



LESSONS IN LIVING

Insights from the Mystics

“Part 3: Spirit as the Fire of Life”

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
June 21, 2026

Scripture Reading: John 14: 1-7 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

“Don't let your hearts be troubled. You have faith in God; have faith in me as well. In God's house there are many dwelling places; otherwise, how could I have told you that I was going to prepare a place for you? I am indeed going to prepare a place for you, and then I will come back to take you with me, that where I am there you may be as well. You know the way that leads to where I am going.” Thomas replied, “But we don't know where you're going. How can we know the way?” Jesus told him, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to God but through me. If you really knew me, you would know God also. From this point on, you know God and you have seen God.”

Sermon

Welcome. It's Father's Day. Thank you for not going fishing. *[laughter]* I appreciate it.

We're doing a series on the mystics. And the reason we're doing a series on the mystics is I think a lot of people could accept a religion of mysticism, if they knew what it was, a lot easier than traditional religion.

There are women who very understandably get shut down because Christianity chose masculine language for the sacred. And there are people who have too much integrity to go along with that, both male and female. One of the reasons we do the inclusive language is that we want everybody to realize that God doesn't look more like some of us than others of us.

But we realize there are a lot of problems in European Christianity that weren't necessarily there at the beginning. But religion is an effort to get in touch with something that's a mystery. And you don't have to believe in God to look up at the stars and be moved profoundly.

You don't have to believe in a God to look at biology and feel moved. There may not be a designer there, but there is some sort of a creative process. That's either a person, or it could just be the nature of the universe. A generative creative process.

To me, religion is skillful means to stay in touch with that. That's the source of our being. And to see it everywhere, and not go through life without appreciating it. To not go asleep in a sense. And we're looking today at one of the most powerful mystics that the West ever produced, Saint Hildegard.

She was a scientist. You can be a mystic and a scientist. She's credited with bringing the natural sciences to Germany. Wouldn't your love be more powerful if it were scientific and reasonable?

She was a musician. She wrote hymns that are still practiced. Wouldn't our love be more powerful if it were artistic and creative?

So, we're going to be looking and listening to someone who embodies what's often missing in modern Christianity. Whether you ever come back again or not, if you can trust your own experience and realize that you may be experiencing the sacred in a way the Church doesn't recognize.

And we've been through a lot of struggles over the years, but one of the things that has gotten clearer and clearer to me is it's not the church that makes love sacred, it's love that makes the church sacred. *[baby crying] [laughter]* So you behave or you'll be out there with the... *[laughter]*

And we're going to be trying to understand one of the most beautiful and problematic verses in all of Christian scripture. Jesus starts off... He's doing his own funeral, in a sense:

Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

He's about to be executed. Sometimes those are the words that we need to hear.

But then Thomas, who symbolizes reason or rational thought... And the fact that when that's all you have, if that's all you have, there's kind of a dead end that takes place. Thomas is brilliant, but he can't feel. He's not in touch with his own intuition.

The word Thomas in both the Greek and the Hebrew means "twin," and it represents that kind of splitting—the binary. That we get trapped, and we can't get out of it because we're thinking in either-or terms.

And Jesus says,

You know the way where I'm going.

And Thomas, of course, great empiricist, says,

No, how can we know? We don't know where you're going. How can we know the way?

And then Jesus says, again, the very problematical verse,

I am the way; I am the truth; I am the life.

We're going to try to understand that better. From a mystical vantage point, it's a very different thing than the classic, the traditional interpretation. So we're going to walk through this verse with the understanding that's at the heart of mysticism: that all the symbols and all the rituals are calling us to the fire of life. The depths of life within us.

So it's not asking you to take in something that you don't already have. That's what Thomas doesn't realize. Jesus is going to say, *"The wisdom I'm talking about is written into your very tissue. You know the way."*

The first thing— and I've asked Erica to read the verses of Hildegard because I don't think the power of this ancient scientist... She was also a feminist, and so I think, I think we can hear the power better in a woman's voice.

