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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation

6.21.2026

Jeremiah 20:7-13

Psalms 69: 8-20

Romans 6:1b-11

Matthew 10:24-39

This past Tuesday, the Episcopal Church and much of the Anglican Communion celebrated the Feast of Evelyn Underhill, an Anglo-Catholic writer, preacher and mystic of the early twentieth century.

Bernard McGinn, regarded by many as the preeminent authority on Christian Mysticism in the West, says *mysticism is about the transformation of consciousness through an immediate or direct encounter with God's presence*. It's not a one-time event, but a process and a way of life. I would embellish McGinn by adding mystics see the Real—capital R—unfiltered by the ego, engaging spiritually, psychologically, physically, grounded by the murmurings of the heart, by the ineffable presence of the Holy inhabiting the soul.

Evelyn Underhill's opus was entitled *Mysticism*, published in 1911. While dense, and probably not a beach read, her insightful and practical wisdom is worthy of investigation.

Today's readings are in the main, challenging and more than likely we would just as well water them down. I like to say, Oh, they're metaphors, Bill, you cannot take this stuff literally. Well, maybe.

In today's reading from Hebrew Scripture, we listen to Jerremiah, a major prophet in the Old Testament. He is also referred to 40 times in the New Testament, and he honored as a prophet in Islam, as well. Pre-figuring the Christ, Jeremiah is called to the prophetic vocation early on. His resistance is notable, even in the depths of this ministry. Though the word mysticism did not come into usage until the 17th century, Jeremiah has the marks of a mystic, as do, in my estimation, all the prophets we recognize in Scripture, and many others whose holy names remain obscured. They were uniquely gripped by God.

Jeremiah was a complicated, volatile, clear-eye voice for the divine, living in a time of great upheaval in the Kingdom, shortly before the Babylonian captivity. He forcefully condemned corrupt leaders and proclaimed that *sin sprang from the stubbornness of the evil heart*. He called, rather, demanded, that the people of the covenant — that's us—return to *sincere prayer and to inner renewal*, in contrast, I am suggesting, to the demands of the spirit-suffocating ultra-programmed, unconscious lives we might well be living.

His intimate — mystical—relationship with God, enveloping his whole life, provided him with the words, and consequent actions from whom his call emanated, leading to a life of forbearance, and anguish, a consequence of his fealty to the Holy One to whom he

was bound. This beautiful, painfilled text read earlier, is filled with his litany of anguish, but for me centers on these words:

But if I say, I will not mention his word or speak anymore in his name, then within me there is something like a burning fire, shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it. I cannot (keep it in anymore).

When do we murmur such words? When do we sense this connection with the Ground of our being, with the Source of life, with the Divine Lover, whose presence fills us, if we allow such transformation. When do we feel so vivified? Perhaps at the communion rail? Perhaps when we labor on behalf of the *othered*? Perhaps when we finally acknowledge the fire inside of us—so weary of holding it—we finally say: *I cannot*. I cannot hold this fire any longer, and we burst, noisily, privately, wordlessly, with some kind of holy energy emanating from our very persons. This fire, if but an ember, is at this moment in our hearts, certainly flickering...

Jeremiah subtly imaged Jesus, who would have a similar experience with the people of ancient Palestine and still today, even today, among us and our all-consuming culture. Jesus, whose relationship with his Father, the One he called, so intimately, his Abba, who not only enveloped him but coursed through his very veins, had received, in the words of errant Episcopal priest Alan Watts, *an experience of Cosmic Consciousness at a very early age*. Perhaps in the womb.

And that sublime consciousness, rendering him, of course, the proto-mystic and a self-fulfilling divine prophecy the true and ennobling and demanding and consoling Lord. For a reason we call him the Son of God.

He sees us.

Have no fear of them, for nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.

Who you talking to?

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs on your head will be counted. So do not be afraid, you are of more value than many sparrows.

Of more value than many sparrows.

And then, counterintuitively, Jesus says ... *whoever denies me before others, I will also deny before my Father in heaven. Do not think I have come to bring peace; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.*

You talking to me?

Well, we probably don't go around *exactly* denying Him to others, though subtly we certainly do. Do our very lives proclaim him with such force and clarity?

The way I understand denying Jesus is in my denying the very ones of whom He spoke every day. The least of my brethren, those who

know they are broken, those whose lives are in chaos due to our greed and arrogance, those who feel unloved or unseen.

The eminent American Buddhist monk Howard Thurman, who died this past week, spoke of the brown *robed monks*, those sent to us in various garb to try our patience, to unmask our many disguises, to observe our hypocrisies, to open our hearts, to look us in the eye, those sent to us who know the value of two sparrows.

So it is with Jesus, the one seemingly shrouded but present to us every day, perhaps sitting in your pew this morning. He engulfs us, occupies the space between us, entering us if we but let him, transforming us so to transform the world.

I have come not to bring peace, but a sword.

And yet, his words are hard. Easy to gloss over. The sword...again, another of his darned metaphors. But I think not.

Jesus' words are hard, so hard they led him to Golgotha. Bonhoeffer says we're similarly led: the Cost of Discipleship, tailored to our specific lives. If we will. And of course, the German theologian followed his Lord to his own end.

Jeremiah was crazy in love with God, even when resenting this ever-present one. Some days we are, too, both crazy in love and resenting the Lover.

We don't become human beings, persons, overnight, we plug away at it, and slowly we are transformed. We come here each Sunday to

be enlightened or consoled or seen; to encounter the One we love who transforms us, to be open to the cost of discipleship.

After the recessional this morning, we perhaps will be invited to inhabit the mystical prophetic voice, no longer afraid, not of God, not of ourselves, not of each other, and not of this needy world.

Jesus has this claim on us. That is everything, and that is enough.