

## “Holy Desire”

Sermon for May 9th, 2010 by The Rev. Joe Summers

*(Readings for the day: Psalm 67, Acts 16:9-15, Revelation 21:10-22-22:5, John 5:1-9)*

My grandmother sometimes used to say, “Days like days and days not like days.” Boy do I ever experience that to be true. This past week I had a week that wasn’t much like a week. Somehow so much of it seemed flat and thin, not round and full. One exception was our poetry gathering on Wednesday night, so I want to begin my reflections today with a part of a poem my mom read at that gathering.

The name of the poem is “God’s Grandeur”. It’s a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins, and it’s about the grandeur that infuses creation.

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil,  
It gathers to a greatness like the ooze of oil  
Crushed. ....  
..... nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights from the black west went,  
Oh, morning at the brown brink eastwards springs—  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast, and with, ah, bright wings.

Bright wings. For me those bright wings speak of what I want to reflect on a little today, which is desire, for what distinguishes “days like days” from “days not like days” is often about desire, or the lack of it.

The anthropologist Rene Girard contends that, as human beings, we are not only creatures of desire, we are constituted by our desires. In his view, what makes this so tricky is that we learn all our desires from one another. It is seeing the desires of another that we learn what we want, what’s of value to us. Because we are so influenced by one another, this makes the desires of those around us tremendously important. In Girard’s view the source of almost all conflicts is that, almost inevitably, we often want the same thing and can’t or won’t share it. It’s also the source of human happiness, when we learn from one another desires that lead to our well being and the well being of those around us.

For me Girard’s ideas deepen my understanding of Paul’s vision of small communities of faith, whose members work out their salvation with one another. To reclaim a metaphor, they are like points of light whose members help to enlighten one another. That’s part of the power of reading poetry together. Hearing another’s voice, we can hear the understanding, the feeling and desires, that might be missing, when we just read a poem on our own.

“There lives in the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights from the black west went, ...  
Oh morning at the brown brink eastwards springs---  
Because the Holy Ghost...over the bent  
World ....broods with warm breast,... and with.... Ah!! bright wings.”

So many desires break forth for me as I hear those words. What does he mean when he says “the dearest freshness deep down things”? I don’t think we can exactly say, but we can feel it. For me it is the cold dark earth, as you dig planting in the spring. Whether we remember our deepest desires and live “days like days”, or whether we forget and live “days not like days”, has everything to do with the spaces we create with one another.

But it is even about more than this. It is about whether or not we ourselves are born into becoming ourselves for, if Girard is even mostly correct in his thesis that we learn our desires from one another, then there are many aspects of ourselves and our desires that we have not yet discovered. There are undoubtedly many primary desires that we may have trouble discovering, because they are blocked by desires we have absorbed from others that have little to do with what we really want.

This is the great joy and the great sorrow of our mothers, who we remember today. Some of us learned our worth through the desire of our mothers in the lights of whose eyes we learned we were among the most precious creatures in all the universe, creatures as glorious as angels with bright wings. Others of us, when we looked up, were not met with that gaze and there is a sorrow we live with, that deep, deep desire --forever lost.

This is also where friendship becomes so central. It is said that one of his disciples once remarked to the Buddha that friendship is half the holy life. The Buddha replied, “Don’t say that, Ananda. Friendship... is actually the whole of the holy life.” He then goes on to explain that if one has admirable people as friends, companions, and comrades, one can be expected to develop and pursue the noble eightfold path.

But I think religious traditions, certainly the Christian tradition, have often been afraid of friendship, seeing how much the desires of our friends can shape us. But this kind of fear of desire, rejection of desire, has nothing to do with the heart of our faith. Over our South Altar are written words from the Gospel of Luke where Jesus says “with desire I have desired” (Luke 22:15) That double emphasis on the word desire says that desire is at the heart of what’s important. Further, the gospels tell us that the holy life is about be-friending; that’s the story of the Good Samaritan, which tells us who is our neighbor and what it means to love them. At the last supper part of what Jesus does is to tell his disciples that they are not his servants; they are his friends. That’s why the Quakers call themselves the Society of Friends. What would it mean if we truly understood God and one another as friends? One of the last things Jesus does on the cross before he dies, is to make a covenant between his friend John and his mother, as he says to Mary “Woman behold your son” and to John “Behold your mother.” For how many of us, has

a friendship, or a group of friends, been the force that allowed us to survive and to become who we are, or who we wanted to be?

I've heard some people say that they come to church but the only way they really experience God is through other people, and I want to say "... And???" The First Letter to John says, "The one who loves knows God and is born of God." That means, when we love--we are children of God. It goes on to say, "No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God abides in us, and God's love is perfected in us." In other words, love is the beginning, the middle, and the end. While I think it is so encouraging, so powerful, to be able to experience God's love in ourselves, apart from others, almost always I think those who have learned to do this have learned to do it from others. Even when all you're doing is sitting in silent meditation with others, you can feel that extra power. So if the main way, or maybe even the only way, you experience God is through others, you've got nothing to be apologetic about.

