

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 today you're listening to Percolating on Faith, but it's a very special edition of Percolating on Faith. We've been looking at a lot of the different mystics, um, in the past. And today, you'll have a very familiar voice talking to you about one of those mystics. So, let's all welcome back. Hi, Tony. Thanks for being here.

Tony Chvala-Smith 00:56

Hi, Carla. It's a pleasure to be with you and to talk about Julian of Norwich.

Carla Long 01:00

Julian of Norwich. I'm so excited to learn more about her. And, I must admit, something about her name makes me hungry. I think it must just be the sandwich thing.

Tony Chvala-Smith 01:10

I'm sure you can get a good sandwich in Norwich. But, uh, yeah, at, what if I told you, Carla, that that's not really her name, and that we don't actually know her name. But she, (Oh!) she was named after the Church of St. Julian where she was an anchoress and we can talk about that later, but

Carla Long 01:28

Yeah, I, oh, gosh. Tony, you've already jumped into Julian. So, let's just, let's just go for it. So, um, tell me more about what an anchoress is? Or however you want to start. Let's just get going.

Tony Chvala-Smith 01:39

Well, sure. And, and, I'm, I'm glad to offer this in this, uh, series on mystics. And Julian is one of my interests. Um, we have students, Charmaine and I have students, both undergrad and grad students, uh, read and encounter Julian because she is a remarkable, remarkable thinker from the Middle Ages whose works, really, I say, I say works, her one work, The Revelations of Divine Love, has kind of come into its own in the last 50, 60 years. Um, so, she's quite worth knowing and is, in some respects, theologically a revolutionary figure in, in the Middle Ages, though, wouldn't have been even, hard, would hardly have been known then. And her revolutionary thought escaped this, escaped the notice, apparently, of church authorities who might not have liked it so much. So, now, there's a little bit of intrigue in this. But (. . .) I'll tell you some basics about, about Julian, I'm going to call her Julian. Uh, that's what everybody calls her. And she is an otherwise unknown English anchoress. And let's see, I mentioned, her name is derived from the Church of St. Julian to which she was attached. Now, what do I mean by attached? So, I called her an anchoress. And, uh, to be an anchorite or an anchoress in the Middle Ages was a particular spiritual vocation. And it was a kind of medieval riff on something that went all the way back to the fourth century to the Desert Fathers and Mothers. And first the word, uh,

the word anchoress, or Anchorite, um, it doesn't, doesn't necessarily have anything to do with anchors. But in Greek, though, the verb (. . .) means to withdraw. And it's used in the Gospels. Jesus and His disciples withdrew to the wilderness, right? And, so, the early desert monastics were sometimes called anchorites because they had withdrawn completely from society out to the Egyptian or Syrian deserts where they lived in kind of radical obedience to Jesus in contemplation and in spiritual reflection. So, well, now we're gonna' fast forward to when Julian lived. Julian lives from 1342 to sometime after 1416. We don't know exactly when she died. But there are some, there's some, uh, some textual, uh, data from the period which indicates she probably was still alive around 1416. But, actually, she lived, you know, 70 some years in the, in the for, from the 14th century, which is a very long time to live in the 14th century. So, as an anchoress, she had taken a particular kind of vow. And this vow was to become a contemplative. And it, it had to pass through a bishop, a bishop had to kind of do some discernment on it, as we would say, in our terms. And when, when someone became a, an anchoress or an anchorite, a number of things happened. First of all, this was not a time when people withdrew to the wilderness like the Desert Fathers. This is a, this is a, a series of vows that is taken and a, a, a spiritual vocation that is practiced mostly in the cities. So, it's withdrawing into a, kind of intentional solitude inside a city and attached to a church. So, uh, what, what was this about? Well, an, an anchor hold would have been a small building or shed attached to a church. And when, when it was just, when someone, when someone offered themselves to be, uh, a, an anchorite or an anchoress, after this discernment process, once the bishop determined that this was a genuine vocation, they went through a particular rite. And the rite was call the right of enclosure. Now, once, when, when you, when you accept this as your vocation and when the church accepts this as your vocation in the 14th century, here's what's going to happen. Um, you are going to be given last rites. Yep, you're going to be given last rites. And there's a, a particular like, ritual of enclosure, a requiem mass, a mass for the dead, is said for you, and you're still alive, right? And then the bishop will escort you to the anchor hold. Uh, that's where you'll be given extreme unctions, last rites. Uh, in some cases, the anchor hold will be sprinkled with dust, dust and ashes, right? And you will be escorted into the anchor hold. And the bishop will then bolt the door behind you.

Tony Chvala-Smith 06:40

And this is where you're going to spend the rest of your life in prayer and contemplation for the church, for the community, and to be there available for spiritual, uh, insight and direction for people from the community. So, (Oh, my gosh! Oh, my gosh!) Uh, huh. Uh, huh. So, in a sense, uh, as, as Grace Jantzen, who's one of the great books on Julian of Norwich, says, this is like, the, the image here is that you are being sealed in the tomb with the dead Christ. And now your anchor hold, so your anchor hold is, it's, it could be smallish or could have a few little rooms. You will be, uh, assigned a servant and the servant for, for an anchoress, the servant, uh, from what we know, was hopefully, an older woman who was single, maybe a widow who, who would then, would then basically be living in a small room attached. She would take care of your earthly stuff, right? She would do the shopping. She would do the cooking. She would do the cleaning. She would clean out your, your room. Um, and, you know, she was your, your main contact with the outside world, though, basically, as an anchoress, a, a contact with the outside world is, is to be severely limited. And, so, you've got this person as a buffer, who is your, your servant. Um, you couldn't have pets, but you could have a cat. And the, the cat, very likely for an anchoress or an anchorite, might have been a way to control mice and rats. Um, and a, according to, there's, there's a text from the 13th century called the, well, it's, it's an old it's, it's in Middle

