Christ Our Mother, 05-14-23

**Matthew 23:37-39 (NRSV)**

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you, desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

**A Song of Our True Nature, by Julian of Norwich**

“Christ revealed our frailty and our falling, our trespasses and our humiliations. Christ also revealed the blessed power of blessed wisdom and love. Our Mother Christ protects us tenderly and sweetly when we are in greatest need; and raises us in spirit and turns everything to glory and joy without ending. God is the ground and the substance, the very essence of nature. God is the true father and mother of all nature. We are all bound to God by nature, and we are all bound to God by grace. And this grace is for all the world, because it is from our precious mother, Christ. For this fair nature was prepared by Christ for the honor and nobility of all, and for the joy and bliss of salvation.”

**Sermon:**

I credit our choir director Bruce Gladstone for the theme and emphasis of worship today. On April 19th, he emailed me the lyrics of an anthem the choir would be singing on Mother’s Day, lyrics inspired by Julian of Norwich – “As truly as God is our Father, so just as truly is he our Mother.”

Of course, I thought! Julian of Norwich and her teachings on God our Mother, Christ our Mother, Jesus our Mother! Perfect for Mother’s Day!

So Julian is our preacher/teacher today even though she’s been gone over 600 years. Today’s music, readings and sermon give voice to her theological emphasis on “Christ Our Mother.”

Julian was born in 1342 and died in 1416 at the age of 74. She lived during a very calamitous time in England – a time of famine, war, and the Black Death, a plague that over the course of the 14th century killed an estimated 450 million people, about 30-60% of the population of Europe. The first outbreak of plague in England was in 1348, when Julian was six years old.

In the midst of all this suffering, Julian was inspired to write: “God made us for love. Open up to this love totally and with total trust. Let it become our sole guide in life.” Clearly Julian believed that even in periods of great tribulation, God calls us to peace, love and joy.

As Julian herself recounts, in May 1373, most likely on the 13th of that month, she was suddenly stricken with a very serious illness that in three days seemed to be carrying her to the grave. After the priest, who hastened to her bedside, had anointed her, and held before her the Crucifix, not only did Julian rapidly recover her health but she received the 16 revelations that she subsequently wrote down and commented on in her book, *Revelations of Divine Love* (It is worth noting she was the first woman to write a book in English). She wrote the first version down that same year but spent the next 15 to 20 years unpacking those experiences and recording the deeper layers of meaning, as they were revealed to her, in a second longer version of text.

Meanwhile, Julian became anchoress at St. Julian’s Church in Norwich, where she was enclosed in a cell, bricked-in, ritually entombed with a window opening into the church so she could attend Mass and receive communion, and a window opening to the outside world through which she received food and offered spiritual direction to visitors. Having taken vows of poverty, chastity and stability of location, she meditated, prayed and contemplated in seclusion with her cat at her side.

There is evidence of her internalized misogyny in the first version written at age 30. ”God forbid that you should say I am a teacher, for that is not and never was my intention; for I am a woman, ignorant, weak and frail (Short Text, 6).”

But in the second version written 20 years later, she removed her misogynist disclaimer. She explains how her 16 showings are teachings, fully equivalent to Scripture.

Ponder that for a moment, even in the 1300’s, some women were waking up to their equality with men and assuming roles that were characteristically assumed only by men.

There are many in our day who identify Julian as queer! She is a pioneer in her unequivocal feminism, making gender-bending references to God our Mother, Christ our Mother, even Jesus our Mother.

She is also centuries ahead of her time in her progressive spirituality and mystical theology. Despite the strict, accusatory, judgmental and hostile attitudes of the institutional church which were all about avoiding eternal damnation, she embodied and taught an optimistic spirituality based on being loved & protected by God, a spirituality that is best known in her statement, “And so our good Lord answered to all questions and doubts which I could raise, saying most comfortably: ‘I will make all things well, and you will see yourself that every kind of thing will be well.’“

For many of us who were raised in toxic religion, and especially for the LGBT community, which has suffered so much by the accusatory and hostile institutional church, we are delighted, encouraged, and strengthened by Julian’s optimism that “All will be well, and all will be well. All manner of things will be well.”

Take a moment of silence considering all the challenges in your life right now. Speak to your heart saying, “All will be well, and all will be well. All manner of things will be well.”

Take another moment to note how you, like Julian, have moved beyond toxic, biased, exclusive, judgmental, hostile messaging and indoctrination in church and society to land where you are here today.

Now let’s dive more deeply into Julian’s teachings on “Christ our Mother.”

Clearly, Julian identifies the characteristics of a good mother with Jesus, characteristics like tenderness, gentleness and sometimes fierceness, nurture, healing, protection, forgiveness, sacrifice, and hard work.

Julian would have resonated with the Gospel writer’s description of “Christ Our Mother Hen” gathering her chicks under her wings to protect them from danger!

