

3.11.2020 Lenten mid-week homily
2 Corinthians 5:16-21; John 17:20-26

Pastor Timothy McKenzie
(Julian of Norwich)

“All Shall be Well”

Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

The theme of this year’s Lenten Mid-Week Services is “Staying Close to Jesus.” In addition to scripture, each week we are focusing on the words of a Christian writer from the history of the church who also “stayed close to Jesus.” There is an insert in today’s bulletin with a brief reading by this week’s writer, Julian of Norwich (c.1342-c.1416) from her book *Revelations of Divine Love*. I have included some very brief biographical information about Julian as well as a recommended Oxford University edition of her book with a marvelous introduction and new translation.

In order to understand Julian’s writings, a bit of introduction about her and her medieval world is perhaps helpful. Julian was born in 1342, which made her a contemporary of Chaucer. Julian lived as an anchoress in Norwich, England, which is why she is known as Julian of Norwich. An anchorite or anchoress was usually a priest or a nun who had made a vow to completely renounce the world and live a solitary life. This practice of a solitary life of prayer developed in the Desert Fathers of the early church, who were more like hermits, living apart from the world. However, the self-imposed solitary confinement of an anchorite became a unique aspect of medieval religious life.

The life of an anchorite or anchoress was a very special kind of solitary life, because it usually meant living in a room in a monastery or attached to a church, which was completely sealed off from the rest of the community. There would usually be an exterior window that allowed people in the community to come to the anchorite or anchoress for advice, counsel and prayer. Food would be conveyed through the window or through a slot in an adjoining door. Holy Communion was allowed.

However, to modern people, the most uncomfortable aspect of this self-renunciation of the world and utter rejection of life was the idea that they had died to the world. The anchorite lived in this room and spent the day primarily in silence and in prayer. Julian of Norwich was an anchoress who lived in a room attached to the parish church of Norwich, England.

In May 1373, Julian was gravely ill, and thought she would die. She held a crucifix before her eyes and suddenly blood began to trickle down from Christ’s crown of thorns. This vision began a

series of sixteen visions. Julian recovered from her illness and wrote these visions down in a book titled *Revelations of Divine Love*. Her book is the earliest surviving book in the English language written by a woman. In her visions, she conceived a loving and compassionate God, who is merciful and forgiving. Julian came to understand that human sinfulness is necessary if we are to know our redeemer, Christ Jesus.

The reason I chose this text during Lent is that Julian is primarily concerned with our human sinfulness and Christ's mercy and love. During Lent, like Julian, we remind ourselves that though we may not be sealed into a room, we are sealed into something called "human life." During Lent we pray, fast and give as reminders of our limited time. We are not sealed into a room, but these forty days of Lent give us a small amount of time to think and pray about our sinfulness and the grace and love of God for each of us.

In today's first reading, Paul writes, "*So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!*" During Lent we remember that through baptism into Christ, we are each forgiven, made well, and made new. We give thanks that God reconciled the world to himself, not counting our trespasses against us. During Lent we remember God's deepest love in which, as Paul writes, "*we might become the righteousness of God.*"

Jesus speaks of this in John's gospel when he prays about the unity of the Father and the Son, and the unity that we as believer also share with God. Jesus prays that we "may all be one" so that we might share the love that the Father and the Son share.

I believe this is what is animating Julian of Norwich's words. For Julian it is the Passion and suffering of Christ that is alive in us, purging us of sin. For Julian, human sin and suffering is what drives us to ask for God's mercy and forgiveness.

We dwell on our sinfulness during Lent, to remind ourselves that, using Julian's words, "*All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.*" These words about being well don't simply mean that everything will be "fine," but that all of us shall be *made well* – that all creation, and all manner of things will be made well. In this sense "all shall be well." Like Paul's words, "to be in Christ is to be a new creation." God is doing something new for each of us no matter our circumstances, our fears, our anxieties – to be in Christ is to have already conquered death, and to walk in the reality of the resurrection.

