

## 453 | Percolating on Faith | Introduction to Mystics

Project Zion Podcast

**Josh Mangelson** 00:17

Welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts Community of Christ offers for today's world.

**Carla Long** 00:33

Hello, and welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host, Carla Long and you're listening to the series Percolating on Faith where today we're going to be talking about the mystics, but before we jump into that, let's say hi to Charmaine and Tony Chvala-Smith. Hello, Charmaine. Hello, Tony.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 00:49

Hi, Carla. Hi, Carla. Nice to be with you as always.

**Carla Long** 00:52

Ah, as always. You're too kind. And I also think you're a little bit of a liar, but I'll take it.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 00:58

I'm a, I'm a kind liar.

**Carla Long** 01:00

You are a kind liar. Uh, today, a, as I said, we're talking about the mystics. And I think, like, maybe the first place I heard about the mystics was a long, long time ago in Corinne Ware's spiritual types? I don't know if anybody listening here knows about the spiritual types, but there's four different types, at least for her there's a head, so, someone who's a real thinker, there's a heart, someone who's a feeler--you know, those people who cry during church, that's a heart--uh, there's the kingdom, which is like the service oriented people, and there're the mystics, which we're going to talk about today. And I took the quiz, I took the quiz, and I would, didn't, I didn't even get one point in the mystics. Like, I don't understand what a mystic is. I'm head, I'm a heart, I'm kingdom. And I don't even understand that fourth quadrant. So, I'm looking forward to today's podcast to learn more about what it is.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 01:51

Well, I think people are often more a mystic than they may think they are. You know, sometimes when you hear the word mystic you expect, like spooky music in the background to come on, that somehow it's otherworldly. But actually, I think, as we describe it, I think you'll probably recognize some elements of who you are and your relationship with God that actually fits. So, we'll see. We'll see.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 02:19

And, so, maybe just to, just to ask you back, Carla, like, in terms of what we can call the, a mystic tendency. Do, have you ever, like, been, stood there in stunned silence before a beautiful sunset? Or autumn colors? Or before one of your children and just wanted to melt into the moment?

**Carla Long** 02:38

Dang it? Yes. Don't tell me I'm a mystic? Oh, my gosh!

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 02:47

Well, I think that's one of the places we would want to go is in different ways of describing what a mystic is. And, Tony, if you want to start first and then I'll bring in maybe another one as well.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 03:00

So, the, the term mystic, and mysticism, is this big broad term that covers a number of phenomena in religion and in Christianity in particular. Um, it's some, it's a bit of a tough, difficult term to, to nail down actually. But generally, when, when we use the term mystic, so, for example, when in our History of Christian Thought One class we ask students to pick a mystic from a list and you're going to journal with that mystic for the next seven weeks. The people we're talking about are Christian thinkers and practitioners who, who have this common trait of yearning for something like union with the Divine. Um, a, Evelyn Underhill, who is a great 20th century Christian spiritual writer. And in many ways, herself, a mystic describes mysticism as the art of union with the real. Uh, I think I would modify it a bit, say, it's the art of ongoing seeking of union with Ultimate Reality, ie God. So there's an element of the surrendering of the self to the Divine that makes a person a mystic, that, a yearning for that.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 04:19

Or an intertwining of the self with God. It's another way of thinking about it. So, another way that one might, uh, describe a mystic are those who have made their relationship with God the primary focus of their life. In, so, in, in, as we're looking at historic mystics in their time and ours, um, some of them may have seemed extreme or even kooks. Um, I mean, sometimes people write off mystics that way in our time. They look at peop, you know, some of the historical figure and they, figures and they looked at their language or, you know, their, their situation and it's like, Whaaaat? I don't get this at all, right? Um, you know, you think about the, the Desert Fathers and Mothers who are, what third to fifth century, who basically leave everything and go out into the Egyptian or the Syrian desert, to, to focus, to focus in on their relationship with God. To leave everything behind. And to do that and, and it comes out of, almost always for those who are mystics that, that went into the desert, because not all who went into the desert to have this kind of time we wouldn't necessarily call mystics, but they, they wanted to let all the parts of their life be engaged with God. And so that's kind of maybe an extreme, uh, image of mystics, but many of us are trying to do that as well. A, as we are encountered by God, there's this need to respond and to let God into all these different parts of who we are. And so, you know, the mystics are those who maybe had the opportunity or maybe opportunity to let that be a bigger part of their life than some of, some of us can.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 06:18

So, if you, if we were to go back into the ancient or medieval church, um, and say, you know, like, go, go to a monastery or convent in the 12th or 13th century, if, if you said, Okay, mystics lineup over here, everybody would have said, What? In other words, we, when we use the term mystic to describe a certain type of spirituality, we're, we're, we're using a handle that many of the practitioners wouldn't have understood themselves. But if we, if we understand it as this deep yearning to bring the whole of the person from the depths of the, of the soul into this relationship with God, then, yeah, there, there, there were people who, people who tracked more in that direction in the, for example, the medieval

church, people who track more in the intellectual direction, people who tracked more in the, the direction of serving the poor and so on. But, uh, they, they wouldn't have understood the term mystic as applied to them. It just would have been, oh, yeah, Sister So-and-So over here, she's got a really amazing prayer life with God and we sometimes go to her and ask advice and stuff. So, that's, so, we, we're using the term mystic to describe something that the practitioners might themselves not have, have understood.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 07:33**

