



LESSONS IN LIVING

“Introduction to Christian Mysticism”

“This, Too, is God.”

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
November 23, 2025

Scripture Reading: Genesis 50:14-21 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

After the burial of his father, Joseph, the brothers and all the others in the caravan returned to Egypt. Pondering their father's death, Joseph's brothers said, “What if Joseph is angry with us and repays us for all the wrong we did him?” So they approached Joseph, saying: “Before Jacob died he said to us, ‘You must say to Joseph: I beg you, please forgive your brothers their crime and their sin and all the wrong they did you.’ Now therefore, we ask you, forgive the crime of us who are faithful to the God of your parents.”

Joseph wept when he heard this. Then the brothers wept also, and fell down before him, saying, “We present ourselves before you, as your attendants.” Joseph replied, “Don't be afraid; is it for me to put myself in God's place? You planned evil for me, but God planned it for the good, as it has come to pass this day—to bring about the survival of many people. So you need not be afraid. I myself will provide for you and your little ones.” In this manner he assured them with words that touched their hearts.

Sermon

Welcome. Thank you for sharing the morning with us. We're on a series talking about mysticism.

My thought of mysticism is not that it's supernatural. It's looking at those core experiences of meaning that human beings have, the sense of the oneness of things, the sense of coming out of whatever the creative source of the universe is. I feel that religion built on those experiences is a foundation of stone, whereas if you just take up what's been taught to you and it doesn't resonate with your experience, you may find a very insecure foothold on reality.

We're looking at mysticism, again, not as magical or whimsical, but as the most meaningful experiences you've ever had. Looking up at the stars and feeling a tie that binds or being in a forest and feeling yourself a part of the web of life. These are the profound experiences, I think, that are missing in most modern religion in this nation.

A long time ago, I was reading Joseph Campbell. I can't remember which book, but he was talking about Sanskrit, and he said that Sanskrit is *the* great language to describe human consciousness. He said that people who live up in the Arctic develop a vocabulary where they can talk about snow with multiple words that we never even would imagine. He said that Sanskrit is like that with human consciousness.

Obviously, as a nerd, I wanted to start studying that, so I bought a bunch of books that were in English and Sanskrit. One night I was reading, I think one of the Upanishads, and the translator was talking about his process of translating. He was somebody who had translated a bunch of the books that I'd read. He said that as he studied Hinduism, he found four great truths, four great truths of life. I was wide awake, like okay, I want to hear those. They're sort of the basis of this series.

One is "*all is one*," he said. That sense of the interwovenness of things is one, I think, mystical experience. Another is "*I am that*" where you feel yourself almost sent into the world, that you realize you have a gift the world needs. Maybe the world hasn't given you permission to do that. Maybe the church hasn't recognized your gifts, but it's a truth within you. Next week, we'll look at the third truth which is "*all is intelligence*," that the universe consists of patterns, and those patterns are not random. They're mathematical, so that life can be our teacher.

But the truth that we're looking at today is probably the hardest lesson in life, and of the mystical states it's probably the one that most people don't want to make time for. I think if anybody learns it, it's usually late in life, if at all. The phrase there is "*this too is God*." It's addressed to the moments in life that are the most hurtful, the most painful, the most disappointing. If God isn't a metaphor you use, then translate it as "*this too is sacred*." This too has a lesson to teach me.

We're looking at the story of Joseph, but I'm just using it as an example. We're not going to really go into it very much. But the phrase, "*You meant it for evil, but God (or the sacred) meant it for good*"—that's a theme that illustrates "*this, too, is sacred*." This, too, is God.

It sometimes doesn't matter where your pain comes from. When you try to rationalize and try to act like life is fair or that God is trying to teach you a lesson, sometimes that just doesn't work. Sometimes life is just too unfair, and it makes you crazy to try to come up with reasons why anybody would do that to you or someone you love. Instead of trying to make it fair, realize that whatever happens can teach us something. Whatever happens comes from the creative principle that gave us birth.

Things like death and disease, as much as we hate them, are the preconditions for our existence in the first place. In an evolving universe, some critters have got to get out of the way. If there was no death, no disease, the dinosaurs would still be here, and that would be unpleasant. [laughter] And all those strange little things that are in the fossils. [laughter]

Life is evolving. It is shapeshifting. When we don't accept that, and I would say most modern Christianity does not accept that, most modern Christianity tells you that you'll keep your form up in a house in the sky. It doesn't get you to say yes to the transformation that you experience

every day of your life, every minute. The answer to our fear and our loneliness and our despair is to say yes to that movement.