Our lessons today speak of this theme of desire and how we can be re-born through our desires. Lydia is a merchant who buys and sells expensive cloth. She desires God and her desire leads her to connect with Paul. That connection leads her to want to have all of her household baptized. Her exercising this kind of authority over her household leads many scholars to assume she must have been a widow, but maybe we'll one day learn that's a false assumption. In any case, it was the Lydias of the ancient world who had so much to do with the growth of the early church, which gathered in households such as hers. They were households of God, households of freedom, where people helped each other move from the whole way the system of domination had shaped the very fibers of their being, their very desires, and helped birth each other into people shaped in the image of the God of freedom, the God of love.

That process of growing into our nature, as created in the image of the Creator, destined to be free, as the Creator is free, freed to love and heal, as the Creator loves and heals, is also the image we hear in Revelation today. It is an image of the new Jerusalem coming out of heaven down to the earth. Jerusalem becoming truly itself. Where previously we were no people, now we are a people. Where previously evil/the system of domination ruled in our absence, in us and through us, now the presence of I AM helps us to become present, to become incarnate, dispelling the cold wrath of disconnection.

If, in Eastern Christianity salvation is known as a process of enlightenment, the process of God's light infusing us and creation, so that we can reclaim our wholeness, I think in the West, where disembodiment has had so much to do with evil -- incarnation, becoming embodied is central to our salvation.

Lastly, we have the image in John's gospel of the man who has been ill for thirty eight years. Thirty eight years-- that's several life times. If you've been one way for thirty eight years, it's hard to imagine, it's hard to even let yourself desire, to be something else, because when you let yourself desire, you feel the absence of what you desire more. And yet, this man still has that desire. The tradition said that when angels flew across the waters in the pool of Bethzatha, the

waters were stirred up, and the first one into those newly stirred waters would be healed. But before this man can crawl down to the waters, someone else is always able to get there first, and he doesn't have anyone to help him get there quicker. And yet he is still there, knocking on heaven's door saying "I want to be whole." And that desire opens the door, as Jesus says "Stand up and walk." What gave this man the power, the courage, the confidence, to get up and walk, having been so accustomed to not being able to walk, having been led to believe that only in those waters could he find healing? My suspicion is that it was something in Jesus' attitude toward him, something in the desire of Jesus, that gave him the power to claim his whole desire.

God in Jesus does not need to wait for the waters to be stirred. God in Jesus is not interested in systems that only will allow one person at a time to be healed or become whole. God in Jesus wants to lead all of us, through our desires (even what James Allison calls our smelly desires, that is, the desires we're embarrassed about) into wholeness.

A little story. One of the better things that happened this last week was that I was told I was agoraphobic. That word once simply meant a fear of open places. At one point, I was afraid of going out of my house, and I thought of that as agoraphobia. But Monday I was told that now that word is used to refer to anyone who has bad phobias, and that, at the heart of such phobias is the fear of one's fears, such that agoraphobia now refers to anyone who has a debilitating fear of their fear.

With me that's meant being afraid that somehow panic attacks could make me lose my mind, which seemed a very good reason to be afraid of them, such that I've lived my life, since probably age 12, trying to avoid the situations that might induce such panic. After seeing how my phobias undermined my ability to fully enjoy our recent trip to Europe, I decided it was worth seeing whether over the last 25 years, anything new had been learned about treating anxiety. Now I'm going to be going into treatment next month to see whether, through a process of desensitization, I can overcome more of the fear of fear that I've been living with for 43 years.

So this gospel story today is not just a story for me. It's a concrete hope about another way I'm hoping to be reborn, another way I'm hoping to reclaim more of my nature as a free child of God, a friend of God, one who partly, through this community of friends, has ceased to look at life in terms of punishment and reward, and am learning to see myself through the eyes of a God who views me as of infinite worth and seeks to help me walk a path into the fullness of desire, that I might indeed know life in all its abundance. I may not be successful in this treatment, but I give thanks that, because of having such a community of friends, I don't have to be afraid of taking such risks. You know, when I'm being confronted with the situations that evoke terror in me, those situations that seem to cut me off from God within me, I'll be holding onto your love.

Finally, another poem by Gerard Manly Hopkins, this poem about becoming who we are. The poem begins with another marvelous image of creation, created in image and sound:

“ As Kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame, .....  
As tumbled over rim in round wells --stones ring.”

It then proceeds to recognize the self as part of this marvelous creation:

“Deals out that being indoors each one dwells:  
Selves--goest itself: myself it speaks and spells,  
Crying what I do is for me: for that I came.”

And then it rises to a vision of the new life in grace:

I say more: the just man justices;  
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;  
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is--  
Christ --- for Christ plays in ten thousand places,  
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his  
To the father through the features of men's faces.

And if we are willing, God is able, and if we are ready, God has already gone ahead to prepare a way for us. Amen.