They wouldn't have seen it as a separate category from, from just living their life as, as honestly with God as they could. One of the things I think, is kind of ironic, both in the past and today, is that, um, while those, uh, Christians who are kind of socialized in their culture might look at some kinds of mystics, as, you know, as I said, kooks or nuts or whatever, uh, both, you know, in the third and fifth century as well as today, and in the Middle Ages, as well. Um, when people came to a place in their own spiritual journey that they, that they didn't understand or maybe it was that, that yearning for God, and they didn't know what to do about it. And they were, you know, feeling like they weren't, uh, being as responsive to God as po, as they wanted to or, they felt some sense of call, the Spirit urging them to act in a certain way. Or, um, you know, as or maybe they became into, what we would now call today, a, a dark night of the soul where it's like, Where is God? I can't feel God. I don't sense God at all. When people got into those times, guess who they went to? They went to the, to these people who, you know, culturally might seem awkward or outside of the norm, to get some ideas on, How do I go deeper? How do I listen to this part of my life. It's so disturbing to me right now or so unfulfilled. Um, so, uh, the mystics have served very practical purposes throughout history, um, particularly when people are at a shift in their own spiritual development and growth.

**Carla Long 09:17**

I think that's a really good point, um, Charmaine, that you know, like, I, too, have gone to mystics, quote, unquote, mystics when I have been in those places like my spiritual director, and my spiritual directors that I've had in the past, they would probably be considered mystics. Um, and I love the idea that, it, it sounds like to me, and correct me if I'm wrong, that mystics just want to make the relationship with God the most important relationship in their lives, just really work hard on that relationship with God. And I, I think that sounds like a pretty cool notion. I think that sounds like a really difficult thing to do. Um, and because it might seem a little bit lonely sometimes and it could be, it could be really, uh, it could feel one sided I'm sure at times. So it, it could be very difficult.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 10:03**

Yeah. And, and the thing is that for many mystics who, who choose that to be their primary identity, whether or not they call themselves that, um, there is this willingness, this hunger, to, to let this relationship with God be that thing that's always puzzling them, that is always inviting them to, to live their life more fully. Um, and, so, it's, it's the puzzle of life for some people and how do, how do we, um, live it as honestly as we can. Uh, so, it's not seen as an obligation or negative in any way, but, but this thing that is calling me to put my life into it.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 10:49**

Charmaine just used the word hunger, which is a great, it's a great word here, and it's, it's reminded me of a Springsteen song, everybody's got a hungry heart. And, you know, in, in, in, in terms of Christian theology and spirituality, yeah, everybody's got a hungry heart. The mystic is the person who wants to explore the hunger really, really deeply and going to go where, where it takes her or him. And, and so it actually, when you read the, the, the writings of the mystics, and read about their lives, this is not an easy journey. And

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 11:23**

Sorry. (Yeah, go ahead.) Then they sometimes have to look at the ugly stuff inside them.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 11:27**

Absolutely. And, uh, you know, a, a certain pattern evolved as, as people pursued this hunger. And, you know, Underhill identifies three kind of stages in it. But you have to be careful not to think of these as like a three step program. But, you know, it's like, so the first stage is purgation. And that's purgation purging. It's not what you think it is, Carla. But pur, purgation here for the, for the mystic is this kind of learning to see yourself as you really are, to see the stuff inside that actually is, is hindering you pursuing the hunger to God and claiming it and learning to practice a kind of detachment from everything that's claiming your atten, attention. That's the first kind of part of this. The second part she refers to is illumination. And that's, of course, the term light is connected to that, and illumination is this coming to an awareness that I with my hunger and my stuff, exist in God, not that I'm God, but that I am surrounded by this whole, Underhill would call it like a, this whole spiritual landscape that is, like, suffused with God. And so becoming aware of the, the profound reality of God in the midst of all this. And then finally is union. And union, she, she describes it as self-forgetting harmony with God. It's, it's described variously by the mystics, what they experience is union, but it's, they never feed it as a, Oh, gosh, I'm so glad I've had union with God. I'm finally there. No, I, I did purgation three weekends ago and then two weekends ago, I did illumination and now I got union. It's like, no, no, no, no, no, it's, it's these terms describe aspects of this journey. And a number of the mystics will say that, that, this, that, that that part of the journey between illumination and what they're calling union is the hardest part. It's, it's the part where you, uh, end up creeping through the dark. The closer, the closer you get to your beloved, God, the, the darker, the darker the journey gets and thus, the, the, the step, the steps toward union involve a kind of faith without seeing anything at all. That's common in their experience. Um, so

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 13:49**

Or the love, the love of God, loving God, um, without needing to benefit from that in any way. (Hmm.)

