

"Contemplating Wounds": The Spiritual Vision of Julian of Norwich
Christ Episcopal Church, Eureka, CA
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For my grandparents: Teresa and Albert,
Rosa and Giulio

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Here is a vision shown by the goodness of God to a devout woman, and her name is Julian, who is a recluse at Norwich and still alive, A.D. 1413, in which vision are very many words of comfort, greatly moving for all those who desire to be Christ's lovers. (125)¹

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And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, "*My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.*" *Matt. 26:39*

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²For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

³He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him of no account.

⁴Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.

⁵But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed. *Is. 53:2-5*

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¹ All citations are from Edmund Colledge, O.S.A and James Walsh, S.J. *Julian of Norwich: Showings*. Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1978.

The first reading from *Isaiah* is one of four Servant Songs. Who is the identity of this Suffering Servant? Is the Servant a metaphor for the people of Israel as a whole? Or a specifically awaited Messiah – a Redeemer figure yet to come? This later interpretation is certainly how the early Christian community chose to understand this mysterious figure.

And yet who are the Suffering Servants in our lives? The Servant who walks among us? Who has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases? A beloved grandparent, a local community organizer, or a sacrificing single parent. An un-documented or migrant worker who has renounced citizenship or security for the hope or promise of future well-being? Or the separated family seeking political asylum at our borders; made scapegoat for our country's iniquities; crushed on behalf of our nation's collective shadow.

The truth is that the Suffering Servant is one of many, or all, of these representations. An "Every Man Tale" – a stand in – for the persecuted, scapegoated, and sacrificed among us.

At the beginning of Lent, Fr. Daniel read the words of Swiss-American psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, the near-death studies expert who theorized the five stages of grief. She reminds us that: "The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern." Fr. Daniel continued with, "These persons have listened to the heartbeat of God and have set their lives in step with that divine rhythm." But prior to offering this deep wisdom he asked, but "Why do we have to walk the slow way of the Cross before we get to Easter? Maybe because this is the path that slowly transforms our heart into God's heart."

In light of this quotation I would like to invoke and perhaps introduce you to one particular "Suffering Servant," a beloved of God who lived in England in the 14-15th c. We know her as "Julian"; she lived as an anchoress, a recluse, at a church in Norwich. She has come down to us in history as "Julian of Norwich."

I was first introduced to Julian as a young man, by a therapist who was also a Presbyterian minister. I was struggling to know love, and to experience love as I wanted and needed. During one of our first sessions he asked, “Do you know the writings of Julian of Norwich?” I did not. He replied, “Like her, you too are contemplating wounds.” It was a moment of profound recognition. To contemplate one’s wounds. To not hide out of shame. To not bury or deny out of a chiseled male posturing. To contemplate. To invite. To ruminate. To pray with and over. Even to bless.

To turn now to Julian: It is “May 13, 1373. An English woman of thirty-and-a-half years lay dying in the city of Norwich.”² This is how the great historian of Christian mysticism, Bernard McGinn, introduces us to Julian. Over the course of two days, Julian received 16 visions of the crucified and bloodied Lord. We know that she was gravely ill and close to death when she received these visions, perhaps as part of what we would consider today a “near death experience” (NDE). These visions drastically shifted her life’s trajectory. After recovering – almost miraculously – from her unnamed illness, Julian goes on to devote the remainder of her life to considering the theological and communal relevance of her visions; in other words, *contemplating wounds* becomes for her a deep and abiding vocational concern as she finds both her own personal salvation, and that of her church, bound up in the interpretation, understanding, and refinement of her visions.

Julian went on to compile these visions into what would become her celebrated *Revelations of Divine Love*, the earliest surviving manuscript written in English by a woman. She first composed a brief rendition of the visions (“Short Text”), and then almost two decades later, a longer more refined version (“Long Text”).

Some of the most profound aspects of her revelatory teachings are in regard to the nature of suffering and sin, which Julian reflects upon extensively. Far from mere theoretical or abstract analysis, hers is a theology rooted in the reality of Christ’s suffering body in which

² Quotes from McGinn: *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism: 1350-1550 (The Presence of God, vol. 5)*. Crossroad Publishing, 2012.

she was granted immediate visual contact through her visionary experiences of his passion and death.

Julian has a tremendous desire to suffer *with Christ*, and to know his suffering *through her own suffering*. As part of this mystical longing, she asks God to receive a “bodily sickness... so severe that it might seem mortal,” and prays for three wounds: a wound of contrition, a wound of compassion, and a wound of longing with all her will for God. Her sickness, which she receives, lasts three days and three nights. And when she finds that she does not in fact die, she receives her first vision: “red blood trickling down from under the crown...flowing freely and copiously, a living stream, just as it seemed to me that it was at the time when the crown of thorns was thrust down upon his blessed head” (129).

What follows her initial vision of Christ’s passion is one of the most celebrated visionary experiences perhaps in all of Christian mystical literature. After visually witnessing Christ’s intense suffering, Julian is shown “something small, no bigger than a hazelnut, lying in the palm of [her] hand” (130). She perceives that it is “as round as any ball” and asks, “What can this be?” “Everything which is made” is the response she receives. Julian is “amazed that it could last” because it is “so little that it could suddenly fall into nothing.” And again, the response: “It lasts and always will, because God loves it; and thus everything has being through the love of God” (130).

The hazelnut – a profound image of the whole from the mind of God. A “God’s-eye-view” of creation. Like Job, humbled in the whirlwind by a power greater than himself, Julian also comes to experience her world – perhaps *herself* – as a very small, vulnerable thing. “So little.” So entirely dependent on the God who made her, who sustains her, and who loves her (131).

It is only, however, after her intense visions of suffering and her near-death encounter, that Julian receives the refrain that resonates and resounds throughout her *Revelations*: “***all shall be well, all shall be well, and every manner of thing shall be well.***” This is a God’s-eye-view of suffering. This is a God’s-eye-view of love. This is not the view from the

perspective of the fear-based, illusory self – anxiously clinging, defended, closed off. Julian’s revelation is an incarnational *suffering-into* of what we read in the *First Letter of John*: “*God is Love*” (1 Jn. 4:8). *This* is the mystery of faith that we proclaim on this “Good Friday,” that “*Divine love is at work in the midst*” of our suffering – the profound truth that God suffers not just *for us*, but *with us* (McGinn, 455).

Later in her *Revelations* Julian is granted a vision of her “soul in the midst of [her] heart.” She sees her “soul as wide as if it were a kingdom” (163). Seasoned in her suffering, Julian is given a profound unifying vision – her soul: vast, wide, and open. It is through contemplating wounds – her own, her God’s, and her community’s – that Julian comes to recognize a profound unity of Love underlying the suffering and brokenness of the world.

Like Julian, may we not shy away from the suffering in our communities, in our families, or in our own personal wounds – *and may we also not despair in them* – and come to know, in a deeply embodied way, the unitary love that exists like a net, weaving us together with our families; our communities with our cosmos. And may we have the courage to invite God – and others – into our woundedness, our vulnerabilities, our smallness. So that *together* we may have the strength to *gaze long enough into the darkness to transform it* – perhaps not into light, but at least *into love*. And through this profound – soul-shattering – knowledge of God’s unconditional love, *may we be well*. May our families be well. May our planet be well. And even in the midst of tremendous, even terrifying suffering, may we know – deeply, securely, intimately – that ***all manner of things shall be well***.