Julian wrote that we are "set at nought" meaning that in following the way of Jesus, we are

reduced to nothing, and this is what purges us of our sinful suffering. Julian's vision is that following the suffering example of Christ is redemptive suffering for us. It is not simply suffering for suffering's sake. Daily, Christ asks us to deny ourselves in following him, and this is how we can participate in his suffering. By denying ourselves we serve others.

We each face much uncertainty and anxiety as the world faces an unseen and unknown virus. As we walk the way of the cross in Lent, we face a time of testing, a time of trial. The grace that we dwell on during Lent is that in the redemptive love and suffering of Christ, "God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting our trespasses against us." Paul writes that through Christ "we become the righteousness of God." The presence of Christ is what remakes us to live in all moments of testing. The way of the cross is power for today.

And so, Julian writes, "*It is true that sin is [the] cause of all this suffering, but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.*" Amen.

Julian of Norwich (c.1342-c.1416)

Revelations of Divine Love

The thirteenth revelation is that our Lord God wishes us to have great regard to all his deeds that he has done in creating all things with great nobility; and how sin is only recognized by the suffering.

After this, the Lord brought to mind the longing that I had for him before, and that I saw nothing held me back except sin, and I saw that this is so with all of us in general. And it seemed to me that if there had been no sin, we should all have been pure and like our Lord, as he made us; and so, in my folly, I had often wondered before this time why, through the great foreseeing wisdom of God, the beginning of sin was not prevented; for then, it seemed to me, all would have been well. I should have given up such thoughts, yet I grieved and sorrowed over this, unreasonably and without discretion. But Jesus, who in this vision informed me of everything needful to me, answered with these words and said, 'Sin is befitting, but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.'

In this unadorned word 'sin', our Lord brought to mind everything in general which is not good, and the shameful scorn and the uttermost abnegation that he bore for us in this life, and his dying, and all the pains and sufferings in body and spirit of all his creatures - for we are all in part set at nought, and we shall be set at nought, following the example of our master Jesus, until we are fully purged:

that is to say, until our mortal flesh is made as nothing, and all our inward feelings which are not truly good. And in contemplating this, together with all the sufferings that ever were or ever shall be, I understand Christ's Passion as the greatest and most surpassing suffering. And all this was shown in an instant and quickly turned into consolation; for our good Lord did not wish the soul to be frightened by this ugly sight.

But I did not see sin, for I believe it has no kind of substance nor share of being, nor could it be recognized except by the suffering it causes. And, as it seems to me, this suffering is something that exists for a while, because it purges us and makes us know ourselves and ask for mercy, for the Passion of our Lord is a comfort to us against all this, and that is his blessed will. And because of the tender love which our good Lord has for all who shall be saved, he comforts us readily and sweetly, meaning this, 'It is true that sin is [the] cause of all this suffering, but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.'

These words were said very tenderly, indicating no kind of blame for me or for anyone who will be saved. So it would be most unkind to blame God or marvel at him because of my sin, since he does not blame me for sin.

And in these same words, I saw a marvellous and exalted mystery hidden in God, a mystery which he will make openly known to us in heaven, in which knowledge we shall truly see the reason why he allowed sin to come about; and in the sight of this we shall rejoice in our Lord God forever.

Book recommendation:

Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*. (Barry Windeatt trans.) Oxford University Press, 2015.

Julian of Norwich (c.1342-c.1416) lived as an anchoress in Norwich, England, and after recovering from a serious illness she described visions that had come to her in 1373 during her suffering. She conceived of a loving and compassionate God, merciful and forgiving, and believed in our ability to reach self-knowledge despite sin. She wrote of God as our mother, and was a strikingly independent thinker. *Revelations of Divine Love* is the earliest surviving book in the English language written by a woman. Though little is known about her life, she is one of the most celebrated figures of the English Middle Ages, and esteemed as one of the profoundest thinkers of this period.