**Carla Long 13:55**

Right. You know, as Tony, as you're describing those three different places, I was thinking how easy it could be to get stuck in one of them as well. Like, stuck in purging, you know, like, Oh, I gotta keep cleaning out. Oh, I gotta keep, or the illumination. I feel like, that could also be some, I could be wrong about that, but it feels like that can also be an issue is, like, I can't, I can't continue on this journey until I'm there. And I'm still not there. And I'm still not there. And I'm still not there. I, although the purging does sound kind of fun. You know, sometimes it's really nice to clean it out.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 14:25**

Yeah. And I think that for many of the mystics, this is, these are all ongoing processes, you know, because one of the identifiers, uh, of the mystical life is the willingness to look within and, you know, our reactions to other people, our reactions to inconvenience, um, I mean, little things in each day will drink, draw us back to those things that we let drive us, that make it harder for us to make room for God--our biases, our, our, our desires that are inordinate, you know, not that desires are wrong, but inordinate desires that, you know, we become obsessive, uh, over or that take up more of our time than they should. You know, all of these things are, are ongoing. Uh, we don't stop being human, just because we're on a spiritual journey. And, so, we would, we need to keep coming back. So, you know, for, within spiritual practices, the idea of examine, you know, that each day, the end of the day or the beginning of a day, looking back and looking at those places where, um, I've ignored God's love at work around me or in me, or those places where I have engaged God's love and invited it in. Um, and just being honest about those things. So, so, yeah, we never completely get through any of these steps. These are, these are all, I would say, ways of opening to God. (Uh huh.)

**Tony Chvala-Smith 16:03**

Yeah. Um, a, a number, a number of the mystics, well, let me put it this way. Um, there are parallels in human romantic relationships to what the mystic journey is about. And, so, some of the mystics like Bernard of Clairvaux and Mechthild of Magdeburg, um, they use, i, almost in, almost erotic imagery to describe this or sexual imagery that is, (it's not almost) yeah, it isn't almost. It really is, it's pretty, it's kind of sexual imagery, yet, I'm not even kind of it's, yeah, when you read Mechthild, you think, Uh, yeah, I kind of recognize what's going on here. But the i, the idea is, they, their, their eros ( . . . ) first different kinds of love, eros, in classical Greek, is this desire for union with the object of your attention. And so that's, the object of their attention is God who turns out not to be an object at all, but a subject who is already prompting them in this loving relationship. And, so, what they want is nothing more than to fall completely head over heels in love with God. And so they use imagery that's, uh, about, you know, satisfying the desire and this kind of, it's, it's, it's very, very interesting and unique, unique, imagery, but what they're talking about is intimacy, that the mystic is seeking a level of intimacy with God that's, uh, beyond, beyond the normal, beyond, beyond the normal, uh, beyond, beyond what we call is normal. And, so, um, I, I think it's helpful to see it as a, mysticism as this spiritual path that really, really, really wants to fall deeply in love with the ultimate.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 17:45**

And I think one of the things to kind of make a, um, clear distinction between is that this is not about spiritual experiences. You know, I think sometimes in some churches, um, people are all about this spiritual experience they had or this spiritual experience they had and kind of comparing and contrasting and who, who saw the most angels or who, you know, uh, cried the most. But it's, there's a distinction to be made here because this is not about getting spiritual experiences. This is about inviting God into all the different parts of our lives. And those kinds of experiences may come out of it, but that's not the goal. The goal is to give room for this love that we have for God and God has for us and to let it permeate all the different parts of our lives. So, one of the things, um, that mystics have done for the rest of us over time is to make imaginable going deeper with God. You know, sometimes we, we get to this place in our spiritual journey where it's like, Ahh, there's some, something else going on here and I, and I want to take the next step. I want to say yes to God in a new way. I don't know how to do that. And so, the, the mystics help us with language to, to start putting words to this, so it makes it real, not

some, oh, you know, sometimes we write off our own spiritual sensitivity and awareness, and here are people who are putting language to it for us and then we can start to identify what this is. And then the, the mystics give us some, actually often, concrete ways of responding to this desire to, to let God in more deeply.

