Darkness Visible, Light Indivisible

Easter 4

May 7, 2017

From Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, Fifth Chapter

Psalm 23 1 Peter 2:19-25 John 10:1-10

May Christ be with you.

And also with you.

Let us pray.

Lord God, in your compassion you granted to the Lady Julian many revelations of your nurturing and sustaining love: Move our hearts, like hers, to seek you above all things, for in giving us yourself you give us all. . . . Amen.

I told one of my classes this past Thursday that the older—and older— I get, the fewer things I see in black and white. Almost every issue, every situation, has nuances, gradations, and multi-hued grays.

But with the feast day tomorrow of Julian of Norwich[[1]](#footnote-1) and the passage this past Thursday of the Administration’s health care bill,[[2]](#footnote-2) I see things this week very much in black and white, white and black.

This stark dichotomy confronts us Christians in our very viscera, in the sacred center of our hearts and souls.

We have a choice to make.

But what can a medieval English mystic possibly have to do with a healthcare bill? Could this be a blind date gone horribly wrong?

But before we get to Dame Julian and the healthcare bill, we need to wrestle with our reading from John’s Gospel. And we can’t tag-team here: each of us has to go toe-to-toe, *mano a mano*, with John.

In John’s Gospel today, Jesus says, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.

Ah, isn’t that sweet? But then he declares, “All who came before me are thieves and bandits.”

“All who came before me are thieves and bandits.”

In other words, John’s Jesus is saying that Moses and Torah and all the great prophets of Israel—Isaiah, Amos, and Jeremiah—are cutpurses, muggers, and worse; vandalizers waiting to desecrate our homes.

This is John at his dichotomizing and demonizing worst.

John is the Gospel of us versus them. For us to understand this, we need history and context. John’s Jesus-people have either just left the synagogue or have been kicked out.

And John is really, really unhappy about this.

We need to have compassion for John and his community. His age was not like ours. Now, if you leave one church, you just walk down the street to another. That was not remotely possible in John’s day. His group must have been devastated, at a loss, bereft of their heritage, completely alienated. Terrified. Angry and bitter.

But, let’s face it, John chose the wrong way to deal with this: he chose the path of we’re right and you’re wrong; not only that, but only our way leads to salvation; your way leads to perdition and doom.

Only in John’s Gospel is Jesus the only way to God; only in John’s Gospel does Jesus practically spit out the phrase “*the Jews*” at his fellow Judeans. An impossibility.

“Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits.”

I don’t believe Jesus said a word of that.

Actually, I’m exaggerating: I think Jesus could well have said that he was the good shepherd, or the gate to the sheepfold, or the gate. Jesus loved such metaphors. But I don’t believe for a minute that he said “Whoever enters by me will be saved.”

In other words, if you *don’t* enter by me, you’re out of luck.

In other words, if you don’t accept *John’s* version of Jesus, you’re out of luck.

The permutations and infiltrations of this idea may very well be the most unfortunate aspect of Christianity. Sadly, such wanton segregating occurs in every religion.

John’s us-versus-them thinking horrifies me. Here, darkness has indeed overcome the light of Christ.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Since last year, a cruel darkness has been spreading over our land: it’s a darkness like John’s, of us vs. them: whites vs. non-white, citizens vs. immigrants, rich versus poor.

The health care bill that just passed the House has just made darkness visible.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The healthcare bill, if unchanged by the Senate, will

* strip at least 24 million Americans of [health insurance](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/health/diseasesconditionsandhealthtopics/health_insurance_and_managed_care/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier).
* It will cut $880 billion over 10 years from Medicaid. Medicaid provides health care to about 74 million poor, disabled, and elderly Americans. The cuts will also hurt [special education programs](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/03/us/politics/health-bill-medicaid-special-education-affordable-care-act.html).
* The bill will provide $300 billion less over 10 years to help people who do not get insurance through employers and have to buy their own policies. This will hurt lower-income and older people the hardest. . . . Many people who find themselves in this situation will have no choice but to [go without insurance](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/03/opinion/trump-health-care.html?emc=edit_ty_20170504&nl=opinion-today&nlid=63507744&te=1&_r=0).
* **This bill will gut protections for people with pre-existing conditions; it will** allow states to waive the requirement that insurers sell policies to people with prior health problems and not charge them higher rates.
* **It will defund Planned Parenthood.** . . and take federal money away from the organization, which provides [birth control](http://health.nytimes.com/health/guides/specialtopic/birth-control-and-family-planning/overview.html?inline=nyt-classifier), cancer screenings, and other health services to 2.5 million people, mainly women.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Such a so-called healthcare bill is cruel in the extreme.

