

6.29.25 Sermon Transcript – Julian of Norwich

In 1347, the Black Death spread across Europe. The bubonic plague was absolutely devastating. As people who have recently come out of a pandemic of our own, our experience pales in comparison to the absolute devastation of the bubonic plague as it spread across Europe – continental Europe and England. It spread so rapidly and it killed 30 to 50 percent of the population in some areas within just a few years. I don't think I can truly comprehend the kind of impact that that would have on a society, on a community. I mean, entire villages disappeared. Clergy died in droves, and mass graves were really common during this time. The Black Death was just one thing that was happening during the period of about a hundred years between the mid-1300s and the mid-1400s. It was a really intense time where there was so much death and there was so much just difficult stuff going on that pretty much all of Western society, of Christianized society, began to interpret everything bad that happened as some type of divine judgment - something that God was doing because of sin. This must be punishment from God. So there was this prevalent theology of wrath and of retribution – preachers all over the place were proclaiming that the plague was the result of moral decay or greed or pride or all of these other things. They preached that the sin was communal, so the punishment was communal too. As for other natural disasters, famines and plague or even war, they too were understood as God's "warning shots". "You're doing wrong, this is my divine punishment for you." The popes would issue different types of absolutions or public prayers, calling people to be more pious, to show more repentance in order to escape this punishment that God is inflicting upon us. There were groups of people, of Christians who roamed towns, and they would whip themselves. Maybe you've seen the Monty Python version, where it's the whacking their books against their heads. Well, there were actual groups of people who would walk around the towns flagellating themselves, whipping their own backs as a sign of penance, of trying to escape or prevent what they perceived as judgment or as God's wrath. This was a time when there was so much wrong in addition to the Black Death. There was the Hundred Years' War going on. There was a schism within the church between the East and the West.

There was so much in upheaval. There was so much uncertainty that people thought, maybe this is really it. Maybe the end is coming. Maybe this is God's wrath finally being poured out upon us. It was a hard time to be alive. There was so much fear. And there was the preaching of fear. The threat of hell was such a prevalent reality in this time. Popular religion became so focused on death, on purgatory. We see it in the arts and the literature from this time. The Dance of Death was something that appears in murals and plays during this time where we have these images of skeletons leading popes and kings and peasants to the grave. This was a time of grave fear as the plague spread throughout Europe. So in 14th century England, and in continental Europe, but in England, the world felt like it was unraveling. The Black Death had decimated the population. I mean, just imagine the period of a few years and the population being reduced by one-third to one-half. That is astronomical. War with France seemed endless, the churches in schism, and in most places in the world, as I said, there so much emphasis on God's wrath – but in a small little

cell attached to a church in Norwich, there was a woman named Julian, Julian of Norwich, and that may not have even been her actual name. We don't know much about the life of Julian of Norwich. Now, she may have had that name because it was a common girl's name, but it was also the name of the church where her cell was ((not like a prison cell). She was an anchorite, meaning she was a person who decided to set herself apart into a life of seclusion, of prayer, of solitude. Her cell, her room, was in the St. Julian Church. As an anchorite, she lived this life of isolation, of solitude, of prayer.

To be honest, when I think about saints, I am not naturally drawn to somebody like Julian of Norwich. I tend to like the more flashy kind of saints, like Saint Francis last week. Saint Francis, he's my guy. He snuck across enemy lines unarmed into a war zone to meet with the Sultan. That's my kind of saint. But Julian, she's a totally different kind of saint. She wasn't well known in her lifetime, and really what she's known for is one particular set of writings, the Revelations of Divine Love. She didn't do anything flashy, or dramatic, or what I would call exciting in her lifetime. She withdrew, she prayed, but in this small cell she had visions (well she may have actually had these visions before she took on the life of an anchorite).

These visions were of a God who was not a wrathful God, but a God who was a loving God, endlessly loving. And she talked about the reassurances that God gave her, that God is indeed love. These visions were called shewings. I'm not sure what type of term that is, but in the Revelations of Divine Love, she conveys her experiences of a series of 16 visions of Christ. They include things like Christ's bleeding and suffering on the cross. They include a vision of Christ as a mother-like figure. One of them involves the image of a tiny hazelnut in the palm of her hand, as a symbol of creation. It's small and it's fragile, but it's held eternally in God's love. She says "God made it, God loves it, God keeps it."