**Carla Long 19:56**

So, I mean, every time I think about who the mystics are, my mind automatically goes to the Desert Fathers. And I'm not sure, I'm sure that there's lots, lots more than the Desert Fathers. And I don't know if you want to talk about some mystics in the past that people might have heard of so, maybe, like, they can put a (Yeah.) face to it. I don't know, something like that. So, maybe people can just have an idea of, like, who these people are. And maybe they've read them and didn't even know that they were, um, that we would label them as mystics even if they wouldn't label themselves as mystics.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 20:29**

Good. And I, I think this really gets to one of the, the points about mystics. And this might really be another shift for you, but in many ways, mystics are missionaries. You know, they're writing or they're having someone, uh, dictating to someone to have something, somebody write it down, because they want everybody to know about this path of going deeper with God. And, so, the writers or these sharers of these words, um, they're wanting this experience of relationship with God to be accessible to people. And it's, it's not about drawing attention to them and their experience. Um, that's usually a sign, um, that, you know, someone's having some ego issues if, if that's what they're doing with this desire to go deeper with God. But most of the time, it's, it's about the God part. It's a, they're trying to give some language to that. And, um, one I'm going to read you is Catherine Siena, of Siena and we decided she was, what, around 13

**Tony Chvala-Smith 21:38**

She's in the, yeah, roughly in the 1300s. Yeah.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 21:41**

And I just want to, to read a little bit from her. So, she's, she's written, uh, it's the dialogue and that has all these little chapters in it. And in this one, this is God responding to her. And, so, uh, this is chapter 64. This is Catherine of Siena. I want you to know that everything imperfect and perfect, is manifested and acquired in me. And, so, it is manifested and acquired also by means of your neighbor. Simple folk know this well, because in many cases, they love creatures with spiritual love. If you've received my love honestly without any self interest, you will drink in your neighbor's love in an honest way. It is like filling a jug at a fountain because if you draw it forth from the fountain and drink from it, the jug will be empty. But if you drink from it in me, meaning in God, it will not be empty, but will always be full. In this manner, love of neighbor, spiritual and temporal, ought to be drunk in me without any self interest, this talking about loving the neighbor. I charge you to love me in the same way that I have loved you. You cannot do this for me. Because I have loved you without being loved, without being loved. Every love that you have for me is a love that comes from duty and not from graciousness, because you ought to do it. I love you from graciousness and not from duty. This is why you cannot give me the love that I'm requesting of you. And, therefore, I have put you in the midst of your neighbor so that you can do for him what you cannot do for me, that is to love him without any self interest, from graciousness and

without looking for any benefit. And what you do for him, I consider as done for me. What an amazing way of thinking about loving your neighbor as part of your own relationship with God.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 23:59**

And the, the references to graciousness there, or divine grace, are really important because, um, the, the, when you read the mystics, you, you come to realize that though they, they live often very austere and severe lives and very diffi, they go through all kinds of difficult spiritual journeys and spiritual practices and so on as they try to open themselves increasingly to God. But one of the things you recognize is that as they go, and as they encounter new depths of intimacy with God, they never think they've earned that, right? That is their, their increasing union with God is always graced, it's not a reward. It's not like, Oh, if I just, if I just take a weekend retreat and I do this and this and this and this and this, all of a sudden, that'll be real to me and I will be united with God. Nope, it's not that at all. It's

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 24:48**

It's a slow process, (It's a slow process.) little steps. Um, and it's not about getting that. (Yeah.) It's about trying to respond in, in the little ways, in the little bays.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 24:59**

In fact, some of the, some of the mystics, uh, become, they, they, they can become almost cautious about sen, sensible spiritual experiences, like some kind of feeling of great love for God or some sense when, some moment when you sense God's presence and so on. They don't deny that those things happen. But they, they, they say that, don't confuse that with union with God because union with God comes as a form of, like, uh, divine presence in absence is that (Sometimes.) sometimes and that, and that, um, there, there's a sense of having to abandon the self and its desire for good feelings, uh, in order to ex, experience God in, in a unitive sort of relationship. So, I, again, there's a sort of, there is a sort of analogy in human relationships in that love, romantic love starts as feelings often. But it has to become more than that, right? If it's going to be, it's going to sustain a long journey. And, so, in the same way, for the mystics, they realize that their early experiences of strong feelings for God or with God were great, they, they were starters, uh, but that was not, you can't, you can't make that the goal of the mystic journey. It has to be a little, you know, a little, a little kindness along the way, but the journey takes place in something more like darkness.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 26:26**

Yeah. So, I have another little reading for you. And this is, uh, Bernard of Clairvaux. And he was known as a mystic, but he was, he was a couple of other things as well. He was, he was an administrator. Um, he, he was, um, an overseer of other religious people. And he was a teacher, uh, but he didn't often tell about his own experiences, his own personal Spirit experiences with God. And, he, um, and so this is kind of a, a neat little piece from him. And just a little background is he's what he's doing in this, uh, writing is describing how sometimes he suddenly realizes that Christ is at work in him. And he want, he's exploring how did Christ get in him? How did this happen? He just, like, snuck up on me and there he is and I, you know, and he, and he goes through this whole thing, Did he come in through my ears or through my eyes from what I'm hearing or what I'm seeing, and I, cuz I don't, I don't get how all of a sudden I'm, I'm aware of him at work in me? So, this is, this is just a segment of that. Um, he, he says, I ascended beyond what is highest in me. And look, the word Christ, uh, was still above that. As an avid

investigator, I descended to my lowest depths, and we can all identify with, you know, knowing what some of our lowest steps are. He says, And nevertheless, discovered him still farther down. If I look to the outside, I found him to be far beyond everything that was mine. If I looked within, he was more interior than I was. Then I knew the truth of what I had read that, quote, In Him, we live and move and have our being--Acts 17:28. Someone in whom that word exists, who gives the person life and movement is blessed.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 28:40**