English, and it's called something like the (. . .). I, I, I hope I said the Middle English, right. And it, basically, is a guidebook for being an anchoress. And in the guide book for being an anchoress, one of the things you discover is that, um, well, it's not advised, you can have a cow, too, as long as it's not a nuisance and doesn't, you know, like wander everybody's yards and lots and stuff. But, basically, your, your job now, as an anchoress, is to focus on the church, focus on Christ, focus on prayer, develop a contemplative life, for the sake of the community. And, and it's a, it's a pretty, it's a pretty rigorous life. Your little, your little anchor hold, uh, is built so that it has a window that looks into the church. And there, through the window, you can see mass celebrated, you can see the priest doing the different, uh, offices of the day which you can chant along with him as long as you don't chant them real loud. And then there's a, there's another, there's another window that points outside and there might have been a small porch connected to it, according to the, according to the specialists from this, uh, on this era. And this is a window by, at which people from the community who, who needed some spiritual wisdom or guidance from this now holy woman could come and that was, that would have been the anchoress' or anchorite's main contact with the outside world. The, the servant, the servant was supposed to not spread gossip to you. But, uh, as different authors have said, you know, if you're, if you're an anchoress in 14th century Norwich in, in England, um, people are going to be bringing their, their woes and their struggles and their pains to you and you're gonna', and, uh, I think Gr, Grace Jantzen says you're, you're gonna be able to sew this together into a narrative. You're gonna' pretty much know what's going on. So, the next time, theoretically, then the next time you come out of the anchor hold is when they carry your body out when you die. Um, to become an anchoress was probably not something that happened to the, the serf class or the poor class in which there were, there probably were some means involved, um, and some capacity to read and write, um, though it would have varied from place to place. Um, and what else can I tell you? Uh, yes. What did you eat? Well, um, by the way, if you ever left the anchor hold before you died, uh, that would be breaking your vow and you'd be excommunicated which is a big thing in the Middle Ages, right? So, um, you, you, you, you were, you were served two meals a day from Easter to the feast of the Holy Cross in September. So, from, you know, basically, uh, roughly early April until September, you got two meals a day. Um, from that feast in September to Easter, you got one meal a day, except on Fri, on Fridays, that was a fast day, all through the Middle Ages for everybody, that's a fast day, a, a kind of a bread and water day. A Sunday, though, the fast rules were, were relinquished and it was a two meals day. So, um, this, this might have been a really good weight loss plan.

Carla Long 11:57

Everything you're saying is literally, sounds like my personal hell, my personal hell. Not eating, not seeing people and owning a cow and a cat. Well, I don't mind that. That'd be great. But oh, my gosh. Oh, my gosh!

Tony Chvala-Smith 12:13

You know, Carla, since everybody who knows you knows that you are the mothership of extroverts. This would have been excruciating for you. This would have been

Carla Long 12:24

Death might have come very early. Like, I don't even really think I would have made it. That's, it's just, like, you would have had to be so devoted. Like, everything, everything about you would have to be so devoted. I can't even fathom people wanting to do that. It, it's just blowing my mind, Tony.

Tony Chvala-Smith 12:40

Well, it's a different world in a different context, isn't it? And, and the, the, the depth of devotion to, to want to accept this kind of a vocation is something that's, that's not common in, in our world, um, where we, we, we worry about when we can get Diet Pepsi on sale, you know, right? Um, and here we have, we have people, men and women, but we know quite a bit about women who did this, who's, uh, who, who went into this, in some cases, as youngish women. Now, there's a, there's a controversy about when Julian actually became an anchoress. And I think, you know, at this point, what I, what I believe is that as, as far as I can tell, she, she was already an anchoress when she had the visions I'm going to talk about here in a few minutes, uh, that became her great book that, The Revelations of Divine Love. I mean, you can argue different cases for this, but it, if, if she wasn't, if she was already an anchoress, uh, when she had the, these remarkable visions, then, um, she would have been, you know, she would have gone into the anchor hold maybe when she was 29 or 30. So, young a, young adult, though, of course, it's the middle ages, and that would have, that would have been more like, more like middle age for lots of people. So, let me tell you a little bit about Julian's, like, context, because that, that shapes, uh, some of what we didn't know about the theological meaning of her mystical experiences. So, I often tell students in The History of Christian Thought, in the middle, in the Middle Ages, if there's one century I could pick to live in, it'd be the 13th century. That's the century of high scholasticism the century of Thomas Aquinas, the century of St. Bonaventure. It's, it's like, it's like the century in which theology reaches this incredible height as it, as it tries to interact with the writings of Aristotle, the Greek philosopher. And then if I could pick one century, I would want to avoid in the Middle Ages, it would be the 14th century, the 1300s. And here's why. I mean, the, the 14th century is like the worst of all possible worlds. Number one, uh, the church, the Catholic Church, which is the only church every, anybody knows in the Western world, the church has a divided papacy, right? There's a, a, a giant, kind of, it's called the Babylonian captivity of the papacy, um, and, in other words there were two Pope's, and one Pope was in France in Avignon and one Pope was in Rome in Italy. And, uh, this got ugly. This was a, this was a mudslinging contest. And so, so the church, the church's credibility in the 14th century is somewhat, uh, suspect, by the average person. And if that weren't bad enough, I mean, so there's this spiritual malaise in the 14th century. But then, this is the century of the bubonic plague, uh, which centuries later came to be called the Black Death, but this was the, the, the plague somehow was passed, uh, to Italy or Sicily, uh, by ship in the, the early 1300s. It rapidly spread through Europe. It hits England in 1348. And this, I, I suppose, at this, at, when you and I are recording this, Carla, we're two years into, to COVID. Uh, so, we have a, a little bit to compare, but not much because the bubonic plague literally killed a third of the population of Europe, if not more. It's hard to know, but at least a third of the population. And it, it, especially hit cities. And it especially hit monasteries. And it especially hit clergy. So, it's, uh, I think Grace Jantzen says that, that the, that the plague, when it reached Norwich, probably wiped out about half of the clergy because, you know, this, this is a situation where people wake up in the morning feeling fine, and they're dead by evening. And bodies are being carted, you know, by the cart full, to giant pits to be buried. And handling them might be a death sentence for you, too. It's, it's absolutely absolutely is just a horrendous experience. And, so, Julianne would have

