

Those of us of a certain age, raised in a certain way, learned to be suspicious of desire. The story of the forbidden fruit plucked by Adam and Eve served as a cautionary tale. The heart can, unfortunately, be so repressed that it is unable to know what it wants, to desire anything much beyond playing it safe.

Self-denial is not an end but a means to an end. We don't lose our lives just to lose our lives as if life was inconsequential. We deny ourselves lesser goods in order to know the greater good.

If the promise of the gospel is to be trusted, our desires are not too strong, but often too weak. We are more likely to suffer, not from wanting too much, but from not wanting anything nearly enough. Have you heard a newborn infant wailing to be fed? Peter admonishes us to be like a hungry, newborn infant.

Walking on Sixth Avenue in Manhattan one night in the spring of 1939, Robert Lax turned to Thomas Merton and asked, "What do you want to be, anyway?"

Merton had earned a masters degree from Columbia University and was now at work on his doctoral dissertation. His religious life was steadily deepening. His obvious choices were writing and teaching, but somehow they did not seem to be, for him, good enough answers.

"I don't know," he finally said. "I guess what I want is to be a good Catholic."

"What do you mean, you want to be a good Catholic," Lax asked? Merton was silent. He hadn't figured that out yet. "What you should say," Lax continued, "is that you want to be a saint." That struck Merton as downright weird.

"How do you expect me to become a saint?" "By wanting to," said Lax.

"I can't be a saint," Merton responded. "To be a saint would require a magnitude of renunciation completely beyond me."

Lax pressed on. "All that is necessary to be a saint is to want to be one. Don't you believe God will make you what God created you to be, if you will consent to let Him do it? All you have to do is desire it."

In the face of the rise of fascism in Germany in 1933, T. S. Eliot advised *We can have no ideal, for all human beings, lower than that of saintliness. It does not really matter whether we succeed or fail . . . but what does matter is that we should find the right thing to do and then do it.*

Like newborn infants, long for the pure, **spiritual** milk, so that you may grow into salvation (NRSV). David Bentley Hart's translation reads *Crave the unadulterated milk*

of **reason** like newborn babes, so that you may thereby grow into salvation. A more literal translation reads *like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the **word**, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation* (1 Peter 2:2, NASB). “Blessed is the person whose desire for God has become like the lover’s passion for the beloved” (John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*).

The Greek word translated as “spiritual” in the NRSV, as “reason” by Hart, and as “word” in the more literal translation is a form of the word *logos*. In the beginning was the *logos*, and the *logos* was with God, and the *logos* was God (John 1:1). No English word captures the weight of *logos*. *Logos* is the reality which is both beyond us and within us, the transcendent and the indwelling life of all things.

God is absolute beauty. God wakens our desire, sets it free and draws it to himself. This beauty is the source of all friendship and all mutual understanding. It is this beauty which moves all things and preserves them while filling them with love and desire for their own particular sort of beauty (Dionysius the Areopagite, *Divine Names*). Only in God is human nature truly itself.

The early church understood human nature to be essentially restless. The heart is moved, drawn, tossed about like a small sailboat in a storm at sea. The heart is not satisfied with an easy stability. It longs for a fulfillment beyond momentary satisfaction, for an unseen reality which is its true dwelling place.

Humans need something more, a meaning that somehow contains the real, for without a sense of the real undergirding one—shifting as the foundations may be—*life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing*. Just as infants need milk to survive, to live, so we need spiritual milk, reason, *logos* to grow into salvation.

Without desire there is no faith, no love, no hope. Absent desire for God, Thomas Aquinas says, we are content to occupy our minds with trivial things. He also assures us that our desire for God is a response to being desired by God.

Our hearts are not satisfied by, content with, any port in the storm. God is our homeland. The Lover who created us, who sustains us in each moment, who is our final dwelling place, keeps our hearts dissatisfied with anything less than communion with the beloved.