

## Lenten Meditation 2

Source: *Wild Mercy* by Mirabai Starr, chapter 7

### A Meditation on God as a Loving Mother

For the Christian mystic Julian of Norwich, it was obvious that God is a mother.

That wasn't Julian's real name, by the way. The woman we know as Julian of Norwich was an anonymous medieval anchoress who walled herself into a small cell attached to the Saint Julian's church in Norwich, England, where she produced some of the most stunning and subversive writings in the history of Christendom. While the majority of her time was spent in prayer and contemplation, Julian also cultivated a garden in a small courtyard adjoining her anchorage and she kept bees. She was not a hermit however, the anchor kept designated hours at a window that open onto the busy streets of Norwich, from which she offered counsel to the townspeople about everything from the deaths of their loved ones to the interpretation of their dreams.

The most controversial of Julian's teachings was her declaration of God-the-mother. The second person of the Trinity, Julian reasoned, had to be female, because who but a mother would break herself open and pour herself out for love of her children? This is what Christ did, Julian reminds us, he incarnated for love. And this is what he continues to do. Like a loving mother, Christ takes a personal interest in every single being, forgiving us when we screw up and rejoicing when we return to love. "Only he who is our true mother and source of all life, may rightfully be called by this name," Julian wrote, sweeping aside, gender binaries, "Nature, love, wisdom, and knowledge are all attributes of the mother, which is God."

How did she get away with this? You might ask. Was the patriarchy on vacation when Julian proclaimed the motherhood of the divine? Were men more tolerant in the Middle Ages? Hardly! Julian hid her writings under her bed and after she died, a protégé (also anonymous) spirited the pages away where they were more or less lost in obscurity for about 500 years before being rediscovered and translated from middle English to modern English at the turn of the 20th century. Julian, a contemporary of Chaucer, was the first woman to write in English because she was not permitted to learn Latin, the language of the church. The only way for her to express herself was in the vernacular.

It's not as if Julian suddenly decided to risk everything and speak out about God. A near-death experience impelled her. When Julian was 30, having born witness to three rounds of the plague - estimated to have wiped out a third of the population of England (which means at least three out of every 10 people Julian knew and loved died a terrible death) - she became gravely ill herself. Her mother called the priest to administer last rights. The

cleric held a crucifix above Julian's face, instructing her to gaze at the suffering Christ on the cross, assuring her that when she died she would go directly to heaven to be with him.

As Julian stared at her crucified Beloved, the room around her began to fade, and Jesus sprang to life. In a series of visions she called "The Showings," Christ revealed to Julian the nature of the universe (Love) and of the human soul (Love) and of God's attitude toward all of creation (unmitigated, unconditional Love). When against all odds, she recovered her health, how could she do anything else but write it all down so that she would never forget it? Julian insists that she wasn't trying to correct the "Holy Mother Church" in reporting the details of the teachings she received. She was simply testifying as accurately as she could to the blessing of her own experience.

It was clear to Julian that Christ made these revelations, not for her alone, but for all humanity. So she pledged her life to God and to living what he (she) had revealed. She entered the anchorage and contemplated the notes she had initially made of everything Christ said to her (known as the "short text"). Then, over the course of 20 years, Julian proceeded to write commentaries on each of the 16 showings (known as the "long text").

Julian of Norwich understood that the Divine Essence embodies the full range of feminine qualities, from mercy in response to wickedness to courage in the face of danger, from "homey friendliness" to passion. God-the-mother encourages us in states of paralyzing doubt, even as she challenges us to subvert entrenched systems of power and authority, and cultivate a direct relationship with the Holy in the temple (or anchorage!) of our own souls.

"On our spiritual path, the Beloved asks only two things of us: that we love him and that we love each other. This is all we have to strive for... In my opinion the most reliable sign that we are following both these teachings is that we are loving each other... Be assured that the more progress you make in loving your neighbor the greater will be your love for God". -Teresa of Avila

**Side note:** Some of us have been so deeply damaged by our mothers that we recoil from the company of women. The whole notion of a divine mother may trigger our woundedness around the ways we were or weren't mothered. There is no reason to force a connection to the sacred feminine. Maybe our true home rests in formlessness. We may find refuge in the holy emptiness, devoid of binary characteristics, free from traumatic associations. The more we seek and attend to what is real inside the holy temple of our own hearts, the more we will find healthy and loving manifestations of her in the world.

### **An Exercise in Mothering:**

Write a letter to a child as if you knew you were going to die soon, passing along what you most wish for them to know. What is your deepest wisdom, your highest truth? The things that delight you, in which you'd like the child also to take delight? Secrets you are ready to reveal or heroes who have inspired you? Distill the essence of your legacy in this letter.