She's going to call us to anchor our faith in our own direct experience. And that's a very central part of mysticism. There's a part in many people, particularly rational people, who don't want to surrender control of their mind. They know they may not get it back again. So let's listen to how Hildegard called us to a kind of rational mysticism.

WE CANNOT LIVE IN AN INTERPRETED WORLD

"We cannot live in a world interpreted for us by others. An interpreted world is not a hope. Part of the terror is to take back our listening, to use our own voice, to see our own light."

Can you feel she's calling you to yourself? A true teacher isn't asking you to suspend anything. Not to believe in anything hypothetical. They're calling you to your own depths.

She talks about the terror. We don't realize that sometimes what we're most afraid of is our own depth, because we've been taught not to trust ourselves. So she's calling us to return to our own eyes, our own ears. To look through our eyes, hear through our ears, feel through our skin.

And she says we can't live in a world that somebody else has interpreted for us. Did anybody here have the church interpret life for them? *[raised hands]* I know I did. How do you follow Jesus? Memorize the Apostles' Creed. Thank you so much. I mean, I know that answers all the questions I was asking. *[laughter]*

That's not what Jesus taught, and it's not what Hildegard calls us to. But it's very frightening to lay down the pretended certainty of religion and take up the raw, naked awareness of mysticism. To use our own voice, to see with our own eyes, to feel with our own skin.

So in our passage today, Jesus is doing his funeral. He says,

Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

That doesn't mean not to feel sadness because the disciples are going to feel sadness.

But I think what he's saying is, don't let this tear into your inner sanctum. Realize there's a creativity that's so deep in you that it's what you're coming out of. It can't be taken from you by anything in the world. It's who you most intimately are.

But to begin with, it may feel like grief. To begin with, it may feel like confusion. And the faith that's needed is not faith in what the Church taught you, but in that process within you. That there's something being born through your confusion, through your pain.

So the first point is to find something that sets you on fire. That brings you to your own depths, that calls you to life. And then the second thing is to broaden that. Think of it like an umbrella. Religion has to be small enough to fit in your hand but also able to open up to include the whole universe. That's a trick.

So the symbols need to be simple, personal. Things you can feel. They need to awaken you, to broaden you, so you see the same truth in others, the same fire. To do that, we have to get beyond literalism. Literalism cannot take you to your depths.

That's Thomas's problem. He's living in his words. He's living in his beliefs. So Jesus is sitting there with the wound still fresh, and Thomas says one of the great comedic lines of all time: "I won't believe you unless I can put my hand in your wound." Boy, thanks a lot, Thomas. Thanks. *[laughter]*

These wisdom lessons, you have to have tongue in cheek to really follow it sometimes. So let's get to our next...

WORD IS VERDANT

"The Word is living, being, spirit, all verdant greening, all creativity. This Word manifests itself in every creature."

So she's a scientist, and she sees this same creativity, the same intelligence in everything in nature. So it can start as small as yourself, but it opens up where you see this same fire in others. Let's look at the next quote.

UNDERNEATH ALL TEXTS

"Underneath all the texts, all the sacred psalms and canticles, these watery varieties of sounds and silences, terrifying, mysterious, whirling and sometimes gestating and gentle must somehow be felt in the pulse, ebb, and flow of the music that sings in me. My new song must float like a feather on the breath of God."

Don't you wish you could talk to her about that?

It's underneath the texts. It's underneath the creeds. It's underneath the beliefs. They're all calling us to a depth. And we can't think our way there. You have to feel it in your pulse and to realize your pulse is harmonized with the pulse of nature.

The intelligence in your head is synchronized with mathematical properties. There's a web of patterning that constitutes a kind of intelligence that is everywhere. And I like that she talks, and she says, *to hear the ebb and flow of the music within me. That to listen to yourself opens this door.*

Now, you may not be able to do that with yourself. If there's another person that you love and you care about, you can do the same thing with another person. But either way you start, you have to have all of it.