been a, a child during that. And it would be nice to know more about her life like what, what did she do? How did your, how did her parents and her survive? Did her parents survive? We don't, you know, there's so much we don't know about her because she hardly ever talks about herself. But, so, the plague left, left just massive devastation all over Europe. Um, so there's that.

Tony Chvala-Smith 17:35

Then, in the 14th century, there are peasant uprisings in England. The, the, the peasantry are, they've had enough. And the peasant uprisings are brutally suppressed. And some church officials are involved in the suppression of the peasants. Um, this is the, the century in which a scholar named John Wycliffe and his followers create an English translation of the Bible, the first actual one, full one, that we know of. And, uh, yet

Carla Long 18:07

Before you go on too far, uh, John Wycliffe was an ancestor of mine, FYI. (Really?) Seriously. Okay. Oh, sorry. Go ahead.

Tony Chvala-Smith 18:18

Wow. I, you know, when you, now that you say that, I think I vaguely remember you saying that at some point, but I'd totally forgotten. That is cool. Well, things didn't go well for him. So, but, um, so, there's, there's like these, these early waves of reformist impulse is trying to reform the church. And they're, they're, they're kind of brutally suppressed, right? And, so, there's that. And then the Bishop of Norwich, whose name was Henry de Spencer, who was more warrior than bishop, um, is probably the bishop who okayed Julian for being, uh, an anchorite. But this, this man is more, uh, marine than he is bishop. And he was involved in all kinds of violence, suppression of the peasants. And, okay, so to make this all more complicated, Carla, so Pope Urban, from Rome, wants to sponsor, uh, he, he, he wants the other Pope in France to be put down. And, so, it's a, it's a complicated mess. But the, but the English, with Henri de Spencer's support, start, you know, they gather people up to do a crusade in Flanders, right, against the French. Now this is going to be Christians crusading against Christians. I, and it's just getting really ugly here. And Urban, Pope Urban had said there's going to be, uh, uh, dispensation for sins if you join this crusade to support my cause and we'll even give, we'll even give dispensation for your dead relatives. Well, you know as Jantzen points out, a, people in Norwich in the late 1300s have a lot of dead relatives because they're buried in, their buried in plague pits. So, so, uh, another scholar, Shelly Rambo, writes a great chapter on Julian in the book, uh, Empire in the Christian tradition. It's a, Henry de Spencer this, this Marshall Bishop, as he was called, um, gathers people together to join a crusade. They cross over to Flanders. After some initial successes, they're just, they're, it falls apart. And then as Shelly Rambo points out, you have all these wounded and beaten, uh, and s, people coming back to Norwich completely devastated by their losses and, again, kind of, uh, the church's credibility has taken another hit. That's the situation in which Julian of Norwich has a series of remarkable experiences, that comes to fruition in a book that, that we, we know as, by the title, Revelations of Divine Love, or her word was showings, the showings, and so they, there was like these sort of visual experiences that happened for her. So, and, um, she wrote this, she wrote down her, her visions in two forms. Um, the vision, the, the, the visionary experiences happened in May of 1373. In fact, she dates it May 13, 1373. And soon after these visionary experiences, she wrote what's called the short text. Twenty years later, after 20, 20 years of reflecting on these experiences, she wrote

another version called the long text. And it is considerably longer, and she's done a lot of theological reflection on what happened to her since then. And the long text is what I'll be citing from and using, uh, today. It's, it's, it's very interesting to have two texts from the same person and a 20 year space of time for her thinking about what it meant and all that. So the, the long text is theologically dense and rich, uh, and extremely, extremely valuable and provocative. So, so, uh, I'll tell you about the experiences here in just a minute. And I'll just say that, in this book, Julian, Julian protests that she is unlettered. Um, as far as we know, she's the first woman to write in Middle English. So, she didn't write in Latin. She wrote in, she wrote in the common language. Um, and she's writing about the time Chaucer is writing, if that gives you kind of a, a kind of a, a benchmark. Um, so, medieval, medieval Christian women did write and many of them were very lettered and very well trained. They were not able to do what we'd call university education or cathedral school education, but in monasteries and other places, and if they were part of the upper class, they, they were, they were literate, uh, to some extent. So, probably what Julian means by that she's unlettered is, she's not telling a fib here. She's not saying don't pay attention to me. I'm, I'm, I'm just a woman. She's not saying that so much as she may be saying, I'm not university educated, right?

