

Trinity 2016: Enclosed in love

Kalamazoo Mennonite Fellowship
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May 22, 2016

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you,
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.*

It's not exactly a vow, but I think I've mentioned in years past that on Trinity Sunday it has seemed important to me to preach on the Trinity on Trinity Sunday, ever since, in college, my beloved pastor laughed heartily at me when I suggested that he do it. To this day, I don't know why he laughed! But it stirred up something in me. I will never be as good a Bible expositor as Tom, or be a very astute theologian, but well, here goes.

In fact, I'd like to think first a bit about how, nowadays, we'd go about learning about the Trinity or other theological matters. I think the standard answer is that we'd go off to seminary, where we could spend concentrated time on theological studies. Or, if we don't go off to seminary, we could devote time to reading books on the Trinity, look on the internet, and so forth. And, if we wanted to share that knowledge, we'd write heavy books or technical articles.

But in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in England there was an interesting different way. Some people were called to a way a life we might find almost inconceivable. Imagine a medieval church. Here's what they would do: Right next to the church, they would build a cell called an anchorhold. After a period of discernment, the person would move into the anchorhold. And never come out again. In fact, the bishop would essentially perform a funeral for the person, who was thus considered dead to the world. These anchorholds typically had three windows: through one, they could squint through to see the church sanctuary. Another window, facing outside, allowed food and water to be passed in, and chamber pots to be passed out. And a third window, also facing outside, allowed them to give spiritual advice to visitors. Also, they could keep a cat.

As I said, they would be enclosed in these cells, dead to the world, where they would participate in the daily office, pray, and think. And so entered a woman named Julian, who became an anchorite at the church of St Julian in Norwich, England. Not a lot is known about the facts of Julian's life—for example, we don't know if her name comes from the name of the church, or it was just her name (Julian was a common woman's name at the time, related to "Gillian").

Before Julian became an anchorite, she had set her heart on another way to learn about God. And, if you think choosing to become enclosed for life is hard to

understand, what she did might be even more surprising. Here is Julian in her own words, speaking of herself:

She had already asked God for three gifts: the first was vivid perception of his Passion, the second was bodily sickness in youth at thirty years of age, the third was for God to give her three wounds¹.

Regarding these three wounds:

That is to say, the wound of true contrition, the wound of kind compassion and the wound of an earnest longing for God. And this last petition was with no reservation².

And, when she was “thirty and a half years old” she did become very sick. For three and nights she lay, and on the fourth day, the priest came in to give her the last rites. In pain of the fourth night, she realized what heavenly bliss awaited her, and she prayed that her death would be to God’s glory. On the fifth day, she woke up, in pain, but “dead to all sensation from the waist down.” The local priest came with a crucifix; by that time, her eyes were fixed and she could not speak at all. The priest told her to fix her eyes on the cross. Her vision began to fail, the room became dim, except for the cross. And she felt her upper body begin to die. She thought she was at the point of death, when, suddenly, she felt completely comfortable.

Thus, she was given her second gift. And it occurred to her to ask for the first gift, a “vivid perception of his Passion.” And so it happened, in the midst of sixteen visions, or revelations, or, in Julian’s word, “showings of divine love.” Julian recovered. She wrote down her showings, and eventually became an anchorite. In her anchorhold she thought and meditated on the showings. Perhaps twenty or thirty years later, she wrote her fullest meditations on these showings, and shared these with others. It was, by the way, the first book written in English by a woman that we know of.

Although she called herself a “simple, uneducated creature,” what she wrote was a profound theology of sin, suffering, and the love of God. And here’s where I want to admit a strange thing: On Mother’s Day, which was just two days after Julian’s feast day, I was thinking about what I would say this year for Trinity Sunday. A strong impression came on my mind: “Go, learn from Julian of Norwich’s *Showings* about the Trinity.” Strange, no? As it turns out, I had a lot to learn from her.

I believe that Julian was thoroughly orthodox; she believed the creeds she recited. She believed in the God, the Father Almighty, and in Jesus Christ his only son, our Lord, and in the Holy Spirit³. She believed we worship one God in

trinity, and trinity in unity, neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance⁴.

But what I learn mostly from Julian is how delighted the Trinity makes her. Just as she has been enclosed in her anchorhold, she is enclosed in God. She feels God's love so deeply. She writes:

We are enclosed in the Father, and we are enclosed in the Son, and we are enclosed in the Holy Ghost; and the Father is enclosed in us, and the Son is enclosed in us, and the Holy Ghost is enclosed in us: almighty, all wisdom, all goodness, one God, one Lord⁵.