It has to be the other person and you, or you and the other person, and then open it up where you see it in nature, in life, everywhere all around you. Not all the time. But at your fullness, you're able to glimpse that.

I love the image of the feather floating. Did anybody see... *Forrest Gump*? Starts off with the feather floating? I don't know if they had studied Hildegard. But it starts off with a feather floating. And the movie asks the question: Do we all have a destiny, or are we like feathers floating in the wind?

Forrest's mom says it's destiny. What is his name, the soldier? What is it? *[audience responds]* Lieutenant Dan, that's it. Thank you. Lieutenant Dan says we're like feathers blowing in the wind.

That seems like an unresolvable dilemma, but the creativity within us helps us realize it can be both. You don't have to believe in creationism to know that you're in tune with the creativity that is everywhere.

And the more your heart is tuned to that process, the more places you're going to be able to see it, feel it, touch it, and taste it. Again, religion takes us to the threshold. The problem is when religion pretends like it's the product, it's the gift.

Religion is the lantern. It is not the flame. It is never the flame. Now, lanterns can be very helpful if you're trying to keep that flame going. And that's the gift we can give each other. But religion is never what we're searching for. Let's look at the next quote.

TRINITY AS A SYMBOL OF THE FIRE OF LIFE

**“For eternity is called the “Parent,” the Word is called the
“Offspring,” and the breath that binds both of them
together is called the “Holy Spirit.”**

Now that's blasphemy. *[laughter]* Right? Because in traditional Christianity, you're supposed to believe in three people, right? But for a mystic, it could also be something deeper than that. The parent might represent anything out of which you come, any source that you have.

And you're not being asked to believe in hypothetical people before you have the experience. You're coming out of something. Can you trust that? Then you are, and every being you ever meet is, an offspring of this creativity. And there's some kind of bond, some kind of tie that binds us all together.

If God were simply three persons, you wouldn't need a symbol to talk about it. Symbols are talking about aspects of experience that you can't put into words. They're not necessarily logical. Lots of biology is not logical. And one of the biggest problems is people are trying to be logical about things that predate humankind.

Nature doesn't necessarily know we're here, and it may not even care. So we have to harmonize ourselves to life and to nature. And when we do that, all kinds of experience open up for us. The Trinity may be three persons. Emerson called it the three-headed dog. Three-headed Cerberus.

But it may be the dynamic of life itself. So, you start with what brings you to life or helps you to recognize life in others, and then religion can skillfully open that umbrella so that you can see the same fire in others. It's the poverty of the Church that doesn't see that in animals and plants. It makes less sense if it's only us.

After Darwin, that can't be. It has to be ecological. It has to be our interwovenness with life. So then the third and most problematic point is why does Jesus say only me? Does that mean Buddha's in hell? Does that mean I'm going to hell? Because if Buddha's not there, I don't want to go. *[laughter]*

I think what is being said is we are animals. We are primates. It's interesting that in the *Forrest Gump* movie, do you remember where he put the feather? He had a *Curious George* book.

We can only open ourselves to this universality through our personal lives: through our bodies, through our minds, through our emotions. When you look through a telescope, it's really important to look in this little end first, right? If you look through the big end, you're not going to see too many stars.

If you can love the small things, it opens up to a type of universality that you can experience everywhere. When you have an idea of unity, it's going to get in the way, and you're going to fight over whose unity is right. The idea of unity has been the most divisive idea in human history *[laughter]* if you think about it.

But the experience of our interconnectedness is a whole different matter. And it's the difference between traditional monotheism and this idea of a kindred spirit that we share with all of life and all of being.

The “I Am” sayings—I first understood them by studying Hinduism, where Krishna says, “I am the way, I am the path, I am this depth.” But Hildegard was a feminist. And I think what she was talking about was *Sophia*. The divine feminine wisdom.