Tony Chvala-Smith 19:28

So, because that would have raised way a lot of eyebrows since that was the province of men in that time. Um, it's kind of a common trope for women to say stuff like that. But you know, we've got lots and lots of texts that come from medieval, uh, female authors. So, it, it's not that, it's not that women couldn't read and write. It's that they had to be careful what they said about their reading and writing. Um, so from the long text, scholars can tell that Julian, she knows the, the Bible really well. Um, it's possible she knew the Latin Vulgate translation. She would have heard it chanted every day from her. And by the way, Carla, she had no place to go. So, I can't think of a better way to learn Latin than to hear it everyday chanted and that's kind of some of the highlights of your day. Um, there, there were as Jantzen points out, there were in Norwich, um, monasteries and centers for a variety of religious orders. So, and an Augustinian, uh, an Augustinian center was very close to the anchor hold. And so she might have had access to books and texts that way. But she's, she's anything but, but illiterate. Um, she knows medieval theology and knows what the church teaches and is extremely thoughtful. But she, but, but what happens to her in this vision is the focus of what will be, uh, this book. So, I'll pause there, Carla, and see if there's any questions or, or wonderings you have before I get into her experience.

Carla Long 25:03

I am actually really appreciative that you have put her in this context for us because, you know, there are times in my life when I'm like, Oh, it wasn't that hard to be a woman back when. Oh, was a bit, it was, it was very, very difficult. She was, she had already dedicated her life. And when I say dedicated her life, definitely like she's living in a box for the rest of her life. Um, so, and gosh, learn, you know, thinking about the bubonic plague and how people's lives are affected. You know, like, I see us two years into this pandemic and I am not the same person I was two years ago, that's for sure. So, lives are definitely changed and moving and transitioning. So, everything around her is changing all the same, all of the ti, all at one time. So, it's really helpful to me to get that context in place. So, I just want to thank you for that.

Tony Chvala-Smith 25:54

Well, I think this is really important and I, you know, we, we teach constantly, context, context, context. We always have to try to understand whether it's biblical texts or church history or, or theology, we have to understand context. And I think so, so much, there's so much more that comes out of reading, uh, her Revelations of Divine Love when you know what a brutal, brutal period it was that she lived in. So, I'm glad that the context is helpful. (Yeah, it definitely is.) You know, it's, it's, we, we, we, of course, wish we knew more about her. But her contemplative vocation is not about her. So, she doesn't, you know, when she, when she describes the experiences that led to her visions, that's about as much as we're going to get from her. Um, we know that, that, that her mother was present when she had, when she had the sickness that I'm about to describe. Um, and, and a few others, but gracious, we have to kind of, we have to do a lot of, of guesswork based on what can be known about life in 14th century England. So, but still, what we have in front of us is this text and here's how it got started. So, um, it's May 13, 1373. And Julian tells us in kind of a preface to this, that she had desired what she calls three graces. Now, she's a contemplative, right, and so her, her life is focused on spirituality, centered in the life of the church, the sacramental life and devotional life of the, of the church in the 14th century. The three graces she says she desired was she wanted number one, recollection of the passion. That means, recollection here is, is kind of mental participation in, in Christ's passion. And then, this is gonna', next one's gonna' sound strange. It's hard one. She desired a bodily sickness. And she'll, and I'll tell you why in a minute. And then the third thing she desired was three more things. She desired three wounds. And she defines the wounds as, uh, a, a wound that would give her a deeper feeling for the Passion of Christ through kind of seeing it. And the second of the three wounds is a sickness unto death. So, there's kind of a little bit of a circular repetition here. A sickness unto death that would lead to a probation of her sins so that she could live more fully to God. And (. . .) this is the mystical tradition, the contemplative tradition. Uh, purgation is part of the process of growing into a deeper life in God so that's basically she's doing what mystics do or wanting what mystics want. And then, then she wanted to receive through God's grace, three additional wounds: true contrition that is feeling, feeling sorry for one's mistakes, loving compassion, and longing for God. So, the things she, the things she yearns for spiritually are re, really, uh, to be more deeply grounded in the Passion of Christ, to have, to have a, a, a deeper awareness of what that means, uh, to have a kind of cleansing of her, her own, her own self stuff, and then compassion. Now, it's interesting, loving compassion. Think of the people who are coming to that window talking to her. Um, I think I would have run into compassion fatigue, pretty soon. You have the people who are impoverished, they've lost a third of their family or more or all of their family because of the plague. You have the people coming back from this abortive crusade against other Christians who are wounded, maimed, missing limbs, hobbling into town. Uh, they're there, there is no VA hospital for them, right? And, so, you have, you have people in all kinds of states of hostility, uh, trauma. And, so, one of the things she longs for is loving compassion, uh, which says kind of a lot about her spirituality. So, these are the things she'd been praying for and longing for in her daily devotions in the anchor hold. And, so, at the age of 30 and a half, she's very precise, uh, on this May, May date and 1373, she becomes gravely, gravely ill. And she's really at death's door the way she describes it. Her priest is sent for. He comes to the anchor hold to be present, this is one of the few times a male could ever come into an anchoress' anchor hold, right, to give last rites or to be there at death.

