

SLD07.18.10 16th Ordinary Summer Saints Series
Emory Presbyterian Church
Colossians 1:15-28
Jill Oglesby Evans

“Julian of Norwich – A Hazelnut of Hope”

What I want to say to you this morning is just this: all will be well. Everything's going to be okay. Whatever's on your mind, your heart, your spirit; whatever scares you, burdens you or keep you awake at night, it's all gonna work out.

It may not always *feel* like that, like “God's in his Heaven (and) All's right with the world!”¹ – in fact, I'd venture that it *rarely* does – yet God *does* have everything under control.

At least that's what Julian of Norwich believed, and counseled, wrote, and witnessed.

And ole' Julian was no Pippi Longstocking, either. No perennially optimistic Julie Andrews, or Doris Day, or...”the sun'll come up...tomorrow”...Orphan Annie. Nor was her life or the world around her any calmer or simpler or easier or more predictable than it is for us today.

In fact, the 14th century England into which Julian was born was an incredibly chaotic time, an era during which England and France fought the perpetual Hundred Years War, when rebel peasant and rival Kings were forever deposing and executing each other, when competing popes (competing popes! - there were 3 of them!) variously assaulted one another or fled for their lives. Add to this political and religious

¹ *Pippa Passes*, [Robert Browning](#) published in 1841 as the first volume of his *Bells and Pomegranates* series.

maelstrom three consecutive sweeping outbreaks of the bubonic plague, and you'll get a pretty good idea of the world as Julian knew it.

Which, incidentally, apart from her writings, is pretty much all we know about Julian. We don't even know if "Julian" was really her name. All we really know is that the late 14th English world into which she was born was a chaotic mess, that she's the first woman writer in English whose work survives, that hers was the first theological work originally written in English, and that her writings was and is considered by some as the most profound and complex of all medieval spiritual writings, treasured for its grace and lucidity.²

By way of call, Julian was an anchoress, a medieval religious way of life of seclusion and prayer. Her dwelling was attached to the wall of the church of St. Julian of Norwich, (which could be how she got the name she's remembered by.) A common misunderstanding about anchorites, including my own the first time I preached about Julian, is that these cloistered servants of the church lived in one single cell from which they never left. Ever. For *any* reason. Until they died.

Upon further research, though, it appears that Julian would probably have had a suite of rooms as well as a walled garden in her living area. And, likely, pets – she is often depicted in the company of a cat. As well she no doubt had servants to attend to her needs, and perhaps even guests. To be sure, her life would have been relatively simple with much time devoted to prayer and contemplation, but not isolated; a main

² For this and much factual information about Julian of Norwich, see *Praying with Julian of Norwich*, by Gloria Durka, Saint Mary's Press, Christian Brothers Publication, Winona, Minn. 1989.

road passed right outside Julian's house and she was often called upon to give spiritual direction and advice to the many people who sought her out.³

Now, the dominant spirituality of Julian's day saw the world and God primarily in terms of sin and judgment, the power of the prevailing Church largely fueled by rampant ignorance, superstition and fear. But Julian came to see things differently, *very* differently. Although she never outright contradicted the church's teachings, she determinedly refocused their emphasis from law and justice to salvation and love. For Julian, love and joy were what were paramount in the experience of God.

The change in Julian's understanding began like this: At the age of thirty she became very ill, to the point of receiving the last rites of the dying. And as Julian lay dying, she lifted to God the whole mess of her world, of her existence – political chaos, religious division, institutional collapse, rampant disease and famine, her own frail, wasted frame. And in response, God sent her a vision, a series of visions, really, about which Julian wrote and from which she learned in her books called *Showings*.

Notes one writer about Julian's visions: "Any death experience is a stripping away, a dying to one's past. The resurrection out of death is a new beginning, and new beginnings are uncluttered. The death experience forces one to sort out the essential from the expendable. ...Julian's encounter with God (on her deathbed) put things in perspective for her."⁴ For as she lifted to God the dross of the nadir of her life, what Julian heard from God was this. She writes:

³ All Will Be Well, compiled by Richard Chilson, Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 2008, p. 2.

⁴ Ibid. p. 4.

***“The good Lord answered all the questions and doubts which I could raise, saying most comfortingly:
‘I may make all things well, and I can make all things well, and I shall make all things well, and I will make all things well; and you will see yourself that every kind of thing will be well....’***

In the face of all that desperation and disease and death, God said to Julian, It’s going to be okay. It’s all going to work out. It’s gonna be fine.

And in these words:.” God wishes us to be enclosed in rest and in peace

God wishes us to be enclosed in rest and in peace. What a contrast to the angry vengeful medieval God whose primary job was to separate the wheat from the chaff, the sheep from the goats, and send the latter directly to hell.

Yet so convinced became Julian of the fundamental, final, and inescapable redeeming power of God’s love and healing for her world, for all the world, for all time, that she dared wrestle with her church’s teachings about the damned. Based on her revelation, Julian stubbornly insisted that somehow, in the mystery of God, Christ has all things in hand and will bring good out of all things.