That's a, a really good example, one kind of example of what, uh, Underhill meant by illumination is this awareness. St. Bernard comes to the awareness that, I can't escape God. I can't escape Christ. I can't escape Holy Spirit. Uh, they're, they precede me. They, they ground me. They are above me. They're in me, behind me, in front of me. And that's, I think, that's part of a, a mystic's awareness is, uh, that, that reality actually saturated by God. Now isn't to be confused with God, but is saturated with Divine Presence and the mystics, the mystic says, Oh, dude, I really want to know that more and more. So,

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 29:24**

Yeah. An, another person that some people may have heard of, but not maybe considered a mystic is someone like Dorothy Day who was one of the founders of the Catholic Workers Movement that worked, um, to change society. In the, from, I think her, her dates are like 1920s to 1980. I think she died in 1980. So, very much in our time, who, uh, became a voice for the poor, um, both in government and in marches and, um, but, but also in creating spaces for the homeless. And for those who have been on the, uh, on the lower side, so that very much the Kingdom Builder kind of person as you were talking about earlier, but deeply, deeply, um, rooted in this mystic kind of way of understanding God at work in and through all things and, you know, she challenges the, the government in the ideological views of a country of, in this case the US, and tries to create these, with lots of other people, trying to create these other, uh, mechanisms, other institutions, that, um, remedy some of the, the things that society uses to crush people and, and speaks out against it. And, so, in, she, I think she grew up kind of more in an atheist kind of way as a, an anarchist. And, and then she became, um, she, I think she actually grew up in a, a, an Episcopal background and, but then became Catholic. And, um, she always said, she, she maintained the anarchist part of herself, of, of needing and wanting to change the world into, now, the ki, the kingdom of God. And, um, so, for her, she had a very, um, a very, a deep pattern of spiritual practices and spending certain part of her day in Scripture and in quiet and then, you know, is out there marching or out there bringing the homeless to a, a safe place, feeding people and all of that. Uh, but a, a couple of qui, of quotes from her that I, I think kind of point us in that direction to understanding her as a mystic. One thing she says, she said was, I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least. And another piece, another quote from her is, My strength returns to me with my cup of coffee and the reading of the Psalms. Uh, it's, so it's, it's not this idea of on these emotional highs all the time, but it's really in the trenches and in loving where it's hard to love and in looking at the despair around and yet, um, with her cup of coffee and the Psalms, um, asking God to be with her in, in all that she is doing.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 32:43**

And, and this is actually something that's very characteristic in the Christian mystical tradition. Now, I can't speak for other traditions, but, um, sometimes I hear people say, Oh, I'm a mystic, or, I want to be



a mystic and it's like, you, in the Christian mystical tradition you, you can't, uh, hate the church and hate Christian community and be a mystic, right? In other words, mysticism is never an escape from community. For, for medieval mystics, uh, mysticism is part of their life in community. And, so, you have lots

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 33:16**

Even the deserts, desert mothers and fathers (Yeah.) came together, uh, for worship and to support each other (Right.) and to hear each other and, and to confess to each other.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 33:26**

And people from around the Empire, though this is the late Roman Empire, people from around the Empire heard about them, made trips to Egypt to get some spiritual counsel for them to figure out what to do with their lives. So, in other words, union with God has an immediate social impact. This is true of the Quakers, right? The, the Quaker, the Quakers would, I could identify as a Protestant mystical tradition, but think about the number of Quakers who were involved in the anti-slavery and ab, and abolition movements and women's suffrage, right? So, deep encounter with God, deep sustained intimacy with God has this love of neighbor component. So, uh, that's Catherine of Siena who Charmaine was quoting from earlier, Catherine of Siena, uh, worked to help, uh, help the pope who was in exile, the, it's called the Babylonian ex, exile of the church or the papacy, that the papacy then divided at one point between three popes and had moved to Avignon in Southern France. And Ca, part of Catherine's work was reform work to get, to get the church recentered in Rome. So, lots of times these, uh, Hildegard of Bingen has all kinds of reformist impulses, and, uh, oh

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 34:42**

Many of them challenged the, yeah, the powers that be and, you know, either whether it's ( . . . ) within the church or within their country or nation, uh, to, to send some pretty pointed letters to, to people and say, What are you doing? You know, Where, where are you giving God room in this? And

**Tony Chvala-Smith 34:53**

So, if you self identify as a kingdom of God spirituality that you want to be involved in social change and, and, and social transformations like Yes, amen. Probably you need to check in at the back door because you may be a back door mystic, right? And lots of social reformers have discovered that their social reform movements and, and efforts wear out if they don't have a mystical core, that is if they don't, if they don't find some way like Dorothy Day to reconnect with the divine ground, the divine center of all things. So, so