Tony Chvala-Smith 30:35

She, she's sick for a couple of days and she's getting, like, paralyzed. I mean, when you, when you read about it, it sounds like she's having a stroke. But we, it's, it's hard to know at this distance what was actually happening to her. And there's, there's no, there's no good way to diagnose it from this distance. But she's, she's now, her, she's, she's, she has to be kind of sat up in bed. She wants to be sat up so she can be a little more attentive. Uh, her, her, her gaze, her gaze looks back and up. She's, she's kind of, you know, getting ready to die. And she's sure she's going to. And at this moment, with her eyes looking up, the priest, she remembers this, the priest puts the crucifix in front of her. And she remembers what the priest says. The priest says, I have brought the image of your savior. Look at it and take comfort from it, quote, unquote. And then, at the very point when she feels like she's at the very point of death, she recovers. And she remembers, least as I read the text, she remembers that her, her, her desire for the second wound, which was the recollection and feeling for Christ's passion. And so at this moment, then, she has the first of what will be 16 showings or 16 visions. And the vision is this. The vision is, she apparently is still staring at the crucifix, and she starts seeing red blood running down from under the, the crown of thorns on the crucifix. And, uh, she says in, in her book, she says that, at that, at that moment, at that very moment, quote, Suddenly, the Trinity filled my heart full of the greatest joy. And then, let me just read you a little, a little further of that. It's, it's quite moving, actually. Says that the, the Trinity filled her with, with, uh, this, thus sense of joy and the sense of bliss. And the sense, I mean, she, she's actually getting the things she wanted. Um, and, and so, um, what, what, then this, this first vision then, is kind of a showing of the crucifix of the crucifixion, of the passion. And, in a sense, this is my interpretation as I'm reading it, she is now entering into the wounded love of God that is represented on the crucifix. Let me stop there. I want to say something about this because we're, you and I, Carla, we live in a time when a lot of people hate crucifixion theology across theology. And one of the reasons people hate it is because the evangelical default setting has turned it into a kind of simplistic, uh, you're a sinner. God wanted to kill you. Jesus took it for you instead. Isn't that, isn't that amazingly loving. It sounds like a, a horribly abusive relationship. That's like, this has nothing to do with really good, a really good soteriology or, or theology of the cross. And, so, what you're going to encounter in Julian is that the Passion of Christ, the cross of Christ, is the entry point into, I'll say, into God's wounded heart on behalf of humanity. It's, it's the entry point into a love that never ceases being wounded for us. So, I think it's just a whole different way to, to configure this. So, um, that's what's happening in this first vision. Now she has, she has 15 others. And I believe Jantzen, Jantzen notes that of the 16 showings, 15 of them are built around her still gazing at the crucifix. This must have all happened fairly quickly. But it takes her, she writes it down and then takes her 20 years to figure out what was that that happened to me. But, uh, it, within that, within that first vision, uh, there's a, a scene that people, people, uh, sometimes reflect on about hazelnut. Let me see if I can find it here. So, within the First Vision, she says this, At the same time as I saw the sight of the head bleeding our Good Lord showed a spiritual sight of his familiar love. I saw that he is to us everything which is good and comforting for our health. He is our clothing who wraps and enfolds us for love, embraces us and shelters us, surrounds us for His love which is so tender that he may never desert us. And, so, in this sight, I saw that he is everything which is good, as I understand it. In medieval theological terms, she's describing being itself which is only good. It's goodness itself. And, you know, that's, that's her, what she's seeing of God at that moment. And then she says this, And in this, he showed me something small, no bigger than a hazelnut lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed to me. And it was as round as a ball. I looked at it with the eye of my understanding and thought, What can this be? I was amazed that it could last for I thought that, because of, of its littleness, it would suddenly have fallen into

nothing. And I was answered in my understanding. It lasts, and always will, because God loves it. And, thus, everything has being through the love of God. So, in other words, in this the first of her visions, she has an, qn image of the universe, the size of a hazelnut. Uh, and, you know, hazelnut here is an image, it's like a hazelnut, it's small and round. And she's, like, Oh, my gosh. How tiny is this? It's, and think about her world. Think about her world just literally coming apart around her. And, and yet, what, what she comes to understand in this experience is that this will last because God loves it. Divine, divine love is at the heart of being. Oh, my gosh. What a breathtaking thing to say in the 14th century when there's so much destruction and loss and devastation and so much, uh, willful and malicious destruction of other people. Um, and yet she sees that the creation is loved fully, completely by God. It's very being is of the love of God. I think that's kind of a remarkable, remarkable statement. Uh, and then she, then she goes on in the same, the same scene, she says, um, you know, she's, she's led to believe, now be careful, uh, you know, don't, I'll put it in my words, don't, don't get all attached to the hazelnut. Don't get all attached to it, um, because the point is to get attached to me, to God, right? In other words, the world, the physical universe, which is loved of God and which in, and in which the love of God is its being, is not the point. The point is for that to point to, to God. And, so, what's, what this is, is the medieval, this is a, really it's central to a lots of kinds of Catholic spirituality. This is an, this is an expression of what's called in Latin, (. . .). Literally translated contempt of the world. But that sounds bad and it's not what it means. Uh, it's more like, it's not hatred of the world. It's proper detachment from that which is good so that you can attach yourself to that which is the ultimate good, right? St. Augustine centuries earlier would have said that it, it's learning, you, you learn to love things in God, right? In, in their, in their (. . .). So, that's the hazelnut story. And I, I just, I just absolutely love that scene and, and when you place it in that 14th century, that miserable 14th century context, the idea of God revealing to her that the world, even in its nastiness is beloved of God and God's love is what gives it being. That's, that's a powerful, powerful thing to say and it has lots and lots of relevance to us today.