“The Lord 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 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.

“In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it, the second is that God loves it, the third is that God preserves it. But what did I see in it? That God is the Creator and the Protector and the Lover.” (Showings, p.183)

I’d like to acknowledge how nice that sounds but how hard it often is to believe, or trust, or even find relevant. Yet once in a while we catch a glimpse of that truth, of that peace, of that rest, do we not? Even if only for a moment, it’s not entirely foreign to

us to feel enclosed in God's rest and peace, is it? In fact, I'll bet every one of us here has, at one time or another, one circumstance or another, experienced a moment's sense of the rightness of things, of rest and peace, of complete trust that the universe is unfolding as it should.

I'd like to think that happens every time we worship together, or every time we pray, or every time we shake ourselves awake to the miracle and the mystery of God's great gift of Life, or the bountiful blessings of our own lives, though I know it ain't necessarily so. But what Julian of Norwich said is that when we *do* catch a glimpse of that "at-one-ness," that "at-home-ness," that "at-peace-ness" with the world, with God, with self, well, *that* moment is actually truer and righter and closer to the nature of God, and of our relationship with God, than all the other anxious chaotic searching moments that fill our lives.

The other day in the church office I was getting worked up about one thing or another when unexpectedly Heather stood up and looked at me and said firmly, "It's going to be fine. It's all going to be fine."

I did a double take. Suddenly I couldn't even remember what I'd been saying. But just as suddenly what became very clear for just a moment was that everything was, indeed, going to be fine. I could relax. And stop worrying. And be grateful.

Which, so far as I can see, pretty well sums up the gift of Julian's revelation.

And the gift of the Apostle Paul's revelation, for the matter. Remembering today's text, the gospel to which Paul binds himself as servant proclaims that, just as in Christ all things were created, so in Christ *all things hold together*. Just as in Christ all the fullness of God is pleased to dwell, so through Christ, God reconciles to God's Self all things, whether on earth or in heaven.

In Christ all things are created. In Christ all things hold together. *Through* Christ, God's working it all out. So we can relax, and stop worrying, and be grateful.

Thomas Merton, one of the most widely admired spiritual writers of the twentieth century, said this about Julian and her visions:

“Julian of Norwich is without a doubt one of the most wonderful of all Christian voices. She gets greater and greater in my eyes as I grow older. And whereas in the old days I used to be crazy about St. John of the Cross, I would not exchange him now for Julian if you gave me the world and the Indies and all the Spanish mystics rolled up in one bundle. I think that Julian of Norwich is with Newman the great English theologian, for she reasons from her experience of *the substantial center of the great Christian mystery*...the objective mystery of Christ as apprehended by her, with the mind and formation of a fourteenth century English woman.” (*Seeds of Destruction*, p. 274-5)

And the *substantial center of the great Christian mystery* that Julian experiences, and from which she reasons, is that, in the end, everything's going to be okay. Whatever's on our minds, our hearts, our spirits; whatever scares us or burdens us or keeps us awake at night, it's all gonna work out. It was all created in Christ, it's all held together in Christ. Understand it, believe it, trust it, or not: through Christ, it's all going to be worked out.

Not that Julian was saying that everything's hunky dory, that evil doesn't exist, that all our endings on this earth will be happy.

To be sure “we are not always in peace and love, yet peace and love are always in us. God did not say, ‘you will not be troubled, you will not be belaboured, you will not be disquieted. But God did say, ‘you will not be overcome.” (Showings, p. 315)

But then, there's the rub, isn't it, for most of us – all those times of trouble when we are “belaboured and disquieted,” when loss speaks louder than love, pain louder than peace, hatred louder than hope; when travail squeaks against the brakes of reason, doubt rubs against faith, and God's absence registers with ever so much more volume than God's presence.

Julian experienced those times, too, in her own heart, and acknowledged the paradox of having to seek a God who's supposed to be ever present, to endure pain in a creation supposedly sustained by the love of God, to suffer tragedy and death in a life through which Christ was purportedly “working things out.”

“I saw God, and sought God; I had God, and lacked God. This is and should be our ordinary undertaking in this life.” (Showings, p. 193)

Remarks Merton, “This was for Julian the heart of theology: not solving its contradiction, but remaining in the midst of it, in peace....”

Without trivializing the pain and suffering around her, despite God's felt presence or absence, regardless even of one's own belief or understanding or participation, yet Julian testified to the power and purpose of God's ultimate redemption through Christ Jesus. Merton called this conviction her “eschatological secret;” I call it her “hazelnut of hope” – Julian's revelation of that hidden dynamism in all of life that is work always and already at work, and by which, in the end, “all manner of things shall be well.”

To remind us of Julian's hope in God's far-reaching, determined and redeeming love, you'll find hazelnuts in the offering plates and in small bowls at the exit doors. As you offer your gifts to God today, or as you leave, take one with you as a sign of God's prevailing love, a hazelnut of hope from Julian of Norwich.

To the glory of God. Amen.