I don't believe that God is a great puppet maker in the sky. I don't believe that God is a great Santa Claus that's watching over us and making sure life is fair. If so, somebody's lucky to have the job, because it's a hard life sometimes. But if it weren't hard, we would not be here. Beauty is linked to the sadness, irrevocably. We cannot separate those. Things that are inconvenient, if we'll let them, drive us deeper into life. They can become sustaining for us.

I live in an apartment, and the thing I hate most in life is when somebody moves above me who likes loud music with really boring bass solos. [laughter] We just had a couple move out that's been there for three years, and I think they're on cocaine [laughter] or something [laughter] because twenty-four hours a day, they're making noise. So, I hate to see them go. [laughter] They'd be such a good illustration of the sermon, but I haven't evolved that much yet, so I'm glad they're gone.

But sometime back, I had the second thing that I don't like, although if you spend time with me, you realize there's lots of things he doesn't like. [laughter] That's a cricket in the middle of the night. Making that noise. [laughter] You try to find them, and they get really quiet. [laughter] And they know what they're doing. [laughter]

Sometime back, there was a cricket going, and I decided just to listen to it. I remembered that thing from the Farmer's Almanac, I don't know if it's literally true or not, but it says that if you count a cricket's chirp for fourteen seconds, add forty to it, and you'll have the temperature. Now, I haven't tested it, but I have seen that there's a link between what insects do and the weather. There's maybe more play in the steering wheel than that one formula. I realized that if a cricket is that interwoven, if a cricket is a thread on this cosmic garment, then I am, too. I just don't always pay attention to my song.

When I try to explain life as though I were at the center of it, it breaks my heart. When I try to make sense of life as though I was at the center of it, and then I bring all the other animals and plants that I love into the story, I realize I'm a bare thread in that story. It starts making a lot more sense.

If the universe were designed for human beings, there are a lot of questions that we can ask whoever the maker is. It's not a fair world. There are diseases. There's heartbreak that any compassionate architect would avoid. But the pain is part of the beauty. To realize that when there's something that doesn't fit in our human story, to listen for a deeper song. It's coming from the same creative patterning that's given us life in the first place. If we can say yes to that, it changes our pain.

The second thing is to realize that when life drives us out of our comfort zone, it's the best time for us to be students of life because we don't do that when we're comfortable. Now, it doesn't justify, it doesn't make it okay. There are lots of times when I've got all the wisdom I need, thank you, and I don't need any more lessons. But in general, my happiness is tied with being a student of life, maybe more than anything, of listening and learning.

I felt sorry this week for Marjorie Taylor-Greene for the first time in my life. Some chickens came home to roost for poor Marjorie Taylor-Greene. She loved it when Trump lied about her enemies, but you see, in truth, there is no honor between thieves. If someone is not committed to truth, they will betray you when you're no longer useful to them. Every person in the MAGA movement needs to go ahead and get ready for that now. You need to take a picture of the gallows that was meant for Mike Pence and realize that's your future if you don't get off that bus.

It hurt her feelings that he called her a traitor. She apologized for the poisonous nature of her own rhetoric. Now, I don't know how deep that is. I don't know how permanent that is. But it's a reminder that that's why we never give up on anyone. That's why the teachings of Christ make sense.

Because people get lost, they get hurt and do incredibly evil and stupid things. And there's a lot of that right now. And it can break your heart unless you go deeper, not deeper into religion, but deeper into life. Because what you're looking for is not gods and angels and fairies and things. You want life. You need the real. You need to be in contact with what's real. And this teaching leads us there.

I've always been moved by the story of Buddha's calling, where here is a person that's been shaped to be a world leader. When he was being born, some prophet said that he would either be a world leader or a world teacher. He'll be rich and powerful, or he'll be a great teacher of humankind. And the father said, I don't want him to be a teacher. I don't want him wearing robes and this kind of stuff. So, he tries to protect Buddha from life, and it keeps him from seeing the suffering of the world.

Until one day Buddha goes into town with this assistant. He sees somebody who's old, and he says, "Could that happen to me?" And the attendant says, "It will happen to you." And he sees somebody that's sick, and he says, "Could that happen to me?" And the attendant says, "That will happen to you." He sees a funeral procession and sees a corpse, and he says, "Could that happen to me?" And the attendant says, "That will happen to you." You know the rest of the story. He renounces the power, the riches, and the wealth.

