

Focusing Desire in Covenant

Isaiah 49:14b-16a, Psalm 42:1-2

Sermon by Dan Schrock

January 19, 2014

Sexuality Series 1

Can a woman forget her nursing child,
or show no compassion for the child of her womb?
Even these may forget,
yet I will not forget you.
See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands;
your walls are continually before me. (Isaiah 49:14b-16a)

As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and behold the face of God? (Psalm 42:1-2)

This morning I want to talk with you about desire—not as an evil force inside of us which we must repress, but as a gift from God to use for the sake of God’s mission in the world. You heard that right: desire is not an evil to avoid, but a good gift to use for God’s mission. Our focusing questions for today are: How are our deepest desires for intimacy are gifts from God? How do they draw us to whole relationships with God and others?

Christians sometimes feel suspicious about desire. We associate desire with things like addictions, adultery, pornography, and with plain old selfishness. Mennonites might have a negative view of desire because of our emphasis on discipleship. “Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus,” we say to each other. From this viewpoint, desire is an enemy of Christian living. Desire is bad because it leads to selfishness, addictions, or sexual misconduct. Or so we think.

It’s true that some desires can propel us in the wrong direction. Our desires for power, fame, wealth, and security can derail the train of our better natures and crash our life with God. We can call these disordered desires or unhealthy desires. These desires we try to hand over to the Holy Spirit for healing and transformation.

Disordered, unhealthy desires are certainly bouncing around inside of us. But they are not our only desires. They aren't even our deepest desires. I find it extremely helpful to think of desires as multi-layered. Inside we have a whole bunch of desires layered or stacked on top of each other, like a multi-layered casserole. On the top layer rest our most superficial desires. As we dig deeper through the casserole we find more basic desires. If we dig through the layers far enough, we eventually get to the bottom layer. At this bottom layer we find our deepest desires which are given to us by God. They are holy.

Since this is the first in a series of 6 Sundays on sexuality, let's use a sexual example to illustrate how this works. Let's imagine someone, male or female, who on the surface has a desire for pornography. This is a superficial, problematic desire which makes it harder to develop respectful relationships with other human beings. When we scratch below the surface of this desire, we might find that underneath the pull toward pornography is a desire for a momentary escape from a life that otherwise feels stale, boring, or full of stress. If we dig another layer down, we might discover that the person wants a life of meaning, purpose, and vitality. At this layer we'd have to say the desire is starting to become something good, because meaning, purpose, and vitality are part of the shalom God wants us to live in.

The desire for shalom may not yet be the deepest layer of desire in this person. Below the desire for shalom could be a desire for a relationship of deep and lasting intimacy with another person. Maybe the person who's attracted to pornography is single and feeling very lonely. Or maybe the person is married but feeling alienated from his or her spouse because the marriage is not going well. For whatever reason, this person wishes for a relationship of deep and lasting intimacy. This is a good desire. God created us to be social creatures who crave friendship and companionship with others.

As we dig toward the bottom, we might uncover one final layer of desire. Maybe at the very bottom of the person's soul is a desire for communion with God. Augustine, the great theologian, wrote that a base-line desire in all of humanity is a desire for God.

Whether or not we fully recognize that desire in ourselves, it's still there. Our hearts are restless, said Augustine, until they find rest in God (*Confessions* 1.1).

This example of the person attracted to pornography illustrates at least 3 things about desire.

First, we have many layers of desire inside of us. Some of these desires are disordered while others are rightly ordered because they're closely related to God. Not every desire has the same moral quality.

Second, we can keep probing beneath just about any desire and eventually arrive at God, or something close to God. In this example we started with pornography, dug through momentary escape, noticed a wish for vitality, encountered shalom, discovered hunger for companionship, and finally found God's own self. But we could have started with nearly any other behavior such as gluttony or greed, adultery or promiscuity; traced a similar path through the various layers of desire; and ended with a deep desire close to God. The more we dig through these layers, the closer we get to God.

