

Love's Twist
Sunday, March 29, 2020

What a hard week it has been. And hard is an understatement. You don't need me to restate the statistics which have confronted us – the numbers ill, the numbers dead, the unmet needs of hospitals, the numbers out of work. The number of people afraid is probably the one statistic I haven't seen, but perhaps it goes without saying, because how can we not be afraid? We are afraid for our own physical health and the health of all whom we love, we are afraid for our own mortality and for all whom we love, we are afraid for our livelihoods, and beyond our immediate connections we are afraid for all who are living – and dying – through these times.

I always wish that my ordination came with a magic wand to wave away fear and the circumstances which make us afraid. But that isn't in my – or anyone's – power. And though there are always times when fear grips our hearts, this is the first time in most of our memories that we have all felt this fear together.

But though it's new to us, we are not the first to go through times of such deep and widespread fear. Covid19 is often spoken of as a new plague, so I looked to a writer from another time of plague and I think she has something to say to us from her experience centuries ago. Julian of Norwich was born in England in the village of Norwich in 1342. When she was about 6 years old, the Black Death swept through her town, the first of five episodes of the disease during her lifetime. About 1/3 of the population of England died from the plague. In Norwich, the death toll was even higher, with about half the town or 13,000 people dying between 1348 and 1350. Julian herself became ill when she was about 30. Her parish priest anointed her for dying and her mother thought that she had died and closed her eyes. During this time when she lay motionless, Julian felt herself taken out of her body and offered visions of a God of boundless love. After 12 hours she opened her eyes and lived – lived for another forty or more years. But the visions changed her life and the lives of those around her. She left her home – and since she was in her 30's and able to do this, scholars speculate that she had lost her husband and children to the plague – and she moved into a little room attached to her parish church. She became an anchoress – anchored to this place – committed to staying in this room, into which she was walled. There were two windows, one into the sanctuary where she could participate in services and one to the outside world through which she received meals, counseled visitors, and contemplated the world of nature, in which she perceived the divine love she had experienced. There she also wrote an account of her vision, *Revelations of Divine Love*, the first book in English written by a woman.

Life in those days was hard. In addition to fearing and suffering from waves of plague, people lived with poverty, inequality, the 100 Years War with France, food scarcity, and religious division. The church didn't offer hope, but preached of a vengeful God who was punishing people for their sins with these hardships and who might continue these punishments in the afterlife. So Julian's vision of divine love was like soft rain falling on a dry land. In her most famous vision, Julian saw something very small, about the size of a hazelnut lying in the palm of her hand. "What may this be?" she wondered. "It is all that is made," God replied. Seeing how small it is, Julian worried. So easily it could be destroyed or lost. But the response came to her, "It lasts and ever shall last because God loves it" (*Julian 292*). She understood this vision as being about the world – the world, like the hazelnut in her hand, rests in this love. Love holds it and keeps it. Love holds us and keeps us.

But Julian was a realist. She wasn't suggesting that love, no matter how powerful, could protect us from the plague or other ills. "If there is anywhere on earth a lover of God who is always kept safe, I know nothing of it, for it was not shown to me," she wrote. "But," she continued, "this was shown: that in falling and rising again we are always kept in that same precious love." The knowledge of this love cannot change our circumstances. But our trust in this love changes our response to those circumstances.

Julian's visions offered such hope to the people of her time that until her death, pilgrims traveled to stand outside her cell and ask her wisdom and her blessing. And pilgrims still visit her cell to stand in the presence of one who has offered them comfort. Some of you may remember my friend and colleague Terry Burke who preached for us a couple times. Terry was a wise and deeply grounded person who was diagnosed with lung cancer in 2013. During his treatment, he took a break and traveled to England in part to make a pilgrimage to Julian's cell. He sent me a picture of himself standing there, wearing the Dr. Who scarf I had knitted him instead of a normal prayer shawl – Terry drew wisdom and strength from many sources. Terry knew that not all was well, but during the course of his illness he was able to rest in the love which held him, knowing that as Julian wrote, "And all shall be well. And all shall be well. And all manner of things shall be well," maybe not well with his own individual survival but well with his spirit, well with the wellness of Life with a capital "L."

So how do we rest in that Love? Julian's cell and its windows offer us a model. First, the cell. Julian placed herself in her cell so that she could be anchored in love. We too have to be willing to be anchored, to be still. Just as a plant can't put down roots if we keep pulling it up and moving it around, so we have to stop our rushing and giving into distractions and take the time to sit and be and breathe. Perhaps this is a time of formal meditation. Perhaps it's a time of sitting

with your morning tea or coffee without *Morning Edition*, *Morning Joe*, or the *Globe*, looking out the window. Perhaps it's a regular walk or yoga practice without headphones or company. However it works for you, it's a time when you are present to yourself without an agenda or a to-do list and listen to nothing beyond your heart. We don't have to wall ourselves up in a cell to anchor ourselves, but we do have to wall off some time to be still.

Second, the windows. One window allowed Julian to join others in worship. We too need wisdom, practices, symbols, and rituals which help to remind us of the love that holds us. Our Sunday morning services, I hope, offer you such rituals and rhythms. In addition, you might take on a practice of prayer or devotional reading to feed yourself with the words of others who have walked these same roads of hope and fear. I read Andrea LaSonde Anastos' daily meditations in the morning and poetry in the evening. The poems of Barbara Crooker, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Mary Oliver, and Wendell Berry especially speak to me at this time. What authors speak to you? Perhaps you could share them in the comments and chat boxes so we can learn from each other.

The second window looked out on the town. Through it Julian could see trees and grass, flowers, fields, birds and animals, as well as people going about their business. Like the hazelnut in her palm, the view reminded her of the sacredness of all life no matter how small. And through that window she also connected with other people, sharing her wisdom, receiving wisdom and care from them. So do we need to be connected with one another, even if through windows and screens. These practices all help to give our lives the twist they need to rest in love.

Love will not stop disease nor protect our bodies from what may come. We are mortal. But love does offer our spirits a softer journey over the road we travel, cushioning us from the fear for the future which makes the present worse. Love's twist, like the Mobius strip, rounds our lives into a wholeness comprehending all. Let us rest in this love whatever the coming days may bring.

- Pamela M. Barz