs, to constellations is still our base of operations. Because the muse I use, you can't get the ocean and do a symbol, but you can drop the symbol into the ocean. We cannot get this infinite bounty of love into the finite confines of our heart, into the confines of infinite knowledge into the confines of our mind.

Jim Finley: And also because God knows that we're attached these finite modalities of experiencing ourselves, and understanding ourselves, and God, and everything. We're very kind of bonded with it. God knows that we're not capable by our own efforts to liberate ourselves from this dependency, this identification with these finite modalities, and therefore what God does is lovingly removes the ability to be nurtured by finite ways of experiencing the infinite presence of God. So that in our appetites, in our desire for gratification, the senses fueled by the desire for gratification. And including being gratified by the felt sense of the presence of God, because that gratification, however, real it is the solace, the sweetness, the warm, because it's finite, and we're attached to it. God lovingly removes our ability to be consoled by the presence of God. If the experiences of purgation, or a loss, or a deprivation of the felt sense of the presence of God.

Jim Finley: And likewise God, seeing that we're attached to our finite ways of understanding God, finite, which are true, how we understand scripture, the teachings of the church is all true, but it's a finite way of understanding the infinite mystery of God. Remember what John of the Cross said that just as someone born blind could be told about the color yellow, and through faith would know that the color yellow exists being born blind, that person would have no essential knowledge of what the color yellow is.

Jim Finley: He says, so it is with faith. We know that God loves us. We know that God's one with us, but we don't know what these things mean by a way of analogy we have, because we know what finite knowing is, what finite loving is, but he said, there's no essential likeness with what the reality is, these infinite realities are in God. We know it's true through faith, but what the infinite reality of what we know through faith is infinitely beyond understanding. And therefore God removes our understanding. That as God removes that previous unquestioned clarity we had, that chapter and verse clarity. We can flip back and forth and explain things, and so God takes away the ability to do that.

Jim Finley: And then he says, John of the Cross says, if we don't panic, and we also discern, make sure what other things that may be going on that could contribute to this. There can begin to grow in us. He says a general loving awareness, in which we sit in kind of a quiet emptiness. It's very subtle. It's very delicate. It's very empty-handed, and poor, and quiet. And we do not recognize it at first, but in that quietness, bereft of insight, bereft of constellation, we've begun to experience a kind of homecoming, an unexplainable homecoming in our heart. And we feel that we're being called by God to be faithful to that homecoming, and sit that way like an unlearned child. And that's the gate of heaven. That's the gate of heaven, and through which we, into our daily life, we find our way into this union, and the union then dawns on us, out of this darkness.

Jim Finley: See, here we are here. We are sitting here, bereft of the ability to meet and find God on our terms. And there is these unconsummated longings and out of fidelity to those longings is God finds a clearing or an opening to begin to infuse the unmediated, infinite presence of God, into the intimate immediacy of our very presence. We begin to realize that the infinite presence of God is being poured out, and given to us as the mystery of our very presence, and our nothingness without God. That God's understanding of God and who we are, is being poured out, and infused into and given to us as our understanding in this love beyond all understanding.

Jim Finley: Where he says, to such a person then they come to realize that everything remains to be understood. That is no matter how deeply we understand it. God's infinitely more than that through all eternity is infinitely more than that. So to know that everything remains to be understood as a deeper way to understand this godly, and it's this mystical understanding that John of the Cross is inviting us to. He also says that this cannot be understood, conceptually, that the finite mind, and the finite heart, this transcended in this birthing of this infinite union with the infinite, this communion that the finite mind itself, can't grasp this realization that transcends what it's capable of. But although we can't grasp it, we unexplainably realize that it's happening to us. And so the whole of the spiritual canticle then, is how do we be faithful to that. It's so subtle and so unexpectedly intimate.

Jim Finley: How then do we surrender to this love, which calls us into ever even more subtle longings, and how do we find consummation of those longings? And so that's the journey he's marking out for us. Now this is a text I'd like to turn here. This is Thomas Merton, the inner experience, well we did Thomas Merton, I don't know if we did this passage or not, I don't remember, but he's explicitly paraphrasing Saint

John of the Cross, and he does so in a way in which I think we said, when we were with Merton, his value is he was so steeped in the ancient wisdom of contemplative Christianity, and so was transformed in at himself as a contemporary. He puts it into our terms. And so he makes these ancient, timeless teachings more accessible. So this is Thomas Merton. This is *The Inner Experience* teaching on Infused Contemplation, Chapter Six.