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 35:38**

Because really, it's about looking at what is that call? What is that disturbed area inside myself that, that says, I need to act. I want to act. I want to make God's love or forgiveness or hope present in this world. Why, where is that, where is that feeling? What are you being driven by? And if you look at what you're driven by, you'll find yourself in conversation with the mystics and your own inner mystic.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 36:08**

Yeah. So, prac, mystical spirituality can, can actually, uh, form you into being a reformer, right? So, for, for example, Meister Eckhart and Jo, Johannes Tauler, these are two important German mystics, they're, uh, 13th, 14th century, uh, their, their connection with God led them to start preaching in German. So, they were reaching out to the average German speaker not to just people, people who spoke church Latin. So, uh, you, you got to be careful with mysticism. It may, it, it may, it may ignite a fuse in you that wants to change the world.

**Carla Long 36:50**

So, it kind of sounds like to me that, you know, the people that you're describing right now, the mystics that are, there is these reformers, like, I, I also feel like I'm a Kingdom Builder, but it does seem like maybe are, the reasons behind it are different, you know, like, we both approach it from such a different way. Or maybe we approach it from very similar ways and I'm just not going deep enough to, um, see that, that, that's where it is. So, that's really interesting for me to, to think about. That's a really cool analogy.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 37:18**

One of the things that the mystics do for us, for all the rest of us who are also, consider ourselves followers of Christ or, or knowers, or lovers of God, is that they give us language to put to these inner things that are happening in us. And I, you know, that's just indispensable as we may have talked about it earlier. John of the Cross, talking about the dark night of the soul, those times that even though we may be fully engaged in, in, uh, Christian life or in serving others, we have these dry times where we, we don't know where God is. And we don't have that sensed, uh, presence, that feeling of, of God with us that we may have had at other times in our lives. And, and, you know, he's given language to help people understand that, that that sense of absence of God is actually a time of growth, hidden growth, like a seed under the soil where it has to, uh, go into darkness in order to germinate. And that some things can happen in these dark nights of the soul that will take us along our, our spiritual path that can't happen any other way. And when, when we come back into the light, we will see that there's things that have shifted and changed within us. So, and that's been such a comfort to so many people who have wanted to know God deeper, followed Christ with their whole lives, but then felt like, Uch, this, this is dry. There's not, why did I ever believe? Is there really a God, you know, because I can't sense it anymore. I can't feel it. I can't see it. So, you know, that's just indispensable. Other mystics, um, giving us some ways to pray. Particularly in those times that are extreme in our lives, when our own words just evaporate. And I don't seem to be going anywhere. And they don't mean anything. The, the mystics often give us whole new ways of letting prayer be real. They give us ways of understanding the inner struggles in us, uh, by naming and describing what happens when we feel guilt and when it becomes bigger and bigger and is suffocating us. They help us to face, um, our own self contempt or self hate. And, you know, some of them, especially some of the women who in their own culture would have been seen as nothing are, you can see them struggling with that, of, you know, their culture saying they aren't anything, but, but underneath that there's a sense that they know their worth because of God's love for them. And so, um, if there's this, these ways, then, that they give people to claim their worth, even though everything around them is telling them they are worthless, and how it empowers them. Um, also, the, the mystics explore and give language to, um, our attempts at self-deception, and are all the creative ways we can be self-centered, and helps to kind of expose all that. And it's, like, Oh, you know, there's some, like Fenelon, uh, who's what year?

**Tony Chvala-Smith 40:55**

Francois Fenelon is late 1600s to around 1715 ( . . . ).

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 40:59**

And, and people write to him with their spiritual issues. And he often has these searing insights that they, you know, as they're reading his letters back to them, I'm sure they're going, Ah, ouch. You know, he completely got it. And oh, my gosh, I didn't want to look at that. And yet, he's right. Um, you know, I'm, I'm trying to pretend that my piety is what makes me right with God rather than acknowledging my weakness, or whatever it is.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 41:33**

I have a good example, a good example of Fenel, Francois, Francois Fenelon was one of my favorites, but someone has, one of his spiritual directees has written him and is going on and on complaining about their spiritual life and how they just wish God would heal them, heal them heal them. And his response to them is, You do not need to be healed. You need to be slain. Now, you got to follow the language. In other words, you, you, you are not practicing the, the detachment from self that the Christian faith calls you to practice. Your, your spirituality is all focused about you getting stuff and feeling good and wonderful, blah, blah. That's not Christianity. It's not about I feel, I feel wonderful all the time. No. Uh, you need to die to self basically is what he's saying. And your, your, your self love is robbing you of the opportunity to become more one with God. So, it's very interesting. He's

