

Rolheiser: How can it all have a happy ending?

There's a line in the writings of Julian of Norwich, the famous 14th century mystic and perhaps the first theologian to write in English, which is endlessly quoted by preachers, poets, and writers: *But all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.* It's her signature teaching.

We all have an intuitive grasp of what that means. It's our basis for hope. In the end, the good will triumph. But the phrase takes on added meaning when it's seen in its original context. What was Julian trying to say when she coined that phrase?

She was struggling with the problem of evil, sin, and suffering: Why does God allow them? If God is both all-loving and all-powerful what possible explanation can there be for the fact that God lets us suffer, lets us sin, and lets evil be present all over the world? Why didn't God create a world without sin, where we would all be perfectly happy from birth onwards?

Julian had heard enough sermons in church to know the standard apologetic answer for that, namely, that God allows it because God gave us the great gift of freedom. With that comes the inevitability of sin and all its sad consequences.

That's a valid answer, though one that's often seen as too abstract to offer much consolation to us when we are suffering. But Julian, despite being a loyal daughter of the church and having been schooled in that answer, doesn't go there. She offers something different.

For her, God allows evil, sin, and suffering because God will use them in the end to create for everyone a deeper mode of happiness than they would have experienced if sin, evil, and suffering hadn't been there.

In the end, these negatives will work towards creating some deeper positives.

Let me quote Julian in the original (the Middle English within which she wrote): *Jesus, in this vision informed me of all that I needed answered by this word and said: 'Sinne is behovely, but alle shalle be wele, and alle shalle be wele, and all manner of thing shalle be wele.'*

She shares that Jesus says that sin is "behovely". In Middle English, *behovely* has these connotations: "useful", "advantageous", "necessary". In her vision, sin, evil, and suffering are ultimately

advantageous and even necessary in bringing us to deeper meaning and greater happiness. (Not unlike what we sing in our great Easter hymn: *O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam.*)

What Julian wants us to draw out from this is not the idea that sin and evil are of little consequence but rather that God, being so unimaginable in love and power, is able to draw good out of evil, happiness out of suffering, and redemption out of sin in ways that we cannot yet grasp. This is Julian's answer to the question: Why does God allow evil?

She answers by not answering because, in essence, no adequate answer can ever be imagined. Rather, she sets the question into a theology of God within which, beyond what we can imagine at present and beyond what theology can really account for, God's power and love will eventually make all things well, dry every tear, redeem every evil, erase every bad memory, unfreeze every cold heart, and turn every manner of suffering into happiness.

There's even a hint in this that the final triumph of God will be to empty hell itself so that, indeed, absolutely every manner of being will be well.

In a subsequent vision, Julian received a five-fold assurance from God that God *may, can, will, and shall* make all things well and *we ourselves will see it*.

All of this is predicated of course on a particular concept of God.

The God that Julian of Norwich invites us to believe in is a God who is precisely beyond our imagination both in power and in love. Any God we can imagine is incapable of making all manner of being well (as many atheistic critics have already pointed out).

This not just true in terms of trying to imagine God's power, it's particularly true in terms of trying to imagine God's love.

It's unimaginable in our present human condition to picture anyone, God or human, who cannot be offended, is incapable of anger, holds nothing against anyone no matter what evil he or she may have perpetrated, and who (as Julian describes God) is completely relaxed and has a face like a marvelous symphony.

The God of our imagination, re-enforced by certain false interpretations of scripture, does get offended, does get angry, does take vengeance, and does meet sin with wrath. Such a God is incapable of making all manner of things well. But such a God is also not the God whom Jesus revealed.

Were we to look into the eyes of God's, says Julian, what we would see there would "melt our hearts with love and break them in two with ecstasy."