

The Fifth Word “I am thirsty”

Luke 7:36-50

As I prepared for this meditation I found myself at my bookshelf or to be more accurate I should say I found myself in the middle of my study where I am blessed by full bookshelves all round.

I stood at the tallest stack and found myself drawn to what appeared to be a humble little volume, *Revelations of Divine Love*. Julian of Norwich, who was a Christian mystic (which means she had been raised to a high degree of contemplative prayer), received several revelations on the 8th of May, the third Sunday after Easter in 1373. At the time she was thirty and a half years old and she was said to have been mature in her faith. It is in her 8th revelation that she contemplates the pitiful suffering of Christ as he dies, his discolored face and dried up body (p87).

Julian of Norwich describes “I saw his dear face, dry, bloodless and pallid with death... for me his passion was shown primarily through his blessed face, and particularly by his lips”. With this image in her mind she describes how the words of Christ dying came to mind... “I thirst”.

She saw that Christ was thirsty in a twofold sense, physical and spiritual (p 88) and later describes “His thirst: his love and longing for us that goes on enduring until the Day of Judgement... His thirst and loving longing is to have us all, integrated in him, to his great enjoyment”. (p108)

At first when I thought of Christ’s thirst I agreed with the twofold interpretation, the concrete physical thirst, and then, the more abstract spiritual thirst. But I was thinking of this as a spiritual thirst for a closer relationship with God, remembering “ the Fourth Word” (My God why hast thou forsaken me) and thinking he had experienced a sense of disconnection from his father at that time. But here is the thing... he **is** God so why would he be yearning for a closer relationship with himself?

Julian of Norwich identified the spiritual thirst as a love and longing for us, and so there is Jesus on the cross, in pain, dying, drying up and basically saying “I love you so much”. Then John says his last words were ‘It is accomplished’ and he breathed out his life. As if this is what he came to do.

Why is it that God had to communicate it to us this way? In our Fall discussion group with Kees we tried to understand this, we tried to identify whether there was another way Christ could have gotten the message across. What if he came in to the world today and was trying to get us all to understand that we have to love one another? What more could he do to get this message across, without dying or being assassinated. Was there any other way that would have been more effective?

And why would God yearn for us? Does he need us?

One of my favorite Thomas Merton rants...

I will digress, and tell you that Thomas Merton was a very cool Trappist Monk who, after following a rather adventurous and sometimes tumultuous adolescence with aspirations to become a famous writer, experienced an awakening spirituality that led him leave all worldly possessions and aspirations behind to enter a monastery in the Southern US. In this monastery, in Kentucky, he planned to lead a cloistered life.

Of course as it happened, once he had become a Trappist monk given his life to God and had given up all his previous aspirations for fame, he promptly became a famous writer. He wrote numerous best sellers and it is from his autobiographical best seller, a book which has continued as a best seller for the past half a century, that I quote.

This is from “The Seven Story Mountain” first published in 1948. In fact it is not Thomas Merton’s rant this time but his father’s that he is communicating to the reader. Merton was born in 1915, as he describes it

“in the shadow of some French mountains on the borders of Spain. Free by nature, in the image of God, I was nevertheless the prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness, in the image of the world into which I was born. That world was the picture of Hell, full of men like myself, loving God and yet Hating him, born to love Him, living instead in fear and hopeless self-contradictory hungers”.

Both of Merton’s parents were artists, his father a painter and it is he that is described here:

“Father was not afraid to express his ideas about truth and morality to anybody that seemed to need them-that is, if a real occasion arose. He did not, of course, go around interfering with everybody else’s business. But once, his indignation got the better of him, and he gave a piece of his mind to a shrew of a French-woman, one of those spiteful sharp-tongued bourgeoises, who was giving free expression to her hatred of one of her neighbors who very much resembled herself.”

He asked her why she thought Christ had told people to love their enemies. Did she suppose God commanded this for His benefit? Did He get anything out of it that he really needed from us? Or was it not rather for our own good that he had given us this commandment? He told her if she had any sense, she would love other people if only for the sake of the good and health and peace of her own soul, instead of tearing herself to pieces with her own envy and spitefulness”.

And then Thomas Merton quotes *“It was St. Augustine’s argument, that envy and hatred try to pierce our neighbor with a sword, when the blade cannot reach him unless it first passes through our own body”*. (p 60)

Merton later describes, *“God has willed that we should all depend on one another for our salvation, and all strive together for our own mutual good and our own common salvation. Scripture teaches us that this is especially true in the supernatural order, in the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ”* (p 194-195).

Through key relationships he developed at Columbia University, and through what he describes as “the level of common and natural and ordinary things” along with the “fundamental instinct of fear of self preservation”, Merton describes a fermentation that took place in the context of relationship with his friends, he describes “sharing of our own ideas and miseries and headaches and perplexities and fears and difficulties and desires and hangovers and all the rest” (p195). Through this fermentation Merton comes to the realization that “the only way to live was to live in a world that was charged with the presence and reality of God”.

Merton recognized this while at Columbia University and at that time he identifies this was still just an intellectual realization. Later when as a Trappist monk, he is reflecting back on this time, he writes

“this intellectual realization had not yet struck down to the roots of my will. The life of the soul is not knowledge, it is love, since love is an act of the supreme faculty, the will, by which man is formally united to the final end of all his strivings by which man becomes one with God” (208-209).

And so in Luke 7 when Jesus says to Simon, in essence, that love is what it is all about. He says “And so, I tell you, her great love proves that her many sins have been forgiven”.

Interesting word choice, he did not say because she shows great love her sins will be forgiven he says that her great love proves that she **has** been forgiven, as if forgiveness is a part of the process towards capacity for great and Godly love.

There is this spiritual thirst as Jesus hangs dying, he is yearning for relationship with us, he is yearning to bring us blessedness and he knows that if we could just LOVE, instead of tearing ourselves to pieces with our own festering psychologies, if we could just love one another, wish each other well, experience loving kindness, that it would be good, for the sake of the good... and health ... and peace of our own souls as well as others and for the whole world. Amen

Refs:

Julian of Norwich, Revelations of Divine Love, Translation by Clifton Woltors, Penguin Books Ltd, London, 1966

The Seven Story Mountain, Thomas Merton, Harcourt Brace and Co, San Diego, 1998