Carla Long 38:59

It's just beautiful. It's just beautiful, that, um, it's just beautiful. Uh, I mean, I love thinking about, you know, like, how she's, like, kind of minimizing it a little bit making it like a hazelnut 'cause her life is kind of minimal, minimalized as she has, she lives in a small space and that's what she's used to. (Yeah.) I just, I'm, I've, I've done a few of these podcasts about mystics before and I'm always, always astounded by what they say in the midst of them being alone or what, however their, their lives have turned out to be. And I'm, it's no exception. Julian of Norwich is no exception here.

Tony Chvala-Smith 39:38

Yeah. You know, and when you, when you start reading through the thing, and by the way, this is, this is a slow read. Um, you're not going to read the long text in an afternoon. It's, it's, it's real, it's theologically quite dense and she circles back and circles around, but it's all built around her, uh, her 20 years of reflection and interpretation of these, these visions which happened on that May day in 1373. So, you got to give yourself time and it's really good to have a couple of commentators to help you, help, to help you find your, find your bearings in the, the 14th century. So, some other things, you know, I'm not going to go through the whole text. It'd be impossible in a single podcast, so, I'm just going to point out a couple of other things that I think might be interesting to, to listeners and that certainly are, are relevant, uh, to us. Um, one of the things that she, she has, she's concerned with, of course, is

suffering, the nature of suffering, because there's so much suffering around her. And in her theological world, suffering was always connected to sin. Well, you know, uh, Adam's, Adam's sin has infected the whole and, and we're now paying the price for it. Um, she's very careful to say she agrees with all the teachings of holy church. And yet at the same time, she, uh, she very creatively and thoughtfully, will push back and offer alternatives. This is remarkable in the 14th century. Um, if Henry de Spencer actually had been reading this, I think we would never heard of her. Um, but, so, uh, one of the things she does is she kind of reconfigures the, the story of the fall. And this is in, in chapter 51 of the long text. It's a, it's a long section. And to make, to make a long section short, what she says is something like this, God created humanity. And humanity has a desire to serve God, right? Uh, it's, it's innate to us. And, um, if, if I could put it in contemporary terms, human beings have a natural desire for the best that they know. I could put it that way. And she says, Well, what happens is that human being set off trying to, their, to the best of their ability, they, they, they, they try to run off serving God, serving the best they know. And what happens is they take their eyes off of God and they stumble and fall. And they fall into a ditch and are wounded. And so what she does is she, in, instead of thinking of the human condition in terms of inherited guilt, she reconfigures the human condition to more in terms of shared woundedness. That is, we are wounded. And we are, we are wounded because our, our, our desires get all messed up and we, while we're desiring the best we know, uh, we stumble and fall and mess things up. And what she says in this remarkable section of the book is that if we had only looked up, we would have saw, the, the loving gaze of the Lord had never left us, right? That even in our bruised, fallen, broken state, we've stumbled into a ditch, uh, Middle English into a dell. We've stumbled into a dell. And, and we think, we think we've been abandoned there in our own, in our own muck and goo and misery and our own guilt. And she says, Our loving, our loving Lord never took his glance off us. And, so, um, she prayed for compassion. And this is the kind of, this is the kind of theology, then, that, uh, is probably why people came to her, I suspect. Um, she was going to try and introduce them to the loving God of the Christian tradition in an era that, that typically didn't think first of all of God in terms of love, but thought of God in terms of justice, and justice in terms of, uh, guilt, punishment and retribution. So, she, she totally reconfigures that. Um, she does say, you know, the suffering in the world is connected to sin, but God's got it, right? God, through the passion, God has it. Uh, so, that's one of the ways she deals with that. Um, and then, just a, a couple more things, Carla, and we'll kind of round this out. Um, I think one of the most intriguing things about Julian is, I hope this language is okay, when it comes to the Trinity, she uses what I will, uh, happily call gender bending language. So, I'll read, this, this is, this is from, uh, the 58th Chapter of the long text.

Tony Chvala-Smith 44:39

And she says, I'm gonna read you a couple different selections from this so you can get where she's, where she's going. Um, she says, And so in our making, God Almighty is our loving father. And God All Wisdom is our loving mother with the love and the goodness of the Holy Spirit which is all one God, one Lord. And in the joining and the union, he is our very true spouse. And we his beloved wife and his fair maiden, with which wife he was never displeased. For he says, I love you and you love me and our love will never divide in two. I contemplated the work of all the blessed Trinity in which contemplation I saw and understood these three properties: the property of the fatherhood and the property of the motherhood and the property of the lordship in one God. In our Almighty Father, we have our protection and our bliss as regards our natural substance which is ours by our creation from, from without beginning. And in the second person, second person of the Trinity, in knowledge and wisdom, we have

