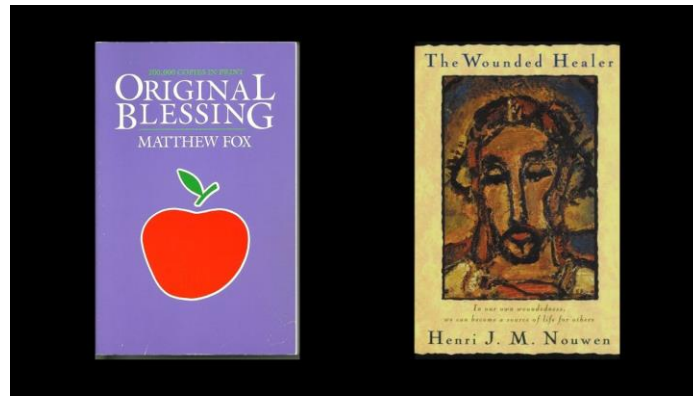


**Sermon: Bookshelf Gems: #3 Love Love Love Text John 4:7-19 August 4, 2024
Rev Steve Clifton Rideau Park United Church Ottawa ON**



Someone has said that “we spend the first two thirds of our lives acquiring things and the last third of our lives trying to get rid of it all.” For retiring clergy, who spent decades accumulating books, there comes the time when you need to find them a new home.

In the weeks of summer, August through Labour Day, I am sharing with you, each week, something rediscovered on my bookshelves, a book or an author who has something to say to us in our present moment.

In week one I shared Henri Nouwen and his classic book *The Wounded Healer*. Then it was *Original Blessing* by Matthew Fox. Both books were from the 1980s but still have relevance.



If we think books from the 1980s might be vintage titles, today we are going to something written in the 1380s or thereabouts.

It is the first book published in the English language that was authored by a woman.

And this book was composed over decades of prayer and reflection. It’s a work of contemplative remembrance that is one of the great writings of the Christian mystic tradition. In

our era this book has been popularized again and rediscovered, perhaps because this very old book speaks to the peculiarities of our time as it did hers.

A couple of summers back, Keva and I had the opportunity to spend time in Yorkshire, England, near the market town of Skipton. In the Anglican Cathedral there, we encountered this:



It's the interior wall and window of an anchorite cell.

In the high Middle Ages, one path for contemplative living involved becoming an anchorite, or for women – an anchoress. In England, women anchoresses outnumbered male anchorites 4 to 1. Anchorites took a vow of stability of place, opting for permanent enclosure in cells attached to churches.



They weren't hermits. Their cells opened inside the church so that they could be part of the worshipping congregation. And their cells opened to the world on the outside, so that they could offer counsel and receive news of the world.

Today's book, written in an anchoress cell, is *Revelations of Divine Love*, by Julian of Norwich.

Norwich in Julian's day was the second largest city in England, a town of wealth and importance because it was the center of the English wool trade. Medieval Norwich was connected to the whole world by trade.

And we call this anchoress Julian but in fact we don't know her name. She chose to be enclosed in the Parish Church of St Julian and so by the saint's name she is remembered.

Her cell, as it was in her day no longer stands. It was levelled by bombs in the Blitz of the Second World War.

So why would Dame Julian choose to be walled up in her parish church. She chose the life of an anchoress in order to reflect on a life-changing and powerful mystical experience that she had when she was about 30 years old.

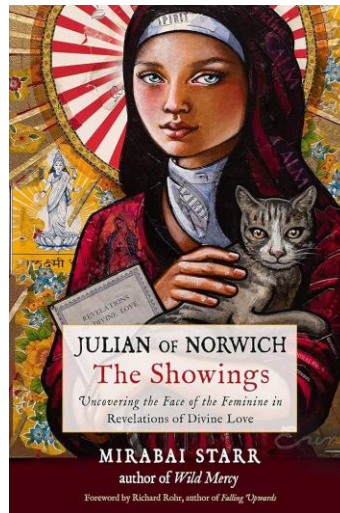


Julian was ill and slipping from this life. Her mother called for the local priest to come to offer final prayers. He held a crucifix above her and invited her to gaze into the image of Christ on the cross.

And in that moment, she had a vision of Christ and in total 16 visions, what some might call a Near Death Experience, visions of the Oneness of all things, a mystical encounter with the Deepest Reality, a vision so potent that she felt compelled to recall it, reflect upon it and to

write it down in two forms, a shorter and longer version. Hers was an experience so profound that she entered her cell to plumb the wonder and depth of her holy encounter with Jesus.

Julian survived her illness and lived on in her cell, well into her 70s. In that time, she wrote her Revelation of Divine Love.



We know a few things about the holy woman we call Julian.

She may have had a feline companion. Artists often depict her with a cat.

She would have had a servant. A young girl who could come and go, deliver messages, and provide what was needed to live.

