

“All Shall Be well,” by Rev. Dr. Mark Caggiano, 9/28/25

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15; Luke 16:19-31

"All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."

This line might be familiar to you. It is attributed to Julian of Norwich, a 14th century English woman who was a mystic and anchoress. An anchoress, or anchorite, was someone bricked up into a church or monastery. They were religious people, often nuns or monks or priests, who dedicated their lives to prayer and seclusion in the most dramatic way possible. And as someone who preaches about the importance of community in religious life, I have opinions. Opinions I will mostly spare you today so that we can explore the life of Julian, also called Mother Juliana, in some sources.

Let us take a moment, however, to consider the scriptures. In the Book of Jeremiah, we have a strange and somewhat technical passage. It is about buying land. It has a bunch of names you probably do not remember and honestly need not remember. It is like an ancient shopping list someone saved – why is this important? But then we come to the last line: *“For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.”*

The Book of Jeremiah is rather depressing, so in context this declaration by the prophet is significant. It strikes a hopeful tone, even amid a terrible situation, what would become generations in exile away from Israel, subjugated by the Babylonians. There was no reason to have hope, but the prophet still offers it to the people. For there can be hope during terrible times.

Julian of Norwich is said to have lived through a similar period of trials and tribulations. She was thought to have been born in 1343 and during her childhood England was struck with the Black Plague. In the City of Norwich, which was major center of trade, fifty percent of the population is estimated to have died. Fifty, not fifteen. One in two people succumbed to the plague.

This disruption of English society led to another catastrophic event, the Peasant’s Revolt of 1381. Many people had died and therefore the number of farm workers was reduced. Many were serfs, meaning basically slaves tied to the land of their birth. After the plague, suddenly workers were in demand and people tried to move around to find better wages. Obviously, one’s lord might have found that inconvenient, so the English Parliament stepped in to pass laws against the free movement of workers. The peasants and serfs revolted but this rebellion was ruthlessly crushed.

However, in a sense, the rebellion succeeded. Serfdom fell out of favor and disappeared entirely in the following century. Landowners developed new arrangements with workers, such as leasing the land to them rather than effectively owning the workers. Not that sharecropping agreements were necessarily positive relationships, but there was a relative increase in the levels of personal freedom along with a far greater share of personal risk. Your landlord did not have as much

invested in tenants as a lord would with serfs. But I will save the economics discussion for another sermon.

After one rebellion, there was yet another. This time it was religious. A religious movement sought to reform the Catholic Church in England. This group came to be known as the Lollards, which was basically an insult because it generally means the mumblers, those mumbling prayers to themselves. These were what we might call proto-Protestants who sought to reform the practices of the church.

The Lollards were denounced by Rome, and yet some influential English nobles were supportive of the effort, such as John of Gaunt who is thought by some historians to be the wealthiest man to have ever lived. Even five hundred years ago, money seemed to have an outsized effect on public discourse. But the Lollards were nonetheless repressed. The Protestant Reformation was delayed in England until the 16th century when King Henry VIII took over the church for his varied political and personal reasons.

Amid decades of plague and civil unrest, and by the way with the Hundred Year's War between England and France raging alongside, Julian of Norwich lived a life of seclusion and deep piety. Her biography is subject to much conjecture – her name was not likely Julian as that was actually the church's namesake. Julian likely suffered the loss of many family members during the plague when she was a child. And the war and rebellions would not have made Norwich a stable place to be. But at some point, she entered the religious life and was allowed to become an anchoress.

Apparently, you had to apply to be an anchoress. It was a much sought after position. For someone in religious life, it would be seen as a true sign of one's dedication to God. And for a woman of that era, it was a position of significance and renown. You were bricked up into a room of the cathedral, but there were openings through which people could speak with you to seek spiritual guidance as well as feed you once in a while. Again, not a small matter for a medieval woman, who might have been otherwise anonymous. And yet, Julian of Norwich has been remembered by history. Her writings are said to be the very first book by a woman in the English language. So, what did she say?

