

“While There’s Life, There’s Hope”

May 17, 2020

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1 Peter 3:13-16a; John 14:15-21**

When the woman, who was in her 40s, walked into the small room, the door was locked behind her. The room had two windows, one open to the church, the other to the outside world. In the church to which her room was attached, a Requiem Mass was said for her, because she was now viewed as being “dead to the world.” Because this particular church was called St. Julian’s, located in Norwich, England, the woman henceforth was known as Julian of Norwich. She spent the last twenty-some years of her life in that small room, hearing Mass and receiving Communion through the window to the church, and being present to visitors who came to her outside window for prayer and spiritual counsel.

Julian’s calling to the ministry of an anchorite was a vocation that was valued in medieval Europe. To have an anchorite living in an anchor-hold, a small room attached to the church, was seen as a great blessing to that church and the surrounding community. Aside from her ministry as anchorite to St. Julian’s, we know very little about Julian of Norwich other than what we learn in her writings. She was born in 1342 and died sometime after 1416. When Julian was thirty years old she became seriously ill, and a priest gave her Last Rites. When she was near death, she experienced a series of sixteen visions, which she referred to as “showings,” beginning with vivid visions of Christ dying on the cross. She wrote about those visions in a book titled *Showings*, which is the earliest known work written in English by a woman.

In her visions, Christ gave her two key promises that are woven into her writings: “See how I love you!” and “All will be well.” “These...promises of divine love and hope transformed not only Julian’s own life but also her understanding of God, human life, and reality itself.”¹ And the reality of life in 14th-century Norwich was harsh, indeed. Julian was six years old when the Black Plague devastated England in 1348, killing about three-quarters of the population of Norwich. This was the first of three episodes of plague during Julian’s lifetime. Along with plague, war and severe famine brought significant economic and social turmoil. And yet, Julian is best known for saying, “*All will be well..and all will be well, and...every kind of thing will be well.*”²

That is a profound statement of hope! “All will be well” because, writes Julian, “[*All of God’s Creation*] lasts and always will, because God loves it; and thus everything has being through the love of God.”³ As Julian learned, God’s love made known in Jesus Christ is the basis for hope. That is why we can endure uncertainty, suffering, and hardship, for through the abiding love of God, the resurrected Jesus is among us. Because God is faithful, we have hope through the assurance that love will always have the last word.

The 1st Letter of Peter says it this way: “*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the*

¹Lisa Dahill, *40-Day Journey with Julian of Norwich*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 2008), 17.

² Julian of Norwich, *Showings* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978), 229.

³ Julian, 130.

resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Pet. 1:3). For the early Christians in Asia Minor to whom Peter was writing, that “*living hope*” was essential. In Greco-Roman society Christians were seen as a significant threat because they would pray only to the “one true God.” Because Christians wouldn’t pray to the whole pantheon of gods, their pagan neighbors feared that divine retribution would rain down on the whole community! In the Roman Empire, Christians were in danger. Indeed, not long after the 1st Letter of Peter was written, persecution began in earnest. Yet Peter tells them to “stand firm,” for in the resurrection death has been overcome. He writes, “*Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence*” (1 Pet. 3-14b-16a). Many early Christians were willing to die for their faith because their hope ran far deeper than their fear.

“*Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence.*” What an important challenge those words present to us today! How do we “account for the hope that is in us?” When some are saying we could be dealing with this pandemic to some extent for the next two years, how can we be hopeful? Here it’s important, as people of faith, to recognize the difference between hope and optimism. Optimism, a belief that good things will happen in the future, originates within *us* and is grounded in a particular outcome, like getting rid of COVID-19, once and for all. But hope originates from and is grounded in *God*. We don’t conjure up hope; hope for the future is a gift that comes to us, grounded in the love of God, and is realized in the present moment. Hope tells us that no matter our circumstance, no matter the outcome, God is faithful. God’s love is always present and active in and among us.

