

ALL WILL BE WELL (II): THE SPIRAL DANCE
Sermon by Audette Fulbright
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All Souls Church, New York City

At certain points in the cycle of the year, my theology rises up in green, a spiral dance of life and the living, the earthy, tenacious power of birth and re-awakening. It takes me first to the wise woman who led me back to faith when I was lost – Starhawk, whose vision of the divine feminine always centers me:

*I who am the beauty of the green earth and the white moon among the stars
and the mysteries of the waters,*

I call upon your soul to arise and come unto Me.

For I am the soul of nature that gives life to the universe.

From Me all things proceed, and unto Me they must return.

*Let My worship be in the heart that rejoices, for behold -- all acts of love and
pleasure are My rituals.*

*Let there be beauty and strength, power and compassion, honor and humility,
mirth and reverence with you.*

*And you who seek to know me, know that your seeking and yearning will
avail you not, unless you know the Mystery:*

*For if that which you seek, you find not within yourself, you will never find it
without: for Behold, I have been with you from the beginning, and I am that
which attained at the end of desire.*

In spring, at midsummer, at harvest time and in midwinter, the spiral dance of the world leads me back to the women mystics, to the seers and sages and wisewimmin whose teachings have often been overlooked by the mainstream faith of the world.

So on this spring morning, I want to talk with you about one such woman.

To find her, we have to go back to the second half of the 14th century, an era of suffering. The Plague was rampant; 30 to 60% of Europe's population died. There was tremendous social and economic upheaval. The prevailing religious sentiment of the time was repentance: clearly God's wrath was being visited upon a sinful world, and all efforts should be turned toward appeasing an angry God.

It is therefore all the more surprising, perhaps, that out of this period should rise the woman whom Thomas Merton called, “the greatest of English mystics,” and the first female writer in the English language, Julian of Norwich. Her writings, based on the “showings” or visions she had while lying near death, are considered among the most uplifting and hopeful expressions of God in all of history. And she is one of our religious foremothers, as well. You see, Julian was a

medieval Universalist. The Christian Universalist Fellowship, of which our own Unitarian Universalist Christian Fellowship is a member, alongside Unity and the liberal Catholic church as well as the Reconciliation and Sonship Pentecostals, claims Julian as a Universalist, for in her *Revelations on Divine Love*, she says: "...by [God's] grace [we are] lift[ed] up and will draw our outer disposition to our inward, and will make us **all** at unity with [Godself], and each of us with others in the true, lasting joy..."

I say she was a Universalist, but let me pause there. As religious liberals with an open and affirming faith tradition, we sometimes have a habit of overemphasizing those beliefs we might share in common with people in other religious communities. Gandhi and the Dalai Lama both discussed this from time to time. They have gently pointed out, on occasion, that Buddhism and Christianity, or Hinduism and Christianity, for example, are not the same religion. And while there may be truth and value in each, one should not overlook the significance of the differences – differences which compelled Gandhi, as a Hindu, to do all that he did, and the demands of Buddhism which have made the Dalai Lama what he is. And so it is with Julian as well. It is vitally important we note that hers was a profoundly *Christian* theology, and more than that, her understanding was strongly Trinitarian. We Unitarians don't share that understanding with her. But Julian's relationship with her God and the power of her love for the Jesus she met in visions was transformative and has resonated with many people across the 500 years since her death. This is the very essence of modern Unitarian Universalism: to hold a deep and abiding respect for the religious understandings that give meaning to the lives of our fellow travelers, while seeking to listen and hear whether those understandings might better inform our own spiritual journey.

There is a pitfall we encounter, even or especially as religious liberals. Ironically, it's one we share in common with conservative faiths, and that is that some of us develop an arrogant disregard or disdain for certain religious ideas, dismissing them or imagining that only unintelligent people would believe them. It's to our credit, perhaps, that we don't tell others that they are going to hell for not believing as we do, but suggesting that they might be mentally deficient for believing as they do isn't much better. A touch of humility in religious matters is called for. No matter what it is we believe or do not believe, the thing about faith or lack of faith is this: we cannot *know*. And perhaps more importantly, it simply isn't Unitarian Universalist to put down the faiths of others. We are all expected to make our own search for truth and meaning, but we are also called to support one another in that search by extending respect and trust. And after all, we need not think alike to love alike. Humility and respect in religious matters: this is what we are called to.

