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Julian's Second Wound - Compassion:
Watercolor, Gouache, and Graphite

Julian of Norwich was a fourteenth-century anchoress, a woman who attached herself to a local church as a counselor devoted to providing parishioners with her time and understanding and prayer. An anchoress was not a nun, rather a type of lay holy woman who lived in seclusion that she might not be distracted by the responsibilities of secular life. In Julian's case, she probably wished to become a nun after her husband's death, but the only convent in Norwich didn't accept widows. She never left her humble quarters, but communicated with the people whom she served and with the church through windows opening onto the street and into the sanctuary.

Julian, in her life of service and in her desire to love God better, prayed for three "wounds:" contrition, compassion, and longing for God. In 1373, these prayers were answered when she became seriously ill. In the throes of bodily sickness, she experienced a series of visions in which she perceived Christ himself communicating comfort and love to her.

With regard to the wound of compassion, Julian desired a fuller understanding of Christ's passion so that she could better appreciate his suffering, death, and resurrection. She had prayed that she might envision his trial on the cross as one of the women who attended him. In her sickbed, she felt this prayer was answered through a vivid "showing."

"Suddenly I saw the red blood trickling down from under the crown, all hot, flowing freely and copiously, a living stream, just as it seemed to me that it was at the time when the crown of thorns was thrust upon his blessed head."

Julian experienced this and twelve other visions during her 24 hours of extreme illness. What may have surprised her is that though she prayed for the wounds that she might love God better, she found that in all the visions she came to a better understanding of Christ's profound and overwhelming love for his people. It was another 20 years before she wrote about her visions for the benefit of her fellow Christians.

What I found particularly arresting in Julian's writings about compassion, and in her showings in general, is a person's vulnerability to God's love in the weakest and most humbling moments. In crisis, hearts and minds can be laid open to Christ's loving ministry and comfort, and his presence can become startlingly real. In my painting Julian's Second Wound: Compassion, I've tried to capture the two conflicting attitudes of weakness and consolation.
**Poppies: Watercolor and India Ink**

One of my artistic interests is sign and symbol as used in Christian art of the past. A sign points to a specific action, person, or concept. The cross, for example, represents Christianity and Christ's crucifixion. A symbol can assume a more abstract character and cause the viewer to ponder qualities in it that resembles actions, people, or concepts. (E.g., Love is like a rose.)

Christian signs and symbols originate from scriptural sources and from the historical traditions of the church. Some are familiar; some are rather obscure. In Christian art, and especially Renaissance Christian art, one can expect to find them liberally used in complex compositions, identifying the subjects and heightening the work's didactic and meditative purposes. In my art, I tend to extract objects from such contexts in order to ponder their particular qualities and ask: how do these physical objects represent or demonstrate similarity to spiritual things?

"Poppies," a watercolor and ink study, is a little meditation on that flower's somnolent qualities that resemble ignorance and indifference, especially of and to God's teaching and will, and the necessity of avoiding them. (Notice the tendency of the buds to waver and nod, and the weakness of the stems.)

The most interesting aspect of studying signs and symbols in historical Christian art is that people commonly saw God in everything. These days, many reinterpret Christian symbolism as myth. The little things of God's creation, though, still provide simple lessons of spiritual concepts.