Third, our deepest desires—the ones at the foundational layer—are closely allied with the deepest desires in God's heart. Our friendship with God—our union with God—happens at the level of desire. When we want the same things God wants, then we are united with God in desire. When this happens, we truly become a missional people. When we want the same goals and strategies that God wants, we can authentically become partners with God's mission in the world. This is a major reason why we ask people in spiritual discernment to name their deepest desires, because as they name those deep desires and follow them, they are more likely to live in cooperation with the mission of God.

The Bible speaks about God's great desire for us, and our great desire for God. Our first text for today from Isaiah 49 likens God to a mother who longs for her children. God's passion for these children is so intense that their names are written on the palms of God's hands. In Psalm 42, desire moves in the opposite direction—the poet expresses a desire for God so intense that it's like a raging thirst.

From these texts we see that desire moves in at least two directions: God longs for us, and we long for God. We and God can meet on the ground of our mutual desires.

God is the source of our deepest desires. God is the one who put them in us. These deepest desires are like an internal homing signal within each of us that pulls us back home to God. If we choose to follow other gods or other paths, God's homing signal will keep beeping inside us until we follow its summons. We will be perpetually restless until we rest in God.

In the history of Christian spirituality, one of the great questions has been how to channel desire.¹ Great spiritual writers from the past knew that even though desire is a gift of God, it can easily become disordered and move in unhealthy directions. Therefore one of the great questions in Christianity is how to channel human desire in healthy directions. People historically came up with at least two practical answers which have stood the test of time. One answer is that we can do an array of spiritual practices or spiritual disciplines. Spiritual practices train our desires. Spiritual practices function in the Christian life like practicing functions for a musician or training functions for an athlete. Spiritual practices train us to want what God wants. A great example of this is centering prayer, which trains us to relinquish our surface desires—every thought, feeling, or image—and focus our deeper desire on God and God alone.² This is just one example. Virtually every spiritual practice I know about—which is somewhere in the neighborhood of 200 practices—helps to channel our desires in the direction of God.

A second practical way of channeling our desires is to make covenants. I think you already know that the Bible has many different covenants. One of the earliest and most foundational covenants is the one God made with Abraham and Sarah,³ but God also made covenants with Noah (Gen 8:20-9:17), Israel (Deut 11), David (2 Sam 7), and so on.

¹ Philip Sheldrake, "Desire," in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Philip Sheldrake (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 231.

² For more on centering prayer, see <http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/category/category/centering-prayer>.

³ The adventure with Hagar which resulted in the birth of Ishmael implies that God's covenant was not with Abraham and *Hagar*, but with Abraham and *Sarah* (Genesis 16:1-7:22).

Individual people sometimes made covenants with each other, as in the covenant Ruth made to Naomi, her mother-in-law (Ruth 1:15-18), and the covenant between David and Jonathan (1 Sam 20). Eventually covenant-making became a metaphor for marriage (Hosea 1-3). The story goes that a church member once asked a pastor what the problem was with adultery. The pastor replied that adultery breaks the covenant between two people. It's breaking a promise, or a covenant, you made to another person.

Making a covenant is a great way to channel desire. When God made covenants with various people in the Bible, God was channeling divine desires in particular directions. It's as if God said: "I, God, have a special desire for you, the people of Israel, so I'm going to channel my desire through this covenant." Something similar happened in the covenants humans made with each other. "I, Jonathan, have a desire for you, David, and I want to channel my desire through this covenant of friendship." This is exactly what married couples do. They channel their desires for intimacy, friendship, joint economic resources, and sex by making a covenant of marriage with each other. In the sermon on marriage in two weeks we'll return to this idea of covenant.

However, I want to say clearly that covenants aren't just for married people. Sure, married people form a covenant when they marry. But single people can and do make covenants as well. I've known single people to make covenants of celibacy where the second covenantal partner is God. Sometimes people who aren't married to each other also make covenants for specific situations and specific lengths of time. Another type of covenant can occur in small groups where the members agree how and for how long they will be together as a group. And of course there's baptism, which is a covenant all Christians make with God. Any of these can be appropriate channels for our deepest desires.

Our deepest desires are gifts from God. Let us keep those desires foremost as we serve God in the world.