She no doubt had experienced loss. Scholars who study her writings suggest that Julian had lost someone close to her; her writing hints at this. And she lived at the time of the Black Death, - it rolled through England three times in her lifetime - with 1/3 to 1/2 of England's population being claimed by plague. Everyone in her time would have known loss.

From the window of her cell, she would hear of years of crop failure with the accompanying hunger in the population. The Peasants revolt led to chaos and instability in her time. War raged in Europe. She remained in her cell but did so with a deep openness to the world.

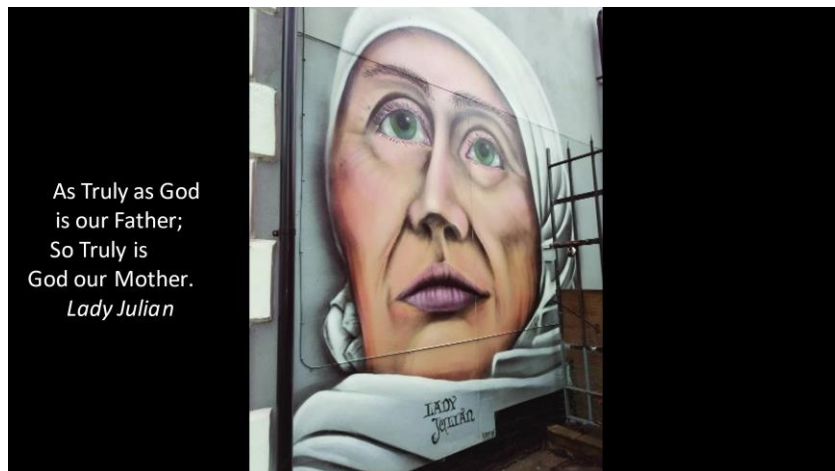
And Julian was known beyond her hometown, even before her writings became known. Another English mystic and writer named Margery Kempe, wrote about a trip to visit Julian, with whom she spent some days, seeking counsel.

=====



Julian recorded her revelations in a time of unrest and struggle; her window opened on a world that was full of heartache.

Her Revelations in contrast are bright and clear, hopeful, and optimistic, radiant amid a shadowed world. She wrote her most famous words even with all that bad news swirling around her. She wrote: “All shall be well/ and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” All shall be well- repeated three times, like a mantra of encouragement – in the end all shall be well. That is Julian`s Revelation.



A few of her insights:

- Julian saw Jesus as a mother. In Christ's Passion she was a motherly love, like a mother giving everything for her children. Like much of the mystical tradition she saw the feminine in God.



- Dame Julian had a vision of all creation resting safely in the palm of God's hand. And in a moment of profound insight, she knew that three things were true. Her words: "The first is that God made it. The second is that God loves it. And the third, is that God keeps it." Julian was confident that God was faithful to what God made. Hers was not a distant and indifferent deity, not an aloof God who made us and then went off to do other things: What God made, God loves and keeps.
- Julian saw that all the sin and darkness of the world was as nothing. God was love, all-encompassing love. And sin was just the absence of that love. Evil was not a thing of itself; it is just where love is not.
- In her self-isolation, Julian reflected on the goodness of God: like a vast expanse of virgin snow, pure and white, radiant and unending. On the white expanse there was a tiny grain of darkness. Almost too small to notice. All the ills and evils of the world were like a tiny speck beside a cosmic field of pure radiant love and goodness. The Divine Love was all.



And what a revelation it is now, and was then to hear that God is love. All love. Vast, pure incomprehensible, radiant love. We know it, but we forget it.

In Julians day as the Black Death swept through her world, the judgement of God was preached. The plague was seen as the wrath of God. Hardship was a deserved punishment from a vengeful deity. Crop failure, hard dark winters, social unrest- all the struggles of her time were characterized as the judgement of God. But Julian sees the Divine and Julian sees just love. A love that sufferers with, endures beside, bringing all to right.

In our time, we can remember how often God is spoken of as angry. How often is God characterized in our day as a steely eyed judge, harsh, uncompromising at least towards certain people?

The voices that declare an angry God have always been loud. One prominent American evangelical has expressed a preference for Jesus of Revelation over the Christ of the gospels. He see Jesus riding on a war horse, sword in hand, eager to smite whatever enemies we would imagine.

At the Pride Parade today as there is every year there will be a few people displaying signs about God's wrath and judgement in the midst of the many demonstrating inclusion and love. It's as important now as ever to hear Julian's deeper vision: "God loved us before he made us; *[she writes]*-and his love has never diminished and never shall." "God loved us before he made us; _ -and his love has never diminished and never shall."

In the 14th Century a young woman had an encounter with the Holy so profound, that she stayed in place for the rest of her life to consider its wonder. In spite of the troubles of her times, she saw what was true and shares her visions even now.

In our times, in a world that is shadowed still, might we hear her words again. "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well." As we are all held in Gods all-encompassing radiant love: All shall be well.

Amen