Can you feel Julian's delight in that? The Trinity isn't just some abstraction, the Trinity surrounds her. In fact, the Trinity, in God's love, is enclosed within her. All around her is might, wisdom, goodness; inside her is might, wisdom and goodness.

Julian's vision of God is that God is both courteous and familiar. Like the ideal medieval knight or courtier, God protects and rules Julian. But at the same time, God is familiar, as familiar as a father or mother or brother. God loves from from a lordly distance, but God also loves us right where we are. Julian's meditations of sufferings of Christ continually remind us to the depths of God's love for us, meeting us in our want and sufferings.

Julian considers our life in three stages as Christians: we are born, we grow, and then we are completed. And she believed the persons of the Trinity were involved intimately in each stage. God the Father, she believes, gave us our nature. In God the Father, we are "sustained and blessed" to be alive, a gift that the Father planned to give us "through our making before time began."

Looking to our completion, our life with God, Julian believes God the Holy Spirit provides us with the grace and rewards of heaven. The Holy Spirit confirms the work of our lives; "in him and by him we are powerfully raised from hell and out of the wretchedness of earth and gloriously brought up into heaven and blessedly united to our essential being, increased in riches and nobility by all the virtue of Christ and by the grace and operation of the Holy Ghost⁶." Wow.

God the Father created us in our nature; God the Holy Spirit completes us in grace. But at the present time, we are double creatures. Our essence is from God the Father, but we are also sensory beings: we feel things, we see things, we taste and smell and hear things. We feel pain and pleasure. And Julian experiences God the Son, who became like us, and suffered like us, and died like us, as the person of the Trinity who provides us the mercy we need for this life.

Julian experiences Christ's love in such a profound way that she experiences this love as deep as a mother's love. Let me read you two passages:

We know that our mothers only bring us into the world to suffer and die, but our true mother, Jesus, he who is all love, bears us into joy and eternal life; blessed may he be! So he sustains us within himself in love and was in labor for the full time until he suffered the sharpest pangs and the most grievous sufferings that ever were or shall be, and at the last he died. And when it was finished and he had born us to bliss, even this could not fully satisfy his marvelous love; and that he showed in these high surpassing words of love, 'If I could suffer more, I would suffer more.'⁷

Julian recalls our human mothers sometimes allow us to fall or be hurt for our own benefit, but would never put us in real danger. Jesus's love is like that. And sometimes we feel shame and fear because of our own "wretched sin."

Julian writes:

But then our kind Mother does not want us to run from him, there is nothing he wants less. But he wants us to behave like a child; for when it is hurt or frightened it runs to its mother for help as fast as it can; and he wants us to do the same, like a humble child, saying, 'My kind Mother, my gracious Mother, my dearest Mother, take pity on me. I have made myself dirty and unlike you and I neither may nor can remedy this without your special help and grace.' And if we do not feel that we are immediately given help, we can be sure that he is behaving like a wise mother, for if he sees that it would be more beneficial for us to grieve and weep, with sorrow and pity he allows it to continue until the right moment, and all for love. So then he wants us to take on the nature of a child which always naturally trusts the love of its mother in weal and woe.⁸

I must finish up. But I am so happy to have seen Julian's vision of the Trinity, one God in Three Persons each actively working to enclose us in love and be enclosed within us, each Person in their own way bringing us into life, through life, and to the life eternal.

Let me finish with one final thought from Julian. As she is caught by this showing of God "our clothing, wrapping us for love, embracing and enclosing us for tender love" God points out a little thing in the palm of her hand. It was the size of a hazelnut. And she wondered what it was. And God answered, "It is all that is made."

And to Julian it looks so small and fragile, it could disappear at any moment. Would it last? Could it last? And the answer comes to her mind:

‘It lasts and will last for ever because God loves it; and everything exists in the same way by the love of God.’ In this little thing I saw three properties: the first is that God made it, the second is that God loves it, the third is that God cares for it.⁹

And just as God cares for “all that is made,” I want to remember that God cares for you. I have brought some hazelnuts with me, and I want to give one to each of you so that you will remember: God made you, God loves you, God cares for you.

Praise be to God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Julian of Norwich (1998-08-27). *Revelations of Divine Love (Penguin Classics)* (p. 42). Penguin Books Ltd. Kindle Edition.

² *Ibid.*, p 43.

³ From *The Apostles’ Creed*

⁴ From *The Athanasian Creed*

⁵ Julian of Norwich (1998-08-27). *Revelations of Divine Love (Penguin Classics)* (p. 130). Penguin Books Ltd. Kindle Edition.

⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 138-139.

⁷ *Ibid.* p 141. The quotation at the end is from one of the showings.

⁸ *Ibid.* pp 143-144.

⁹ *Ibid.* p 47