Jim Finley: First, this infused that is this influx of God, this unmediated influx of the presence of God pouring itself into us, and transforming our very presence into the presence of God through love in our nothingness without God. Oh, there's the noise outside. Let's see what happens. First, this influx has experienced, one, it is an intuition that on it's a lower level transcends the senses, that is as the influx that you're sitting there, it transcends anything that you can perceive with the senses. That is it can't be seen, it can't be heard, it can't be touched with the hands. This doesn't mean that later on, as it gets deeper, that there are not things mystical sensed through visions, and auditory voices of God, and so on those Can and do occur.

Jim Finley: But then he says, if when they do occur, he said we are not to be attached to them. But see them as calling us even deeper to lean in closer to God beyond anything that can be perceived by the senses. So it is an intuition that on its lower level transcends the sensors, and on its higher level, transcends the intellect itself. So this is why he says it's impossible to understand it, this is why we shouldn't be frustrated if we don't understand it, because if we can understand it, it wouldn't be what he's talking about. Because understanding it, we mean conceptually understanding it by an insight of our finite mind into the infinite, but this is not an insight of the finite mind of the infant. This is the infinite understanding, pouring itself out, and fusing itself in transforming our understanding into this divine understanding.

Jim Finley: So we're beyond the intellect, beyond the senses. Number two, hence this infused contemplation is characterized by a quality of light and darkness, knowing and unknowing. It is beyond feeling and even beyond concepts. However, notice there are concepts that embody and bear witness to this knowledge beyond concepts, which are the teachings of the mystics because we're using concepts right now. It is Using words, that these are concepts that embody that are in the service of the knowledge that transcends concepts as is every word of scripture, as is every word of Jesus. Number three, in this contact with God, this light and darkness, there must be a certain activity of love on both sides.

Jim Finley: So you're on the side of God, it's already taken care of because God is the infinite love. That is both the origin, and the fulfillment of this very transformation, which is ultimately eternal divine. On the side of the soul, there must be a withdrawal from attachment to sensible things, a liberation of the mind, and the imagination from all strong, emotional, and passionate clinging to sensible realities. In other words, there must be a liberation from reactivity. What happens in reactivity, we get so energized by the intensity of the moment that we lose contact with the divine context that utterly permeates and transcends that would so excites us at the moment. So there's certain kind of deepened equanimity of a very broad based way of being present with the rise and fall of circumstances of daily life, in the rise of fallen or what occurs to us in prayer. Passionate thinking distorts our intellectual vision, preventing us from seeing things as they are, but also we must go beyond intelligence itself, and not be attached even to simple, intuitive thoughts. All thought, no matter how pure is transcended in contemplation.

