

TEXT: Philippians 2:12-13
THEME: Desire is God given
SUBJECT: Desire
TITLE: Ordered Love

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
27 September 2020
Messiah Moravian
Jerry Harris

Desire is God given and the key to all human spirituality. Desire is what powers our spiritualities but, at the same time, spirituality is about how we focus our desire. At the heart of Christian spirituality is the sense that humanity is both cursed and blessed with restlessness and a longing that can only be satisfied in God.

It is as though our desire is infinite in extent and that it cannot settle for anything less. It pushes us beyond the limitations of the present moment and of our present places towards a future that is beyond our ability to conceive.

This is why the greatest teachers of Christian spirituality were so concerned with this God-filled desire and with how we understand it and channel it. The most fundamental human desire is for transcendence. How can we transcend ourselves in relationships—with the world, with other people and with God? (Philip Sheldrake, *Befriending Our Desires*, 2001)

If this strikes you as odd-sounding, listen closely to Paul's invitation to the Philippians: "Thus, my beloved ones. . . work out your own salvation in reverence and trembling, *for it is God who is making active in you both the willing and the working of that which is dearly desirable.*" (David Bentley Hart's translation.)

What makes it possible for us to work out our own salvation is that God is at work in us activating our willing and our doing to pursue what is *dearly desirable*. Our desiring is a response to being attracted, desired, loved by God. Because of the immensity of God, who is endlessly rich in love, wisdom, and all perfections, our desire too can be endless.

Working out our own salvation is hard work. The temptation to play it safe, to take the path of least resistance, to settle for "answers" where only questions exist, is powerful. Playing life not to win, but not to lose, Tom's repressed heart is unable to define its desires. Repressed desire seeks satisfaction in commodities, in money, in artificial stimulation. Tom is a daydream believer suffering from what the Christian tradition calls velleity: wishes or inclinations not strong enough to lead to action.

Gregory of Nyssa (c330-395) saw the nature of humanity as characterized by desire, by longing. Human nature is seen as essentially restless. The story of a life, of your life and mine, must begin with the stirring of desire. The heart is moved, drawn, tossed about by impulse and desire, and the will has less to do with reason than with passion. Human beings are naturally passionate, vulnerable, mobile, and if their humanity is to be saved it must be without loss of all this.

The early church knew that rationality is not the most important factor in human experience. Salvation has little or nothing to do with the enthronement of reason over the passions. God is not known by reason alone but by wisdom. Contemplative knowledge, wisdom, is the knowledge of love, of desire and delight, the will consenting to the drawing of the divine beauty.

The beauty of God, according to Augustine, is the vision of an indescribable loveliness that calls our hearts out of darkness, breaking down the barriers of false love, rightly ordering those desires and impulses by which we live. *Ordered* love recognizes and clings to what is authentically lovable and is not content with merely transient beauties. As Augustine put it, “God’s goodness is both sought that it may be found the more sweetly, and found that it may be sought the more eagerly.”

Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) was a Basque noble destined for a military and courtly career whose life unexpectedly changed in a most radical way. Many people see his teachings as a paradigm of a spirituality of desire. From the moment that a severe wound at the battle of Pamplona in 1521 ended his military career, Ignatius began a journey of desire.

During his painful convalescence at Loyola he first had to struggle to discover what his heart’s desire really was. The remainder of his life, a period as a hermit at Manresa, university studies, the creation of the famous *Spiritual Exercises*, and his founding of the Jesuits, was a gradual process of learning how to focus his desire in the most powerful way.

He was also concerned with how to pass on to other people the wisdom he had gained in his own life and from accompanying others on their spiritual quest. Running through Ignatius’ spirituality of desire is the quest for spiritual freedom, freedom from misdirected or superficial desires that imprison us (what he called “disordered attachments”) and an ever greater ability to center human desire on God.

Etty Hillesum was born in 1914 into a scholarly, highly talented and secular Dutch Jewish family and died in 1943, age 29, at Auschwitz. Her story is available primarily through her diaries for the years 1941-1943 and her 1942-1943 letters from the Nazi transit camp at Westerbork. She was hardly known outside the Netherlands until recent years and, compared to Ignatius, is spiritually unconventional.

She wrote, “Our desire must be like a slow and steady ship, sailing across endless oceans, never in search of safe anchorage.” That admirably sums up the fearless and passionate commitment of Etty’s never-ending search for an inner truth, for intellectual honesty and for moral beauty. Eventually, her restless desire led her to develop an intense religious sensibility that gives her diaries a profound and even mystical tone.

Etty gradually discovered how to channel her desire into a deeper and more tranquil blend of tender commitment and personal freedom. The intensity of Etty’s growing mysticism did not lead

in the direction of detached solitude but back into the world of action, expressed finally by her volunteering to work for her fellow Jews at Westerbork and thus inevitably to share their fate.

The spirituality of desire understands that underneath all our desires, even motivating our “disordered attachments,” is the desire for God. Thomas Aquinas asserted that a trip to the house of prostitution was really a search for God, however misdirected the aim. Aquinas’ brothers attempted to force him to see a prostitute as a way of dissuading him from joining the Dominican Order.

Both Hebrew and Christian scriptures are full of the themes of desire, yearning and longing. The Psalms overflow with such expressions:

As a deer yearns
for running streams,
so I yearn
for you, my God.
I thirst for God,
the living God;
when shall I go to see
the face of God?

Psalm 42:1-2

Work out your own salvation in reverence and trembling, for it is God making active in you both the willing and the working of that which is dearly desirable.

PRAYER: Gregory of Nyssa (c335-395) Bishop whose writings helped to shape Orthodox theology and spirituality. (Translation by Scott Cairns)

“Soul’s Eternal Rapture”

The soul that looks
 finally to God, conceives
 a new, mouth-watering
desire for His
 eternal beauty,
 and tasting this, she
awakens to an ever
 greater yearning—
 an ache never
to be finally satisfied.

By this sweet hurt,
 she never ceases,
 to extend herself,
to touch those things
 beyond her reach
 and ever beckoning.

By this she finds herself
 passing, always,
 from the present
circumstances to enter
 more deeply the interior,
 and to find
there yet another
 circumstance awaiting.

And thus, at every point
 she learns that each
 new splendor is to be
eclipsed by what will come—
 the ever-exceeding
 Beautiful that draws, and calls,
and leads the beloved
 to a beauty of her own.