For Julian, in her experiences, in her encounters with God, God's love is the foundation of all things. We heard it a couple of times in the call to worship and in the prayer for illumination, this phrase that she is very well known for, which says, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well." This isn't naive optimism, but it's a deep and a hard-won confidence in God's steadfast love, and that ultimately God's goodness will indeed prevail. That's what we heard in the Revelation text this morning associated with Julian of Norwich. She saw that, unlike what pretty much everyone around her was preaching or was believing, that God is not wrathful. She saw that sin is what causes pain, but God does not react to that sin with wrath, only with compassion and with healing. As I said, in one of her visions, she sees Christ as a mother-like figure. She refers to Jesus as a mother, nurturing and tender, which is a really a bold theological claim emphasizing the care and the closeness and the life that God gives to us.

Julian's visions were radical and countercultural to her day and time. In an age where faith was used to dominate others, she teaches of a God who serves and nurtures. And in a time where religion was used to divide, she proclaims universal love and divine protection. In a culture that is just full of fear and retribution theology, her voice says, "God is not angry.

This is not the wrath of God. Rather, God is love.” She says, “I saw that God does everything in love and never stops loving.” Imagine how scandalous that was in this time. When everyone was proclaiming that God was punishing the world through plague and war, Julian said, no, that's not who God is. God is not the source of suffering, God is the source of love. She challenged the common belief that sin provoked divine rage. Maybe this doesn't sound revolutionary now, but in her time, it was. She wasn't burned at the stake or anything, maybe because she kept such a low profile as an anchorite, living unassumingly off in her cell. She wasn't out leading a revolution, but she was continually putting forth this alternative picture of God, one that I think is faithful to scripture, that God is indeed a God of love.

So what does Julian teach us today? Today, I think we face a different type of plague. Not one of disease, but perhaps one where we again see God being used for wrath. One where we see the Bible being used to justify hurtful and harmful things. One where we see a theology of fear and power disguised as faith. We see a kind of plague of a Christianity that preaches a wrathful God who blesses conquest, and guns, and violence, that fuses patriotism with salvation as if the two are the same thing, and confuses domination with discipleship. Just like in Julian's day, today I think we also experience fear. And many of us are afraid. The world feels unstable and we don't understand why things keep happening the way they do. Many voices are again preaching that God is a God of vengeance, God is a tribal God, a God of exclusion. Julian shows us a different path – a faith rooted not in fear but in love. For us today, Julian teaches us that to preach love is, in fact, to resist the disease that is spreading among us. God's love is the starting point and the end point of our theology. When we abide in Christ's love, we resist that urge to build walls, or to hoard power, or to scapegoat the vulnerable, or point the finger of blame at this person or that person, or that group of people. Julian also reminds us that all shall indeed be well. Ultimately, we can trust that the goodness of God will prevail, while at the same time knowing that's not an excuse for inaction here and now. Rather, we are called to a faithful defiance of despair. When we preach a loving God today, we defy a world that profits off of hatred, fear, and violence.

What does it look like to follow Julian's example? As I said she's not a saint that I'm naturally drawn towards. Give me your Bonhoeffers and your Romeros - but I think we need witness of Julian too, because she teaches us what it is to speak of God's love, even when others weaponize God's name. She calls us to recognize that resting in God means resting in that love, and knowing that love is the means and the ends. I think faithfulness to Julian's vision means that we teach our children, as we did this past week in Bible School that love is stronger than fear. That's what Julian teaches us. When we grow weary, resistance and faithfulness to the gospel can be quiet, contemplative, and rooted in hope. Julian, she wrote in secret (not like she was hiding it from people, but in privacy, in the quiet). She didn't lead an army or command a pulpit. She lived alone, and she had these visions of God, but her words have endured because they tell a truth, that God is not the author of terror. God is love and there is nothing that can change that. So in a world today that is running after power, or that feels motivated by panic or fear, let us follow Julian. Let us trust

even now that all shall be well – not because the empire is winning but because God's love will outlast everything that is. May we know that “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.” Amen.