- Jim Finley: For Saint Teresa of Ávila, remember in the fourth mansion, the time has come to love more and think less. This knowledge through love, it's a loving knowledge, and love. The contemplative must then keep alert and detached from sensible, even from spiritual attachment. St. John of the cross teaches us, but likewise, if I receive an inner illumination, like an influx of deep joy, I have to realize that the influx of deep joy is happening, but to realize because it's in the phenomenal order of what rises and falls, I'm not to become attached to that. Influx of joy or union likewise, if in the deprivation of joy, I'm not to be attached to my deprivation of joy because the deprivation of joy is simply the deprivation of what's infinitely less than the joy of God. This beyond the joy that arises and falls, or rises and falls, this is the eternal joy boundless in all directions, this present in, but not limited to moments of joy.
- Jim Finley: It's also present in a hidden way in the loss of joy. The contemplative then was keep alert, and detached from sensible, and even from spiritual attachments, St. John of the Cross teaches us that the contemplative should turn away, even from seemingly supernatural visions of God, and of his saints, in order to remain in the darkness of unknowing that St. John of the Cross says, these insights that we get, or these realizations, we never know for certain where they come from. They could be from God, they could be the mind. It could be from inner realms of consciousness itself, it could be the forces of darkness. So, we must never be attached to them, but be open to all of them. Because even if they're from God, and we're attached to them, though distances from this mystical union with God, and even if it comes from the forces of darkness, but the spiritual quickenings that come from the forces of darkness, if a deepens our faith in God, even though it's from the forces of darkness, it will deepen our union with God.
- Jim Finley: Our only concern here is to do God's will, and leaning ever closer to this transformation that God's achieving in us unexplainably in our heart. In any event, contemplation presupposes a generous and total effort of ascetic self denial, but the final astatic movements by which the contemplative goes beyond all things, is passive and beyond his own control. That is, there must be the asceticism of detachment from what can be gained or lost, from what we understand, or don't understand all of that. We're aware of it, we're open to all of it. But we're leaning in to a realm of fullness is present and it permeates all those fluctuations, but is infinitely more than that. But when the ecstatic moment of communion comes, like the mystical union, it will arise without our control because it's God doing it. That's why it's infused contemplation, it's really the act of God in us.
- Jim Finley: Four, contemplation is the work of love. Oh, that noise I want to keep going. I think you can hear anyway. I want to keep going. This is... Good to have little bit of life in the real world. Contemplation is the work of love, and the contemplative proves his love by leaving all things. Even those spiritual things, for God is nothing, for God in nothingness, detachment, and night. That is to say, yes, when the pleasant thing happens, it really is pleasant, and I'm grateful for it. But the pleasant thing that happens, for which I am grateful, and God is present in it, is in it and of itself infinitely less than the joy, this flowing unexplainably into my heart and so on. And likewise, when sorrow happens, yes, this is very sorrowful. I feel the weight of it, I do. But I know that this sorrow as real as it is, does not diminish nor from this infinite love that transcends the sorrow.
- Jim Finley: It does not take the sorrow away, but sustains me in it, and gives me the courage to face it

from a depth of love that empowers me to be present to it as best I can in the presence of God. It's really the mystery of the cross, and the ground of our minds, the mystery of love crucified, probably I think. For God alone can grant the gift of mystical grace and make himself known, but the secret ineffable contact reveals his presence in the depths of the soul. What counts is not the soul's love for God, but God's love for the soul.

Jim Finley: Five, this knowledge of God in unknowing is not intellectual, or even in the strict sense, effective, that is, it's not heartfelt in the emotions. It is not the work of one faculty or another uniting the soul with this object outside of itself. It is a work of interior union, and of identification in divine charity when knows God by becoming one with him, when apprehends him, by becoming the object of his infinite mercies. And lastly, six, contemplation as a supernatural love and knowledge of God, simple and obscure, infused by him into the summit of the soul, giving it a direct experiential contact with God.

Jim Finley: So this is what we're talking about and notice too. I didn't end it with this. When we hear talk like this, we may say, I don't know if I've ever experiences in this fullness in an abiding way. Well, we can be sensitive, like the reflection we did earlier on married love, or on parenting. We've tasted something of this. Also, I think when we listened to talk like this, we sense in at the beauty of it. And we know that it's beautiful because it's true. And knowing that it's true, we're on a path because it's in God's hands, the extent to which we realize this, and the fullness of which we realize it. What's important is our deepening experience of in response to God's infinite love for us. In the midst of our situation, in the midst of being who we are right now, is being unexplainably trustworthy, and Abba father, which is really Christ consciousness in the world.

Jim Finley: So I hope this helps give a sense of this. And how important it is to be patient with ourselves as we sit with the beauty of it, and kind of let it settle in we're right at the edge of spiritual direction, right now. There is a view and I could talk one on one, or if we are in a live silent retreat together, and we could have question and answers, you do get to do that through Cursor indirectly, you sit in a dialogue that you kind of get intimations of how this is somehow present in your life, where it wouldn't make any sense to you, if it wasn't.

Jim Finley: The very fact you're drawn to, it gives witness that you're already on this path, and so let's end then here with the meditation. Let's just sit straight, fold your hands, and bow. Be still, and know I am God. Be still, and know I am. Be still, and know. Be still. Be. (silence).

Jim Finley: So, let's say the Lord's Prayer together. Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory now and forever. Amen. Mary, mother of contemplatives, pray for us, Saint Teresa of Ávila, pray for us, St. John of the Cross. Now, blessings till next time.

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. All of this information can be found in the show notes. We'll see you again soon.