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 42:14**

Or to meet the needs of those around you, to, to be compassionate and, and, so, so there's all of these ways, um, you know, when we try to follow Christ, and we know we're, we're not going to be able to do it perfectly. Um, they deal with that. And, so, how do you, how do you keep choosing to go on, um, learning forgiveness, both to give, to give forgiveness and to receive forgiveness? Um, and then what do we do when, when we're overwhelmed by hopelessness and, and death and fear. And, you know, we think of somebody like Julian of Norwich, who was what they called an anchoress. And, so, basically, what an anchorite would do is they would, they basically lived in a little addition added on to, um, a, a big church, a big church building. And they lived in that for the rest of their life. And they would have a window into the sanctuary so that they could participate in the Eucharist each day and see worship of God and be part of the community in that way. And then there was a, a window or a door where the person who helped and helped them clean and bro, brought their food and things could come in. And then there was a window to the outside where they were available to people in the community to listen and to perhaps bring counsel. And Julian of Norwich, we don't really know her name, um, but, uh, she was an anchorite in, uh, the, the town is, is (Norwich) it's Norwich and ( . . . ) Julian is the name of the, the church. (Yeah. St. Julian's church.) Uh, so, so we don't really know who she was. But she was living in a time when there was all kinds of wars and crusades. And here are these, uh, soldiers coming back without limbs, uh, maimed, uh, de, destroyed by the violence of war. Um, and this is also during part of the time of the, of the Black Death, the Black Plague. And, so, she is there to, to be present for people who are suffering and for whom God may not even seem a possibility when everything is so broken. And yet, she's the one that you wo, you might have heard this or seen this written down somewhere where all will be well and all manner of things will be well. Um, that comes

from that time and that kind of ministry. Um, finding and naming God in creation and then making connection with creation. There's Francis, uh, St. Francis who in many ways is a mystic, um, and senses that, that God wants us to be in communication with all that is around us, that the communication it, that the, the nature it, nature itself is speaking, uh, for God and to God. So, there's all of these different, different ways in which the mystics give us a language to bring into reality the things we may be feeling or sensing.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 45:58**

There's, there's one place where I think mystics give us language we have to, we have to be very attentive to and cautious about and that is, uh, medieval ones following, uh, the, the, the line of medieval theology understand that human beings, that we have being and that being is a gift of God who is infinite being. And, so, there's a sense for the mystic, and this is true also for scholastic theologians, that we are because God, God gives us being, and, thus, we, we have something we share with the divine. But the, the key, yeah, the thing you have to be careful of, and sometimes the mystics themselves are not, not as, like Meister Eckhart can be a little bit careless about this sometimes, but we, we have to just cut him some slack for that, but the sense that the divine, the divine ground is actually inside, it's, it's buried in our own depths. And our own existence is itself connected to the Divine ground and to discover that is to discover kind of an endless and infinite source of your worth as a, a person. The danger zone is when you start co, confusing the two, right, that somehow, Oh, the Divine ground is in me. I must be divine. And it's, like, Eh, no, no. Uh, you may, you may, you remember that purgation stuff? No, there's no way your divine, uh, because you've got more purgation to do, right?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 47:27**

But, but the benefit of all of that is, you know, that sense of, of knowing our worth because we are, uh, part of God's own expression in the world, um, i, is that it gives us perspective (Um hmm.) that we might not get anywhere else, both our perspective of our, in, in the most positive sense, indebtedness to God, um, that, that we are not God and yet, this gracious gift of being and of knowing God has been made available to us. And, so, it, you know, when, when the car start, stops running and the toilet backs up and the, you know, the basement is flooding and, you know, when all of the things that annoy us and that, and sometimes they're dangerous, but this is a place to go back to perspective. Who am I in this big picture of who God is in the world? And it can be quite a self righting kind of, uh, practice.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 48:36**

And, as many mystics have argued and shown, to recognize that human, each human being exists because the Divine ground is in them, then slavery should always have been wrong. And sexism should always be wrong. And heterosexism should always be wrong, because, because my neighbor and I are grounded in God. Thus, thus, immediately, fully, completely equal. So, in other words, there's a, a social dimension to this that people like Quakers and, and suffragettes who were, who came from the Quaker background, others, that there's this sense, sense of, uh, you know what, what's happening to you is wrong and you as my sister or brother sh, as we share in the Divine ground, I need to do something about that.

**Carla Long 49:25**

Well, that's just beautiful. I mean, I, I, it doesn't take a mystic, I guess, to figure that stuff out, but I'm really glad that you said it sum, o clearly, you know, there's Divine in all of us. That's im, that's such an important, uh, important point that we should, I think that we should probably be hearing every single day. Everyone has Divine, Divinity within them. Um, well, I've learned a lot about mystics in the last hour.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 49:50

Well, yeah, and, and

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 49:52

I think I'd say everybody, everybody has a connection to the Divine within them and as we

**Carla Long** 49:57

Ah, a connection to the Divine.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 49:59

We don't have a di, we don't have divinity in us as a property of being human. Now as humans we are finite. We, we once didn't exist. We once won't exist again. We, we have

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 50:08

We once were dust, and we will be dust again.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 50:10

And as a student once said, we have an expiration date, right? And, so, it's, there's no sense in which we are gods. Our worth is that God, infinite, holy, boundless love exists within us as well as in all things.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 50:26

Chooses to be in us. It's not like ( . . . ) we're inherently that, but that, that God chooses to be at work in us.