I think Julian would have understood. Her vision of God was profoundly loving and generous; a God who had no wrath, whose only message and medium was loving. Again, consider the time in which she wrote, and the condition in which she received her visions. Almost dead from the plague, she had a series of sixteen visions, or "showings" as she called them. Then, unlike so many others, she recovered from her illness. She became an anchoress, essentially a hermit who lived in a cell attached to the local church, spending her life in contemplative prayer. She recorded her visions, and over a period of twenty years, she wrote and produced what would come to be called, *The Revelations of Divine Love*.

One of the stories that I find most powerful and touching is this one from the fifth showing. The following is partly my translation and partly that of others, such as Sylvia Maddox of ExploreFaith (.org).

In this same time, our Lord showed me a spiritual sight of his loveliness. I saw that He is to us everything that is good and comfortable, for He is that Love which clothes us, wraps us and protects us, and that He never leaves us, being everything that is good. And he also showed me a little thing; it looked and was the size of a hazel-nut, lying in the palm of my hand, as round as a ball. "I looked at the hazel nut 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. ¹

Julian was overwhelmed by her experience of divine love and a vision of God as Father/protector, Mother/creator, and lover. "As truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our mother. And [God reveals] that in everything and especially in these sweet words:

"I am the power and goodness of fatherhood, I am the wisdom and lovingness of motherhood. I am the light and grace which is all blessed love... do you wish to know your Lord's meaning in this thing? Know it well, love was his meaning. Who reveals it to you? Love. What did he reveal to you? Love. Why does he reveal it to you? For Love. Remain in this. And you will know more of the same." ²

Thus Julian came to the great truth that has been an essential experience for mystics throughout all the ages and in every religion: that the foundation of life itself is Love, and that we are each called to participate in that great Love which is the generative power of being.

In a troubled world, a question arises – for Julian, perhaps as for us – and that is if God is all Love and so wonderful and etc., then why is the world full of violence, despair, and suffering? And to this she heard the response: God is with you. "You will not be overcome. God did not say you will not be troubled, You will not be belaboured, You will not be disquieted; But God said, You will not be overcome."³ This is the question to which Julian spoke when she heard the words for which she is best known, "all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well."

In Julian's understanding, not one thing and not one person was beyond the loving embrace and the reconciling power of a God whose very being was Love itself. And in this way, we must hope to understand something more: that we ourselves are loveable, despite sin or fault, because God is in and with us in every breath and moment. We are all loveable. We are all loved. We are all saved. There was never any doubt, despite the appearances of our own limited viewpoints. The practice for knowing this in greater measure is to pray. Julian said, "Pray inwardly, even if you do not enjoy it. It does good, though you feel nothing. Yes, even though you think you are doing nothing."

The persistent power of Julian's message, I believe, is its hopefulness and its transcending trust in a loving, creative God. She is a teacher of hope and her message is that the most powerful force in all of creation is Love. Beyond that, though, as a woman I am grateful that her experience of God held an understanding of God's feminine face. In this, she was like Jesus, who

¹ Sylvia Maddox, "Julian of Norwich"

http://www.explorefaith.org/faces/saints_prophets_and_spiritual_guides/julian_of_norwich.php

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

– incredibly for his day – described God as a woman leavening bread or searching for a coin, as a mother hen gathering her chicks. In a time when the religious leadership was eager to root out heretics, who were thought to be in league with Satan, Julian's feminine imagery held similar risk. But she wrote and trusted that her work would fall into the hands of, as she put it, “God's other lovers.” And so it did.

In a world where harm falls so viciously on the innocent, where truth is treated with despairing disregard, it is crucial that we root ourselves in a faith that declares that beauty, wonder, and joy are our cornerstones, a faith which, like Julian's, believes that God or Life itself wants us to know and be love. So may we remember, today and always, “that all will be well and all shall be well and all manner of things will be well.”

Amen.