The poet Emily Dickinson described the gift of hope in this way:

“Hope” is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -
And sore must be the storm -
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm -

I’ve heard it in the chillest land -
And on the strangest Sea -
Yet - never - in Extremity,
It asked a crumb - of me.

Hope is God’s gracious, unconditional, gift. Hope that is anchored in God’s love and defended, as Peter says, “*with gentleness and reverence*” is essential, not just for us as individuals, but as a society. Even before the pandemic hit us, we had a crisis of despair in this country that will only be made worse by the impact of COVID-19 on our economy. In their book “*Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism*” published earlier this year, economists Anne

Case and Angus Deaton chronicle the reasons behind the significant rise in deaths by suicide, drug overdose, and alcoholism, a category known by public health professionals as “deaths of despair.”

According to Case and Deaton, the underlying issues are both economic and social, related to the changing structure of our economy that has led to significant job loss and a decline in wages, especially for people who do not have a four-year college education. Underlying the sense of despair is “the loss of meaning, of dignity, of pride, and of self-respect that comes with the loss of marriage and of community.”⁴ Case and Deaton call this phenomenon, “social disintegration.”

Disintegration. The sense that the fabric of our lives, individually and collectively, is being torn to pieces. That things are falling apart. None of us likes to be there. And that is precisely what many of us are experiencing today, regardless of our social and economic circumstances. But, in her book called *When Things Fall Apart*, the Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön says that such times of transition and uncertainty can be life-giving. She writes:

Life is a good teacher and a good friend. Things are always in transition, if we could only realize it. Nothing ever sums itself up in the way that we like to dream about. The off-center, in-between state is an ideal situation, a situation in which we don't get caught, and we can open our hearts and minds beyond limit. It's a very tender, nonaggressive, open-ended state of affairs.⁵

When things fall apart, “we can open our hearts and minds beyond limit.”

That's what happened to Julian of Norwich. At the point of death, her time of greatest vulnerability, the time of transition, her heart and mind were broken open beyond limit by sixteen visions. In those visions she experienced firsthand the love of Christ, a love that was deep, tender, and intimate. Through the depth of that love, Julian received the gift of hope. She knew that “all will be well.” That love and that hope saved her life, and so transformed her that she chose to spend her last twenty years in a small room attached to a church, with a window to the church and a window to the world, writing about what she had learned. Julian's great work, *Showings*, was born in that little room where she was nourished by Christ's love, through the church. She shared that love with those with whom she spoke, one person at a time, at her outside window, and with those who read her words today, 600 years later.

We, too, have a window to the church and a window to the world. God's love saved Julian. God's love will save us, too. Keep your window open to the church and to the Word of God. Be nourished by this promise from Jesus Christ, who on the night before he died told his disciples, “*I will not leave you orphaned....because I live, you also will live*” (John 14:18-19).

And keep your window open to the world. Share the love of God with each person you encounter, one person at a time. Now, more than ever, we need to be tender-hearted, following Christ's commandment to “*love one another*” (John 13:34). As St. Theresa of Calcutta said, “Not all of us can do great things, but we can do small things with great love.” That will be our

⁴Anne Case and Angus Deaton, *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 8.

⁵Pema Chödrön, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 2002), 14.

salvation. In a time of pandemic 600 years ago, Julian of Norwich wrote words that have great wisdom for us, today: *“The love of God creates in us such a unity that when it is truly seen, no man can separate himself from one another.”*⁶ Our essential unity through God’s love for all Creation is the basis for our hope. Julian said it this way in the concluding portion of her reflection:

So I was taught that love is our Lord’s meaning. And I saw very certainly in this and in everything that before God made us he loved us, which love was never abated and never will be. And in this love he has done all his works, and in this love he has made all things profitable to us, and in this love our life is everlasting. In our creation we had beginning, but the love in which he created us was in him from without beginning. In this love we have our beginning, and all this shall we see in God without end.⁷

Amen.

⁶ Julian, 309.

⁷ Julian, 342-3.