

Exodus 1:8—2:10  
Romans 12:1-8  
Matthew 16:13-20

One of the most beloved figures in our Episcopal tradition is Julian of Norwich, credited with being the first female writer in the English language. She died almost exactly 600 years ago – in the year 1416 – in her cell in England. What she wrote was two different accounts of the visions she received: a long version and a short version. We know her work as *Revelations of Divine Love*.

Soon after receiving the visions at age 30, she chose to become an anchoress at the church from which she took her name: The Church of St. Julian at Norwich. It was named for French Bishop Julian of Le Mans. Norwich is about twenty miles from the North Sea. If you drew a straight line from it to the European continent, you would be in Amsterdam, Holland: a mere 150 miles away. I offer that geographic tidbit in an attempt to understand why good British folk would name one of their churches after a French bishop – thinking that proximity would provide a rationale. But the best I could do was Holland. But hey, we in the US name our parishes after saints of Ireland, England, Italy, and so on.

Anchoresses, like Julian of Norwich, and their male counterparts, called anchorites, flourished – mostly in England – for 500 years from the eleventh to the sixteenth centuries. The cells they lived in were called anchorholds. Usually, these were attached to a church with a window looking into the church so the anchorite could hear Mass daily.

Another window looked out. It was through this window that anchorites received food and water, often by an assistant who looked after them. These assistants were often the next in line to occupy the anchorhold – there could be waiting lists for the cells. The outside window also allowed anchorites to receive visitors and converse with them. They were highly sought for their spiritual advice and guidance.

Sometimes anchorholds had more than one room. They often had a garden. One of the duties these people had was to dig their own graves. When monasteries were disbanded in the sixteenth century during the time of religious reform, the anchorholds were all destroyed and their inhabitants driven away. Century's worth of skeletons could be found in the remains of these anchorholds.

Needless to say, this was a strict life. The person venturing into this form of religious life did not do so lightly. After much discernment, a bishop would agree to the arrangement and conduct an elaborate ceremony, administering last rites. It was a funeral mass. At its conclusion the door to the anchorhold would be walled up and often sealed with the bishop's own signet. An anchorite who left the enclosure could be forcibly returned by the authorities, and faced damnation in the hereafter.

Julian did not meet with such a fate, of course. We think she entered her cell sometime in her 30s and spent her life there, passing away in her early 70s. So she spent a good forty years as an anchoress. We like to think that she belongs to us Anglicans because she was located in England, but she is also revered by Roman Catholics and Lutherans.

It's fascinating to learn about anchorites; monks and nuns; and hermits. There are those who take vows of silence or vows of extreme poverty. There are those who are cloistered, or separated from the world, and those who are deeply engaged with it, like Mother Theresa's Missionaries of Charity.

These are people who have taken to the uttermost St. Paul's words to us today: "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice." It is easy to see the sacrificial aspect of lives like theirs. What motivated their sacrifice is the same that motivates ours: devotion to God.

We who profess devotion to God believe that there is something greater than ourselves. We believe that *we* are not all that matters; that what is greater is perfect – perfect love, perfect goodness – and that this perfection of Being, whom we call God, longs for us....not as slaves, not as blind devotees, but as friends and lovers. It is a radical thing to believe.

The evidence we offer is Jesus of Nazareth – fully human; fully divine – at the same time. Viewed strictly as a human Jesus is a great exemplar or example of how to live; great teacher; wise sage; worker of good things like healing, feeding, standing in solidarity with the outcast. Viewed as the Son of God is something that even he says must be revealed. "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven."

This revelation seems to have come slowly to Simon – over the course of years – as it does for many of us. Few of us get the divine revelation that Julian of Norwich got: the revelation that God loves us personally; intimately. But once it comes – in whatever fashion it comes – we are motivated to love back.

And that's a fairly simple definition of devotion. One of the dictionaries I consulted says that devotion is "a feeling of strong love and loyalty." It is a word that belongs in the vocabulary of romance. "He is absolutely devoted to his wife." "That couple is devoted to each other." God is devoted to us.

This changes everything! Once we really come to see – even a little – that we are loved, we want to give back. We want to respond. Love begets love. This isn't religion as "has to" but religion as "want to." And religion as "want to" is called spirituality.

When we come to the place of wanting to give back to God because we have been given so much, we start to learn about being a living sacrifice. There is time we set aside daily for prayer because we want to be in touch with God. There is money we set aside to help further God's work in the world because we want to see "thy kingdom come: thy will be done." There is energy we reserve because our church needs us or there's additional learning we need to advance our spiritual lives.

Becoming a living sacrifice means consenting to be transformed. Transformation isn't always pleasant. A time-lapse film of the caterpillar in the cocoon shows the thing wrestling, writhing, squirming inside its gossamer home until it emerges as something completely different. The butterfly is almost a different being entirely from the caterpillar.

We, too, struggle and squirm under our mandate to live sacrificial lives. We are called to make sacrifices daily – large and small but mostly small. When we attend to these doggedly, faithfully, always willing to start again if we haven't kept with the program, then we are changed.

Some saint somewhere has speculated that the angels mourn because we cannot see the remarkable creatures we truly are.....creatures of love, patience, kindness and history-changing goodness. If only we could believe that about ourselves.

We are gifted, as St. Paul says a little later in today's second reading: "We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us." But there's more! We *are* gift. We are the gift God has given to the world and to God's own self. We are meant to be cherished by God. Most of us just don't stay still long enough to really get that. We wiggle away from God's loving embrace like some three-year-old who has better things to do than be hugged by grandma.

Coming to understand that we are gifted and graced by God is a consequence of a sacrificial life. Coming to understand that we are gift is even more so. This kind of inner transformation is what God wants for all of us, not just the select few.....not just the anchorites, nuns and hermits. This kind of inner transformation is something we can chose by deciding, each day, to be a living sacrifice.

Amen.