The motif of mother and child is central to all the world's mystical traditions. Even Buddhism, which Westerners tend to see as essentially cerebral in its emphasis on mental training, has as one of its central tenets the Buddha's own instruction, "Learn to love the whole world as a mother loves her only child."

During the Middle Ages in Europe, the figure of the Madonna and child came to be very nearly as important as the crucifix itself. One of the most widespread devotions of the time was to imagine oneself beholding, even nursing, the infant Jesus. A great many women mystics experienced this in dreams or visions. **Julian of Norwich, however, went much further by attributing to God, specifically to Christ, the love of a mother for her child.**

A good many earlier mystics and theologians had touched upon the theme, including Augustine, Anselm of Canterbury, and Bernard of Clairvaux, but none had developed it as fully or creatively as Julian did.

Even before Julian identifies Christ explicitly as a birthing mother, she establishes the connection through certain images, the most obvious of which derives from the biblical tradition that holds that after Christ's death a soldier pierced his side with a spear so that blood and water issued forth.

In the 24th chapter of Julian’s “long text,” she describes the Lord gazing into his side, through the wound, into "a fair and delectable place." Afterward, he brings to mind "the dear and precious blood and water which he suffered to be shed for love." To a woman, the suggestion is sufficiently explicit: in birth her water breaks and her blood flows. The "fair and delectable place" within Christ seems recognizable enough as the womb itself.

Simply put, we might look deep inside ourselves and discover the source of love.

Julian writes: “The mother gives her child suck of her milk, but our precious Mother, Jesus, feeds us with himself. The Mother lays the child tenderly to her breast, but our tender Mother, Jesus, homely leads us into his blessed breast, by his sweet open side, and shews therein part of the Godhead and the joys of Heaven, with spiritual sureness of endless bliss.”

She taught: Jesus is our Mother in nature, grace, mercy, goodness and love. In her we are “grounded & rooted, whole & safe without end.” In our Mother Jesus “we are blissfully *oned* to our Substance.” Our Mother Jesus holds all our parts together, reforms & restores us.

Julian saw “that Jesus our Mother is to us everything which is good and comforting….He is our clothing, who wraps and enfolds us for love, embraces us and shelters us, surrounds us for his love, which is so tender that He may never desert us.”

She continues: “When a child is hurt, it runs hastily to the mother for help, with all its might.” And Jesus wants us to do this and to say: “My kind Mother, my gracious Mother, my dearworthy Mother, have mercy on me.”

“When we fall, (Christ Our Mother) raises us by his lovely calling and gracious touching. And when we are thus strengthened by his sweet working, then we with all our will choose him, by his sweet grace, to be his servants and his lovers lastingly without end.”

Through those 16 revelations and the subsequent years of unpacking their many layers of meaning, Julian realized that the God she learned about in church was too small and that the abundance of God’s love & forgiveness is freely given as a mother freely loves and forgives her children.

Julian had encountered--and continued to experience—and then wrote down that everyone and everything is in GOD-LOVE and GOD-LOVE is in everyone and everything.

I don’t think it’s coincidental that Julian, who was encased in a cell for most of her adult life uses the word “encasement” to describe our relationship with God. **The divine is encased in us, and we are encased in the divine.** All humans, with diversity of age, race, culture, physical, mental & emotional ableness; sexual orientations, gender identities & expressions; varying degrees of religiosity…***all*** humans are encased in the divine, and the divine is encased in us.

In her contemplative conversations with Jesus, Julian asked, “Why did you do all that you have done for us?” And Jesus answered: “For Love.”

Julian’s reputation as a spiritual counselor spread far beyond the region around Norwich—people from all over England and from northern Europe made pilgrimage to her anchorhold eager to receive themselves comfort in their afflictions and a visitation from God. In the midst of so much suffering from violence and sickness, poverty and injustice, selfishness and corruption, Julian spoke about Love. Seeing all that hardship through the loving eyes of Christ our Mother, we may become exactly the kind of love that the world needs. And we will know with certainty that *All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well.*

Julian offers Christians today language for God and the spiritual life that is maternal and distinctively feminine.

This gives us permission to approach God as Mother *and* Father. This will be liberating for some and difficult for others. Hopefully, this language can open new doors for our intimacy with God.

Surely you’ve noticed that here at Orchard Ridge, we strive to use inclusive and expansive language. Out of respect for the historic Christian tradition, we may choose to pray prayers and sing music that were written before the exclusive aspects of male dominant language were understood. But as often as possible we move away from male dominant language and offer versions of familiar prayers, psalms, and hymns that use an expansive array of metaphors for the Divine, including the Divine Feminine.

Julian had an experience of divine love and spent the rest of her life unpacking the experience, trying to figure out how to actually become that love.

We too have had experiences of divine love, a love that transforms us, moves us to tears and laughter, and motivates us to love God, love others and love ourselves.

Not just on Mother’s Day, but every day, may we become the love of Christ, our Mother.