our perfection as regards our sensuality, our restoration, our salvation, for he is our mother, second person is our mother, brother and Savior. And in our Good Lord, the Holy Spirit, we have our reward and our gift for our living and our labor endlessly surpassing all that we desire in his marvelous courtesy. So, she's overlaying or interpreting into the document, Trinity, a whole bunch of new different gender categories, right? Father, Son, Spirit, that's the traditional language of the church. But she's going from her experiences in the, in these visions and the, and the deep encounter with, with the, the wounded love of God. And she, she's going to say, There's fatherhood in God, there's motherhood in God and so on. Um, she says further here, in the same section, I saw and understood that the highlight of the Trinity is our father. And the deep wisdom of the Trinity is our mother. And the great love of the Trinity is our Lord and all these we have in nature and in our substantial creation. And furthermore, I saw that the second person was our mother, substantially the same beloved person has now become our mother essentially, because we are, we are, uh, double by God's creating. That is to say substantial and sensual. I'm gonna' to tell you what that's about in a minute here. Our substance is the higher part which we have in our father, God Almighty, and the second person of the Trinity is our mother in nature in our substantial creation, in whom we are founded and rooted, and he is our Mother of Mercy in taking our sensuality. And, so, our mother is working on us in various ways in whom our parts are kept undivided for in our mother Christ, we profit and increase, and in mercy, He reforms and restores us. And by the power of his passion, his death, and his resurrection, unites us to our substance. Um, what's going on here? So, first of all, a word about this gender language. Um, we have to let Julian be in the 14th century. And, so, I want to be very careful about some kind of eternalized gender essentialism, you know. Uh, I, I whatever she was saying, we have to be careful not to say, Well, motherhood is an eternal principle in God and it's, it's about nurture and blah, blah, blah. And fatherhood is a principle of power that's eternally (. . .). This, this is us overlaying our stupid gender stuff on, on the divine. And we have to be really careful about that. Not to do that. What what Julian is doing is within the gender constructs of her day, she is making room in the Godhead for a variety of experiences. The, the, the, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Christ, our mother, uh, who is connected to us, sensually, meaning that our central physical bodily nature he took on in the incarnation. And, so, mom is, mom is connected to child, right, is what she's saying there basically. And, so, this, this is remarkable, remarkable language in the Middle Ages to think of God, to think of the Triune God, the One God with images from her, from her cultural context that apply motherhood, uh, and fatherhood and thus, and the, the unifying, loving power of the Holy Spirit all together. Um, now, stop. We're not talking about what some people call the Divine Feminine here. Uh, not a helpful concept in my view, um, because the, just, it just internalizes once again, you know, all the, all the gender stuff and that's, we have to be really careful, then, about traipsing down the polytheistic route, which has happened in some restoration traditions.

Tony Chvala-Smith 49:30

No, she's, she's trying out of experience to say there's so much more to God than our traditional language has let us see. And this, this so much more is Orthodox, it's grounded in Scripture, it's grounded in tradition, it's grounded in our experience. Um, by the way, there's a, an older tradition, in, in ancient Christianity, of referring to Christ as our nurse. And so that, that image of, of Christ, that way, that way of talking about Christ's, uh, meaning and value to us by the use of, uh, context-dependent gender images. That has a history within Christianity. I don't know whether she was a, she knew anything about that, but she certainly picks up on it there. And, uh, I think it's, it's quite, it's quite

amazing, um, that she goes there. Uh, how different to think of Christ as our mother, right? Uh, they, you know, who's connected to us substantially because of taking our flesh. Uh, but she also will say that, that God has the property of motherhood too, um, right? And she, again, she's not talking about divine masculine or divine feminine. She's talking about, she's using, she's using gender role language from the 14th century and saying, The, the Trinity, uh, connects us to all this or is connected to all this in a way that allows us to use that language of God to appropriate it to persons of the Trinity. So, I don't know what do you think, Carla? That's, that's pretty radical stuff for the 14th century.

Carla Long 51:04

It is really radical stuff. You know, I didn't think that Julian and I had a lot in common, but it seems like we might have a little bit in common. It seems like she was a bit of a stirrer. She liked to stir the pot a little bit. So, did she, like, get into any trouble for, you know, kind of pushing those, uh, kind of gender bending norms.