Her book, *Revelations of Divine Love*, was inspired by a near death experience. Julian thought she was dying and during that episode, she had visions. Visions of the suffering of Jesus on the cross. Visions about the nature of sin and the infinite capacity of God to offer forgiveness. Julian also described God as a motherly figure, something no more traditional then than it would be now in many modern Christian settings. But she focused on an image of love and of nurturing, images more often attributed to one's mother than one's father, modern sensibilities on the question notwithstanding.

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[Yes, singular "thing."]

This line attributed to her encapsulates another message of Julian, that we will all be reconciled with God. Now, did she mean all *will* be reconciled or that all *may* be reconciled with God? It was her vision, of course, but universal salvation would have been a heresy at that time. And given the treatment of the poor Lollards who were rounded up and, in many cases executed, it was not a time of tolerance for religious innovation.

And Julian did not need to say all *would* be saved, as long as she stated that all *could* be saved. Saved if they repented. Saved if they turned back toward God and of course to the church. That message is consistent with medieval Catholic teachings, even if the odds were not in favor of 100 percent forgiveness.

But what other conclusion could Julian draw from a vision about the infinite forgiveness, the infinite love of God? *Infinite* does not allow exceptions or excuses. Infinite is infinite. And from that wondrous insight into the nature of God, Julian seems to have concluded that we can all return to God when our day is done. Even the vision about Christ's suffering upon the cross supports this idea. If even those who executed Jesus could be saved, who could be beyond the scope of God's mercy?

And that image of the suffering of Jesus would be a comfort to someone like Julian who was living through terrible times. There is some speculation that Julian was not originally a nun in a convent, but that she had been a mother. This deduction is due to some of the language of her writings and her focus on the maternal nature of God. These suggest that she had had children but, if so, it also suggests that she somehow lost those children during those troubled times.

Personally, she almost died and came away from that near death experience with a sense that God loves all, all of God's children, all of us sinners. And from those revelations of universal grace and divine acceptance, she responded to those who might listen:

"All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."

Religion is an interesting human creation. I say creation because no matter how we try to express our religious ideas, they will always be limited by our human experiences. They will always be conditioned by what we have been taught and what we have lived through in our lives. Existing religious ideas will be reinterpreted or extended or transformed. The Lollards did not survive, but a century or so later, the English Protestants changed their society.

And yet, they used the same books. They used the same stories. They adapted traditions to suit their new ways of worshipping. They kept many of those past practices, many of the styles and much of the shape of the church. It was ancient and it was also new.

I have been researching the various prayers in our prayerbook over the past year, and I have found that many of them originate from the 1600s. Three hundred and fifty years ago. Many are set forth in our book with few changes, in all their Elizabethan glory. But realize something about those ancient words: they were once not ancient. They were once, in a way, quite radical.

These changes were in response to the upheaval of the times, casting off the Catholic tradition and creating the unique Anglican strain of Protestantism. One still Catholic in certain respects, as the rebellious Puritans and Presbyterians would be quick to point out. And yet, there were foundational changes. Even changes to the nature of salvation.

For example, an understanding of the infinite nature of God's love as described by Julian of Norwich was altered. We are saved through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ alone, not because of our good works, not because we have repented our sins. Your good works, your charitable acts were a *sign* of your salvation.

This signaling from God was later deemphasized, however, making Anglican theology more compatible with the Puritans and Presbyterians. This change rankled some within the English church and it was a major factor in the development of Methodism, which sought to restore the idea that good works have a sanctifying effect upon us.

Where might we find ourselves in this spectrum of ideas? Julian came away from her visions with a sense of the infinite love of God and the meaningful role of suffering in our lives. We suffer, not because suffering is good, but in a sense to become connected to the suffering of Jesus and, perhaps, to the suffering of all humankind.

How might we understand Julian's incredibly optimistic view of this world and the next? And before anyone starts listing the parade of horrors that make up our daily news cycle, please think back to the lifetime of Julian. The Hundred Years' War started before she was born and ended after she died at the approximate age of 73. Half the people of her city died of plague. Two separate rebellions, one economic and the other religious, tore apart the surrounding society. Being bricked up into a wall was probably comforting in that context. And yet the world kept spinning. No one was raptured then just as no one was raptured away last Tuesday—at least no one I know, which may be saying something.