Such a healthcare bill is immoral.

So, what do we do?

Each of us, as followers of the gospel, must do *something*.

The action I’m about to describe isn’t about the healthcare bill, but it’s related: three of us from St. Paul’s with other social justice activists met this past week with Supervisor Leticia Perez; we’re working with her and Faith in the Valley[[6]](#footnote-6) to have St. Paul’s host a town hall discussion on Senate Bill 54, the bill concerning sanctuary.[[7]](#footnote-7)

But, dear friends in Christ, before we act further we need to pray.

In the ‘60s, a time of much violence, hatred, and war, Thomas Merton reminded Christian activists that their actions must come from a place of deep prayer, of silence, of spiritual reading,[[8]](#footnote-8) of communion with God and one another.

Before we hit the streets, Merton says, we need to still our restless minds; we need to expunge our own fears, angers, and hatreds; we need to center ourselves in the loving creativity of God and the compassionate teaching, example, and ministry of Jesus.

We can do so today with Dame Julian of Norwich as our spiritual guide:

Today Julian is meditating first on the bleeding of Jesus’ self-sacrifice:

At the same time as I saw this sight of our good Lord’s head bleeding, he showed a spiritual sight of his familiar love. I saw that he is to us everything which is good and comforting for our help.

Julian sees *at the same time* both Jesus’ bleeding and his love. They are inextricably bound together.

Julian speaks of Jesus’ “familiar” love, “our good Lord’s head bleeding.” That is, in the English of Julian’s day, Jesus’ love is that of a mother or father within family, intimate and friendly. Jesus, like a good mother, bleeds for us; he, Julian says, “is our clothing, who wraps and enfolds us for love, embraces us and shelters us, surrounds us for his love.”

Julian today is showing us three essentials for our faith:

1. A spirituality of love must—must—coincide with, indwell, self-sacrificial bleeding, the bleeding of Jesus.
2. With the metaphor of the hazelnut in the palm of her hand, Julian offers us another essential truth: God, she perceives, is “the Creator and the Protector and the Lover.”
3. Her third point is absolutely central if we are to work for God’s justice: we must be “substantially united” to God; we “can never have perfect rest or true happiness” until we are “so attached to [God] that there can be no created thing between” God and us.

That is, we must be God-inspirited advocates of justice through peaceful action.

Peaceful action. Peaceful thoughts for those who oppose us. Peaceful prayer in love and forgiveness.

Sisters and brothers, we live in a soul-searing time.

Perhaps all times sear the soul; perhaps all times serrate its divinity. But with issues such as the healthcare bill and sanctuary, God calls us to choose: will we help those in need, or will we stand by and watch?

I think we really are in a black-and-white situation.

But you know what? As Julian tells us, we have God “the Creator and the Protector and the Lover” always with us.

We have Jesus, our loving model of compassion and caring, always with us.

And we have the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, the Guide, our Protector and Advocate and loving Counsellor, always with us.

Amen.

1. <http://prayer.forwardmovement.org/the_calendar_response.php?id=400508>; <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julian_of_Norwich>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/04/us/politics/health-care-bill-vote.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See John 1:5. The irony is almost incredible. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness* is a book by William Styron; the phrase comes from Milton, *Paradise Lost*: “As one great furnace flamed, yet from those flames / No light, but rather darkness visible / Served only to discover sights of woe, / Regions of sorrow, doleful shades. . . .” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/04/opinion/obamacare-house-vote.html?partner=rssnyt&emc=rss>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <http://faithinthevalley.org/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <http://www.sacbee.com/news/politics-government/capitol-alert/article142502974.html>; <https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201720180SB54>. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Spiritual or contemplative reading is reading not for facts and information but for reflection and deepening of the spirit. Spiritual reading may use not just the Bible and “religious texts,” but novels and poetry, biography and autobiography. You don’t zoom through spiritual reading; you pause, often, for reflection. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)