What sense do those things make when we look at the human condition? You can pile up money as high as you want, and if you weren't going to die that would make sense. But it's insane when you look at the human condition. The only thing you have is what you share. Your love and compassion for other living beings is your wealth, and the rest of it is made-up stuff.

In my line of work, I'm with a lot of people when they die, and there are people who know how to do that well. There are people who are lost when the moment comes, and they think they're this [gestures]—they think they're their body. They think they're their stuff. There are also people who lose beloved ones, and their hearts are injured beyond repair because they don't realize there's a greater story. There's a deeper life of which we are all a part.

So, the second teaching, I think, is to realize: be comfortable when you can, be happy when you can, but when life forces you out of your comfort zone, it's a time to learn. There's an old saying,

"Days that do not make us happy may make us wise." Just remember that when that day comes, when happiness is not possible. Wisdom is future happiness.

The last thing is to realize that what's painful to you personally can be a gift to the rest of the web of life. I've learned more from people who are dying than any book I've ever read. I've learned more from people who've been treated unfairly than any philosopher I've ever come across. If I were designing the world, I would do without pain, but if that happened, there would be no beauty, no art, no growth beyond a certain point.

My line of work exposes me to the impermanence of the human condition, but for many people that's hard to take in. That's hard to grasp. The fact that we don't live forever seems depressing until you see somebody who's lived too long. Then you realize there's more to this story than I was realizing.

One of the friends we've lost over the years, Jim Mahon, was minister of First Presbyterian Church. After he retired, he decided he wanted to come to St Andrew's, which was weird for me because we were always in trouble with the presbytery. So, I thought, why don't you go to a real church?

When he realized he was going to die, he began to work on his funeral, and he worked on it with passion. He wanted it to be his last sermon, his last gift to people. Ilene Dunn did the exact same thing. I was with her when she was diagnosed with terminal cancer, and I got to see what an old minister can do when their time comes.

It's one thing to be wise for everybody else, but when our time comes to be ready for that and to be prepared for that. I really think from a mystical viewpoint, that's what the cross means. The cross is not forgetting that sometimes life is incredibly painful. Life can sometimes be incredibly unfair. And you don't have to come up with fake reasons why it all makes sense.

Instead, it's realizing that the pain and the beauty are not separate. You wouldn't be human if you didn't want to avoid life's suffering. But if you could remember, there's a gift in that. It's not that God shapes it to teach you a lesson. That's insane. That's absurd. But there is a lesson in life, and sometimes the more painful a lesson is, the deeper it leads us into wisdom.

These are painful times. I don't think popular Christianity cuts it for most people, and one of the things that is missing is the foundation of your mystical experiences. Again, not supernatural necessarily, but when you feel at one with everything. When you realize that you are sent into this world and you have a gift that the world needs to hear. When you realize that there's a pattern in everything you encounter. And then the lesson today is when you realize that that part of life that is the most painful and the one that you would do the most to avoid is also sacred.

So, remember that whatever happens to you comes from the same source that gave you being in the first place. Whether it's a being, whether it's a cosmic process, who knows? But whatever happens to you is coming from the same source that gives you life.

Then second, to realize that when you're forced out of your comfort zone, that's the best time to learn wisdom, not for yourself but for everyone. That you were never meant just to get by. You've always been a teacher. To listen to that message, to listen to that pain, let it be transformed and to realize that in that pain, there is a gift that becomes beautiful.

I think that's the meaning of the Joseph story. It's the meaning of the cross. It's the meaning of the Beatitudes. The verse says blessed are you if you're poor because you would not sell out. Blessed are you if you were passed over for promotion because of your integrity. Blessed are you if your family hates you because you won't hate the same people they do. Blessed are you if the conditions of the world break your heart, because what that means is your heart is still alive.

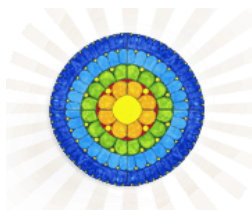
I invite you to your own reflections on these words.

Benediction

Rev. Carol Johnson

You can't control much, but you can control how you treat people in this heartbreaking, news-breaking world where nothing seems certain. Let raw kindness be your certainty. Let your compassion be a North Star stamped in the sky for people to follow back home and know that the Spirit of Love is with you every second, even when kindness feels impossible. Amen.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.



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