

**SLD06.24.07 12<sup>th</sup> Ordinary *Julian of Norwich*  
Emory Presbyterian Church  
Romans 8: 35, 37-38  
Jill Oglesby Evans**

**“A Hazelnut of Hope”**

Each summer Sunday during Ordinary Time, we at Emory Church look together at the lives of certain individuals whom I loosely call “saints;” that is, otherwise ordinary people whose choices and actions make them extraordinary witnesses of Christian faith. We examine their lives not so much for doctrinal or theological insight as for inspiration and imagination, ever on the lookout for ways the lives of other disciples might inform our own.

The process for selecting the particular “saints” on whom we focus is a fairly random one. I have my personal favorites, of course, as well as a panoply of holy ones about whom I’m simply curious. Every so often one of you will suggest a person for us to explore. And guest preachers always get to choose their own, which invariably adds a delightful unpredictability. Old Testament professor David Petersen chose Elijah, and Youth Minister, Deedra Rich chose living lay person, Agnes Church. In July, visiting preacher Tavye Morgan will explore activist Oscar Romero with you. And when we all worship together over at Trinity Church in Decatur the first week in August, Cecelya Taylor will preach on Howard Thurman.

Today, however, I get to choose. And my first choice this summer is 14<sup>th</sup> century English mystic, Blessed Julian of Norwich. (The “Blessed” part means Julian hasn’t made saint yet but is in the running. However, fixed as we Calvinists are on the total depravity of all humanity before God, we needn’t fret with such innuendo.)

Apart from the fact that she was born in Norwich, England in 1342, almost nothing is known about Julian's life except what she wrote about herself and her calling as an " anchoress." An anchoress is a female hermit who lives in seclusion for religious purposes. The solitary life of an anchoress was not unusual in medieval times. In order to follow this call, a new anchoress had first to satisfy the bishop that she had a genuine sense of call and an adequate means of support. After that, she would be solemnly conducted to her anchorhold, a small room often built into the wall of a church, where she would live the rest of her life.<sup>1</sup> (Durka, p.16)

Julian's anchorhold, where she lived for roughly forty years, was attached to St. Julian's Cathedral, from which she likely took her name. About ten feet square, with a small patch of garden outside, her room had an internal window through Julian could see the high altar of the church and participate in its services. A second window looked directly onto the road that ran beside the church. Counseling other Christians was a common feature in the life of an anchoress, and many visitors stopped to speak with Julian and ask for her prayers and help. (Durka, p. 35)

Finally there was a third door or window in the anchorhold through which Julian could communicate with her serving woman, who shopped and transacted necessary business for her. In addition, because of the depiction on a stained-glass window in Norwich Cathedral, it is often assumed that Julian also enjoyed the company of a cat in her anchorhold. Otherwise, no other creature entered her space, and certainly she never left it.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

So it's fair to wonder what a 14<sup>th</sup> century female hermit who spent forty years holed up in a ten-foot cubicle attached to the side of an English cathedral might have to say to 21<sup>st</sup> century peripatetic Presbyterians in Atlanta, Georgia? But I assure you, Julian's is a word for which Christians of every age and place hunger – that God is trustworthy. That, despite what we know, or what we feel or what's happening around or within us, we can, and must, trust God.

Certainly easier said than done, though don't imagine for a minute it was any easier for Julian than it is for us.

The period of time during which Julian lived was chaotic, tumultuous. Already by the time of her birth, the disharmony in the Catholic Church had caused its popes to abandon Rome and flee to Avignon, France. During the subsequent Great Schism, no less than three rivals laid claim to the papacy.

Meanwhile, England and France were fighting the perpetual, on-again, off-again, Hundred Years' War. Closer to home, rebel leaders of the Peasants' Revolt and rival kings kept deposing and executing one another, ravaging the area around Norwich in the process. Add to the political chaos and collapse of traditional institutions, three outbreaks of the bubonic plague in Julian's lifetime and you have a pretty good picture of her milieu.

In case you thought it couldn't get worse, at the age of thirty, Julian herself became seriously ill, to the point of receiving the last rites for the dying. But it was also during her illness that Julian received her 16 dramatic revelations about the nature and love of God, revelations she subsequently called "Showings." Over the years Julian wrote and rewrote her revelations into a work called the *Book of Showings*, which single

book established her as the first English woman of letters, the first theologian to write originally in English, and a brilliant scholar. Indeed, the *Book of Showings* has been described as the most profound and complex of all medieval spiritual writings. (Durka, pp. 18-19)

Commented perhaps the most widely admired spiritual writer of the twentieth century, Thomas Merton,

“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)

Also notable in Julian's *Book of Showings* is the remarkable imagination that informs both her theology and her spirituality. When ruminating on the Trinity, Julian's imagination expanded the imagery both for her day and for ours when she spoke of God as Maker, Keeper and Lover. She went on to write,