She's going to do an “I Am” saying, but it's coming through her and her experience. Let's look at this last quote.

“I AM” THE FIRE OF LIFE

**“I am the fiery life of the essence of God; I am the flame
above the beauty in the fields; I shine in the waters; I burn
in the sun, the moon, and the stars. And with the airy
wind, I quicken all things vitally by an unseen,
all-sustaining life.”**

Isn't that what we're looking for? Not to have an idea of unity, but an experience of unity. We were taught that the “I Am” sayings only refer to Jesus. And we were told that what Jesus is saying is if you don't believe in Christianity, there's not a second bus coming.

I don't care about that Jesus. I don't care about a Jesus who's apathetic to most of humankind being tortured for all eternity. That's not who I follow. I follow a love so great that it has a place for every person.

He said in his Divine Parent's house there are many rooms. That's all the different approaches and perspectives. The point is there's a room for you. There's a place for you in this. And you need never doubt that. Because whatever that creative source is, you're coming from it.

And if its name is “I Am,” think about if you were to say, “I am the way, I am the truth, I am the life.” Now, you're not the source, so it's not true in the same way. But you're an expression of the wisdom of the universe. And even if it's not all accessible, it's there in the background of your being. It's written into your tissue.

As we saw last week, every bird, even in the egg, has a song written into it. Every bird, even in the egg, has a map of where it will need to migrate. It has a map telling it how to build a nest. You are not alone in the universe without instruction. Your very nature is an expression of this wisdom.

You may not be able to think it, but can you feel it? By listening to your song, by feeling the pulse. If you can see it in yourself, you can see it in every other being. In the nature of things, in the one family of all of life, there are many lodgings. There's room for us all.

So choose what brings you to life. Broaden it until you see that fire in all beings. And then once you trust it, give yourself fully to it with nothing, nothing held back.

Late in the *Forrest Gump* movie, he's going to visit the grave of Jenny. And before long, the feather falls out of the book and floats off. And he's sitting at the grave and he says, "Mama said that we all have a destiny."

Is it Lieutenant Dan? *[audience nods]* I don't know why I'm blanking on it. "Lieutenant said it's random, like we're all these feathers blowing in the wind." He says, "I kind of think it's both."

And that's mysticism in a nutshell. The sacred is not something, and it's not nothing. It's not necessarily a noun, but it shows up in the adverbs and the adjectives of our lives. The bad news is we're all going to die, and what we do will be swept away.

The good news is we're actually the flame of life itself. If you go deep enough inside, you can feel it. Even if you can't think it, you can intuit it. The trick is to take back your own perception. To see through your own eyes, to hear through your own ears, to feel through your own skin. And then open that compassion until it includes all beings.

I think it's wise to give Hildegard the last word. Would you read that quote again?

UNDERNEATH ALL TEXTS

"Underneath all the texts, all the sacred psalms and canticles, these watery varieties of sounds and silences, terrifying, mysterious, whirling and sometimes gestating and gentle must somehow be felt in the pulse, ebb, and flow of the music that sings in me. My new song must float like a feather on the breath of God."

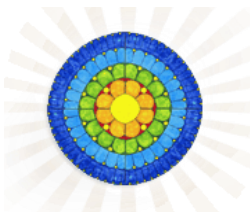
So we'll take a moment for you to consider how you would understand these words.

Benediction

Rev. Babs Miller

And as we seek to find our own light to shine into the world, may we float like a feather on the breath of the spirit of the universe. And as we do all of that, I would remind each of you that each of you is a child of that wonderful spirit of love that we sometimes call God. And that spirit knows when you skin your knee or your heart. That spirit knows when you admire a butterfly or cry in the darkness. So go out into this wonderful creation and tell the whole world that they are loved just exactly as they are. Go and kiss the hurts of this world. Go and laugh and play in the fields of grace and love. Go in peace. Amen.

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



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