Tony Chvala-Smith 51:25

Um, as far as I know, not. Um, we don't know how widely this text was read. It was copied. That's why we were able to, to, you know, there's, there's inked copies made of it. But, um, a, apparently, apparently church officials had too much else on their plate to read this. And also, you know, if we, if we look at, if we look at the whole medieval mystical tradition we'd find, um, other women mystics who use highly sensual language for the divine, the divine human encounter and union. I mean, you, they use sexual language. I think, Charmaine and I talked about that in, in our, our, our introductory podcast to the mystics, but there, but, you know, you did hear her say, uh, our, Christ our spouse, right? Uh, so, there is, she's, that language is quite traditional, and, and even somebody as traditional as St. Bernard of Clairvaux, uh, in the, right around 1100, 11th century, 1000s into 1100s, he, he wrote a commentary on the Song of Songs that uses all that kind of language. Um, so, it wasn't the language of God or Christ as the sole spouse with whom we seek intimacy. Uh, that's not uncommon in, in the church's language. But this kind of, uh, this kind of motherhood language is, is sort of new, as far as I can tell, in, in, in the church's life. But, you see, she's very careful to say, I, I honor holy church. I follow holy church's teachings. Um, and then this happened to me, and this is what I'm trying, I'm trying to make sense of it. You know, I an unlettered woman, I'm trying to make sense of it. And, and she's rigorously Trinitarian. So, she's not going to run into problems there. And she will say things like, As I see it, or, As it occurred to me, or, As I, you know, she'll, she'll own it as opinion. But what we have here is a vision of the divine human relationship that is, uh, characterized by love, connection, intimacy, not power over and subservience as much as a kind of bonding between God and us in our souls. Uh, it's beautiful, beautiful language that is really, uh, evocative and, and, like I said, she's, she's really come into her own in the last 60 years. That's a long time to wait. But, so, so, I have, I have one more text, Carla, and then we can, we can round things up. This is, I think, one of her most famous things. Uh, this is in the, the 13th showing in chapter 27 of the long text. Um, see if I can find it here. She, she says, And with the beholding of this with all the pains that ever were or ever will be, I understood Christ's passion for the greatest and surpassing pain. And yet this was shown to me in an instant and it quickly turned into consolation. For our good Lord would not have the soul frightened by this ugly sight, (ie. the ugly side of how much pain he bore and, and it, in, in his own person), but I did not see sin for I believe that it has no kind of substance no share in being, nor can it be recognized except by the pain caused by it. Now, stop, that's an Augustinian idea. Sin as, as an expression of evil does not have existence. Uh, it, it is, it,

it doesn't have a, a, it does not have a, a substance of its own, right? All, the way we know it is by the feelings it leaves behind. So, um, that's definitely Augustinian. Um, and it seems to me that this pain is something for a time for it purges and makes us know ourselves and ask for mercy. So, we do stuff wrong or when things get messed up and we hurt, um, it helps us know ourselves better. And there's an, kind of an educative function to it, and helps us ask for mercy. For the Passion of our Lord is comfort to us against all of this and that is his blessed will. And because of the tender love which our good Lord has for all who will be saved, He comforts steadily and sweetly meaning this, it is true that sin is the cause of all this pain, but all will be well and every kind of thing will be well. Wow. Alright, so what's going on there? Um, existence is, existence, as we know it, is full of pain and suffering struggle. And in her mind, i, it's, not, that's not unconnected to sin, not unconnected to our, our self love, our self loathing, whatever, right? But it's, she's basically saying, it's not unknown to God. It's, it's been taken into God through the passion and therefore we're covered. And all will be well. In the end, all will be well. Um, I think she means that eschatological that in the end events, all will be up, all of the be well. By the way, there are parts of the showings that you can read as if she is, she has her own suspicions that hell is not a good doctrine. She kind of, that's, and this is really kind of on the edge in the 14th century, but she has a sense that the passion of, the Passion of Christ, which is the passion of God, the son, is big enough to cover it all. And, so, uh, there's so much richness and, and so much to be learned from sitting at the window of this anchoress from the 14th century. Um, she's well worth, I think, exploring. And one of the things I love about, about her work, is how Christocentric it is. Um, it's focused on what is the heart of Christianity. Um, incarnate, crucified, risen, coming again. That, the, the, the story, the storyline that's at the heart of the story. Her, her spirituality is based and built around that. And in the Passion of Christ, she finds a revelation of a love that is broad and big and rich enough to cover it all.

Carla Long 58:14

Ah, Tony, you mean, this has been a roller coaster of emotions for me. First of all, I was like, no way she sounds like a crazy person. I'm, there's no way. I'm never gonna like this person ever. And now, like, I'm in. She's, she sounds amazing. Um, I, she sounds like she, um, was really pushing the envelope on a lot of places and, uh, her, a lot of, of, from what you've said, it seems like her theology is very similar to my theology, which sounds, it's amazing that I'm matching someone from the 14th century, which blows my mind.

Tony Chvala-Smith 58:46

Minus the anchor hold.

Carla Long 58:47

Oh, my gosh. I, I, like, I won't, I don't know if I'm ever going to be able to get that out of my mind. Uh, and

Tony Chvala-Smith 58:55

Well, I suspect, though, there lots of people who would come to your window to ask for wisdom and advice. So,

Carla Long 59:00

Gee, I think you're very kind because I don't think I can think of anyone. Um, and only two meals a day and then only one meal a day. You know I can't handle that, Tony.

Tony Chvala-Smith 59:13

Yeah, I know. Uh, and, and, oh, I didn't mention no meat either. None of the meals have meat. And, so, Carla, neither your one meal of the day nor your two meals are ever going to have bacon again.

Carla Long 59:24

And I'm guessing no Velveeta either. I mean, what's the point?

Tony Chvala-Smith 59:28

Oh, Velveeta may have been invented in the 14th century. I just don't know for sure.

Carla Long 59:33

That might be the Velveeta we eat today. Um, but I really appreciate your walking us through, um, learning more about Julian of Norwich. She sounds incredible. Just an amazing human being and I, I really enjoyed learning more about her. Thank you so much.

Tony Chvala-Smith 59:47

You are so welcome. I, I find her endlessly, endlessly intriguing and a really, a really good antidote to lots of the kinds of, uh, judgmental versions of Christianity that are so prevalent in so many traditions. Um, this is somebody who's come face to face with the truth of the claim in the gos, in the New Testament that God is love.

Carla Long 1:00:13

Absolutely. Well, thank you so much. That was so wonderful. All right, Tony. You're the best.

Josh Mangelson 1:00:25

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