“And so I saw that God rejoices that he is our Father, and God rejoices that he is our Mother, and God rejoices that he is our true spouse, and that our soul is his beloved wife.” (*Showings*, p. 279)

In Julian's understanding of the Trinity, fatherhood meant power and goodness, and motherhood meant wisdom and lovingness. And she consistently identified Jesus in functional terms as “mother,” saying

“But our true Mother Jesus, he alone bears us for joy and for endless life, blessed may he be. So he carries us within him in love. ...The mother can give her child to suck of her milk, but our precious Mother Jesus can feed us with himself, and does, most courteously and most tenderly, with the blessed sacrament, which is the precious food of true life.” (*Showings*, p. 298)

Because of her imagination and ever expanding understanding of God's endless love for all humanity, Julian struggled for years with the seeming inconsistency between her revelations versus her Church's teachings regarding sin and God's judgment. Indeed, an obsession with damnation, death and the serpentine path to salvation seemed to permeate all of medieval life. But in the end, though she never rejected the teachings of her Mother Church, Julian worked out a theology of sin and salvation that was faithful to her own experience of God.

"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? God is the Creator and the Protector and the Lover." (*Showings*, p.183)

From this revelation, Julian learned two lessons that formed the foundation of her spiritual understanding. First, she gained insight into the awesome power of God the Creator, Keeper and Lover, whose hands hold, and whose heart loves, the entire universe, even to the tiniest hazelnut. Secondly, she saw how she needed to rely on God; more than rely on God – how much she needed to *cling* to God, to fasten herself irrevocably to her Maker, Keeper, and Lover, with an unshakeable belief in God's love and goodwill despite the uncontrollable aspects of life.. (Durka, p. 42) For, if out of love God created all things, surely out of love God also sustains all things.

"For our courteous Lord does not want his servants to despair because they fall often and grievously.

To be sure "we are not always in peace and love," reflects Julian, 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,” she writes, “but God did say, ‘you will not be overcome.’” (*Showings*, p. 315)

Of course, there’s the rub, isn’t it, for all people of faith – those times of trouble when we are “belaboured and disquieted,” when loss speaks louder than love, pain louder than peace, agony louder than hope. That’s when travail squeaks against the brakes of reason, faith rubs against doubt, and God’s absence registers with far more clarity than God’s love.

And so it was for Julian, who acknowledged the paradox of ever having to seek a God who ever is present, struggled with it the whole of her life, but in the end, did not try to resolve it:

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

“And so our 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.” (*Showings*, p. 229)

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

And whence comes such spiritual confidence? Such perseverance with trust? Julian’s answer, of course, was prayer.

“Pray wholeheartedly,” God told Julian, “though you may feel nothing, though you may see nothing, yes, though you think you could not; for in dryness and barrenness, in sickness and in weakness, then is your prayer most pleasing to me, though you think it almost tasteless to you.” (*Showings*, p.249)

Current day author Paula D’Arcy writes of a fearful moment when she is caught in a literal storm in the wilderness.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Gift of the Red Bird*, Paula D’Arcy, Crossroad Publishing, New York, 2003. pp. 115-117.

“The storm worsens. ...The animals’ screeches and the wind, rain, and thunder make the night feel wild. The lightning bolts are constant now. And this has all happened within the space of one hour. I think of a loved one who is dying from bone cancer. Is this how he feels? Caught up in a fury. Life changed without notice. His gentle God vanishes and all around is darkness and silence.

“Where are you, God, in this storm?” I ask aloud. Where are you when illness comes? How can it seem safe to believe in you when cancer roars through your body and eats your bones. How can it be safe to follow you and depend on you when the wind is so fierce and the sounds so frightening? Where are you, God? Why can’t I feel your presence anymore? ...Silence....”

“I feel betrayed,” writes D’Arcy. “I feel abandoned.

...Then I hear a question, deep within me, spoken into the night. ‘Paula, can you trust me even when you do not feel my presence? Can you trust me when there is no reassurance? Can you believe when you don’t understand my ways? Can you get yourself still, and just know that I am there?’ *Can you trust me?’*”

Julian’s answer was “yes.” Without trivializing the pain and suffering around her, the testimony of Julian’s life and revelations is that regardless of all circumstance, inner or outer, regardless of God’s felt presence or absence, or our belief or understanding, the power of God’s ultimate redemption through Christ Jesus is trustworthy. Merton called this conviction an “eschatological secret;” I call it a “hazelnut of hope” – Julian’s revelation of that hidden dynamism in all of life that is at work always and already, and by which, in the End, “all manner of things shall be well.”

The final testimony of the life of Julian of Norwich, and her gift to us today, is unshakeable trust in God. To remind us both of Julian’s gift and of God’s far-reaching love, you’ll find hazelnuts in the offering plates and in small bowls at the exit doors. As you give your gifts to God, or as you leave today, I hope you’ll take with you a hazelnut as a remembrance of the love and hope that is yours through God’s great goodness.

To the glory of God. Amen.