

5.8.2022 Easter 4 (Commemoration of Julian of Norwich)

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Acts 9:36-43, Psalm 23, Revelation 7:9-17, John 10:22-30

“Jesus is the Good Shepherd”

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

A blessed Mother’s Day to all mothers, all the mothering figures, and all the mentoring women in our lives. There are many feminine images of God in the Bible, and of course, Mary is the example of motherhood we might think of today. Indeed, the early church called Mary the *theotokos*, the “Mother of God.” However, today on the church calendar, we also commemorate a woman named Julian of Norwich (c.1342-c.1416), a 14th century English theologian and the author of the Christian spiritual classic, *Revelations of Divine Love*. This book is the earliest work known to have been authored by a woman in the English language. I recommend the Oxford University Press edition with a marvelous introduction and a new translation.

Julian of Norwich was born in 1342, which made her a contemporary of Chaucer. Julian was an anchoress, someone who had made a vow to completely renounce the world, living a solitary life of prayer enclosed in a single room. In May 1373, Julian was gravely ill and thought she would die. She held a crucifix before her eyes and saw a vision of blood trickling from Christ’s crown of thorns. Julian, however, recovered from her illness and recorded the sixteen visions she received from Christ in her book titled *Revelations of Divine Love*.

I mention Julian of Norwich today not only because she is commemorated on May 8th, and continues to be a theological mentor to many, but also because Julian wrote a great deal about the motherhood of God. For example, Julian writes,

So Jesus Christ who does good in return for evil is our true mother; we have our being from him where the ground of motherhood begins, with all the precious safekeeping of love that endlessly follows. As truly as God is our father, so truly is Christ our mother... Jesus is our true mother by nature at our first creation, and he is our true mother in grace by taking on our created nature.

Notice what Julian does here. All that is and all that continues to be created is given birth through the eternal Word, the Christ. And by taking on our human nature, Christ gives birth to our life of grace. So Julian could say that Christ is “the true mother of life and of all things.” So it is fitting on Mother’s Day that we remember the life and the love that all mothers share finds its

origin in the love of God. As Mary bore the Son of God, Julian of Norwich helps us see that all that has life has come into being through the Word, the eternal Christ.

Today's gospel text uses the metaphor of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, and Julian herself heard the voice of the Good Shepherd as she lay gravely ill. Not only was she restored to life, but she was given words to share with us about the eternal Word, Christ Jesus.

The Good Shepherd Jesus, leads the sheep to green pastures and to still waters, and Christ prepares a table for all who come to him in the presence of enemies and evil in this world. The images of Psalm 23 are images of a shepherd who cares for and feeds the flock. Even in the darkest valley we fear no evil because we know that the Good Shepherd, Jesus, walks with us. Jesus continues to prepare a table for us at which we receive not simply bread and wine, but at which we receive his body and his blood, the forgiveness of sins, reconciling us to God and to one another.

With profound insight into sacramental theology, Julian writes of the living Easter reality of Christ who feeds us like a mother with his very self.

He could not die any more, but he would not cease from working. So then he has to feed us, for a mother's precious love has made him owe us that. The mother can give her child her milk...but our precious mother Jesus, he can feed us with himself.

Though historically possible, it is very unlikely that Martin Luther read or was even aware of Julian's book. However, I think that Luther would have found a kindred spirit in Julian's understanding of Jesus feeding us with himself, his very body and his blood. In the Eucharist, we receive the real presence of Jesus in the bread and the wine, which is the living mystery of salvation that we actually cradle in our hands.

Julian wrote down the following words she received from Christ in her visions,

‘It is I that the Holy Church preaches to you and teaches you, that is to say, All the health and life of the sacraments, all the power and grace of my word, all the goodness which is ordained in [the] Holy Church for you, it is I.’

Like a mother's love and nurture, the eternal Word, Christ Jesus, feeds us with the bread of heaven, sustaining the church with the sacraments and the word.

In a few moments we will celebrate the holy mystery that is Jesus Christ, the living Word, who says to us over and over, “*This is my body given for you.*” Jesus sustains us with mercy and grace at his holy table so that renewed, we might be sent from this place to feed others. As a loving

mother feeds her children, Jesus feeds us so we might set tables for one another and for our neighbors.

Today as a congregation, we also commemorate the 8th anniversary of St. Mark's Soup Kitchen ministry, which is the outpouring of the real presence of Christ's love for our neighbors through us. We do this because Christ commands us to love our neighbors and to care for "the least of these." We do this because, as forgiven sinners, we are to become light and hope in a dark and despairing world.

In the most well known passage of her book, Julian wrote of our sinfulness as the reason why we know Christ. Julian wrote, "Sin is befitting, but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well." Our sinfulness is befitting; it is what brings us into the presence of Christ, causing us to work for good in this world. As forgiven yet sinful people, we now work to overcome sin, violence and hatred, war and division, because, in Julian's words, we know that following the voice of Jesus, the Good Shepherd – "all shall be well."

Our broken world moves from one crisis to another, yet with Christ, *all shall be well*. Like sheep led to green pastures and through harrowing dark valleys, we know that in Christ, *all shall be well*.

Leave this place again today filled with the motherly forgiveness and grace of Christ.

Leave this place today led by the Good Shepherd.

Leave this place today knowing that with Christ alive in you – *all shall be well*.

Following the Good Shepherd, live as hope for others.

Jesus, our true mother, comes to us saying, "It is I" – *all shall be well*. Amen.