**Carla Long** 50:36

Oh, thank you so much for making that more clear. I thank you. That's very helpful and beautiful.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 50:41

Because Carla, you know me well enough to know that there's no sense in which Tony is divine.

**Carla Long** 50:45

Well, I was gonna say that, but I didn't want to be rude.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 50:48

You beat us both to that.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 50:55

I was like low hanging fruit to pick there actually.

**Carla Long** 50:57

Self deprecating humor is always my favorite kind actually. Uh, well, you two, this has been really, really helpful for me actually. And I, I can, you know, it, this is weird, but I've heard a lot of people say this, extroverts actually, that the pandemic has kind of changed, um, who we are and changed my, I, changed our personalities a little bit. And I actually see myself less of an extrovert than I used to be and maybe more wanting to be in tune with what's going on inside of Carla. So, uh, and I think the pandemic has actually done that to a lot of people. I've heard it at least.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 51:31

Yeah. (Yeah.) Yeah, I think the pandemic has allowed us time to slow down and to pay attention to what's happening in us. And when we do that, we might be surprised, we might be surprised at how much we're already hearing and responding to God, that we may, may or may not know that's what we're, we're calling this. And it, we may find that we actually long for some stillness at times, uh, even though there's this other part of us that, that loves being on the gerbil, gerbil wheel, especially if there's other gerbils in the area. But, you know, it's given us this chance to say, Oh, uh, not only do we have different kind of time, but people had to look inside at our questions of mortality, of vulnerable-ness, to, you know, to disease, but also to, uh, those other inner, uh, discussions that we have with ourselves and we begin to see those and, and maybe not be as afraid of them as we sometimes can be.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 52:42

I, I have a, a short, a short story from the Desert Fathers that, to me, is like, it's like the perfect invitation to the mystical journey. And it goes like this. So, there's this, uh, this Abba Joseph in the desert and Abba Lot comes to Abba Joseph kind of troubled. And Abba Lot says, Abba, basically I need some spiritual counsel here. I read the Psalms, I pray the Psalms, I, you know, I, I, I, I go to the meetings when we have them I, I fast I do all the things I'm supposed to do. What, what more should I be doing? And the story says Abba Joseph stood up and he reached his arms up and extended his fingers toward heaven. And it was as if his fingers had become 10 lamps. And Abba Jos, Abba Joseph says to Abba Lot, If, if you want, you can become all flame. That's the story. You can become all flame. In other words, it's an invitation to, yeah, keep doing what you're doing, but there's so much more depth in the relationship. There, God, God is infinitely deep. There's so many more places you can go. And if you, if you want to go there, uh, every part of you can come to glow with the divine love. That's kind of how I would read the story. So, to me, that's an invitation to the journey of the mystics. If you want, if you want you can go way deeper than you ever imagined.

**Carla Long** 54:11

Abba Joseph, my gosh, you are, you, you're a little trickster. That was, that's a really cool story. Uh, and it makes me want to try that hat. I need a new party trick. Well, thank you again. Say that again, Tony.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 54:32

Don't try it with lighter fluid, please.

**Carla Long** 54:36

I'll try and do it Abba Joseph's way someday. Uh, I have, I have three free weekends, you know, I'll, I'll go through the steps each weekend. I'll just try and make it to union by the end of the month. Uh, well, thank you, both of you, for that. Is there anything you want to add that we haven't talked about?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 54:52

I, I think just that there are so many mystics through time. And I think even as we look back to Judaism, there were mystics within Judaism before Christianity was even a conception. And, so, this idea that there are these people who have, throughout time, had and been able to, to act on this longing to go deeper with God and to benefit the whole community, that that's, that's been there, um, always in people's interactions with God. So, to, to not see it as something new and strange, but it's really part of maybe a particular calling within Christian community.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 55:37

And the only thing I have to add is for people who are interested in going deeper with this, I think a nice place to start is, is a book by Bernard McGinn. Bernard McGinn currently is the scholar to go to to understand mysticism. But he wrote, he has this book called The essential Writings of Christian Mysticism, and it's an excerpt from mystics' writings and experience across time, and it's very, very, very helpful book with a great introduction to mysticism and, uh, wonderful, wonderful excerpts from different mystics.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 56:07

So, that's the other piece I would want to add is that there are so many different mystics. Go out and, and find out about some of them or listen to future podcasts about them, um, because each one has their own story. You know, they, they can't just be all amalgamed into a mystic. They have their own particular time and their own story and their own way of trying to, to claim and live this relationship with God. So, they're each individually fascinating and there's much to learn.

**Carla Long** 56:41

Awesome. Thank you so much, you two. This has been fascinating. I really have enjoyed it and I've really learned a lot. So, you two are awesome. Thanks again.

**Josh Mangelson** 56:52

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