Julian was optimistic because of her understanding of the nature of God. If you accept that God is all-loving, all-forgiving, all-accepting, then it might be easier to be optimistic in light of terrible times. Pessimism might be warranted these days, but the same would have been true for 14th and 15th century England.

Religion has many purposes. It is a way of interpreting the world around us and the people we encounter. It is a way of understanding all manner of things. And those interpretations and that understanding come about because religion offers us stories. Stories about the world, stories about people. Stories about all manner of things.

And those stories are not always happy ones. Honestly, they are generally not happy ones. They are stories about broken promises and bad behavior. They are about hatred and warfare, deception and greed, sinfulness and desolation.

We are told what to do and what not to do, of course, but the stories frequently demonstrate for us what doing and not doing might look like. I am reminded of the term the “wages of sin,” the end result of our sinful behavior. But that phrase was not offered in isolation. Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans: *"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord"*. The gift of God is eternal life.

I must confess that when I think about this comparison, the wages of sin and the gifts of God, I am reminded of Julian’s vision of God as being the source of infinite love. The wages of sin, our payment for all our sins and the sins of others, are suffering and trouble. Sometimes we are more sinned against than sinning, as the phrase goes, but we are often sinning in ways, large and small, right along with others. Through anger and resentment, through pride and prejudice, through selfishness and envy. Sin, sin, sin.

Orienting on the infinite love of God allows us to cast off the anxieties we might hold about being perfect surrounded by sin and sinning ourselves. That does not mean we get to sin boldly as Martin Luther once preached – not a fan by the way – but that in our struggles we need not worry about every mistake, every mishap. We might turn back to God even after falling down a hundred times. Optimism need not be an unrealistic worldview, one that is pointlessly hopeful in the shadow of many things that might make us feel hopeless.

When Julian likened God to a loving mother, she tried to take a common image that would have been familiar to people. That does not mean every mother was perfect either, but the ideal of maternal love signals to us what the love of God might be like. Someone who forgives again and again the failings of a poor child who does not know the meaning of what has been done. Forgiveness that also serves as a model for us to follow, of loving others rather than just trying to get away with everything because Mom will always forgive. The nature of God’s love is not only a gift, but a guide, a beacon for how we are meant to love each other.

I have preached in the past about the connected nature of hope, faith, and love. Hope is possible because we have faith – faith that God is good as well as that the people in our lives are good. And we have such faith because of an understanding of love, the love of God that is infinite and eternal along with the love of those who have cared for us in this life.

Even if that worldly love has been uneven, even if it took us time to find the love of true friends and family later in life, the gift of love and the idea of love are the foundations of faith. And that sense of faith can be projected beyond our hearts and souls, into the future. Having known or experienced or recognized love in the world, we can imagine that love will exist tomorrow and the day after. We can see love on the horizon, a promise to be delivered with the sureness of the rising sun.

And that is hope.

When Julian spoke of God’s love, of the endless nature of that care and concern, it allowed her to encourage others. To preach through the little window of her wall to those troubled folks who

came seeking her comfort and guidance. To announce again and again that God loves you and God will always love you, now and forever more. That such love is so broad and so gracious that all will in time be reconciled with God. All will find their place in the light of the divine, all will be eternal in the mind of God.

Even as we struggle with bad news. Even as we worry about this event and that news story. Even as we understandably wring our hands about things over which we have no control and yet they are ours the fret over. Even as our bones ache and our hair turns white. The love of God is infinite. The love of God is all encompassing. The love of God is eternal, and the love of God is eternally ours.

In the spirit of such boundless love, how can we not be drawn to love and care for others? How can we not seek to embrace that love and share it with the world? And how can we not rise with the morning light with a sense of hope, hope at least knowing that God loves us? God loves us truly and deeply and eternally. And how can we not join in the words of Julian, as she sung the praises of God and called us toward hope for the days and years to come:

"All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."

Amen.