

Desire

- [Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7](#)
- [Romans 5:12-19](#)
- [Matthew 4:1-11](#)

About 15 years ago the people of St. Ben's read a book together. Some of us joined in groups during the week, some of us shared it in a couple of Saturday workshops and some people just read it on their own. However we did it, a significant number of us read [Mysteries of Faith](#) by Mark McIntosh. It is well worth re-reading, or if you were not with us then, reading for the first time.

The thing that really stood out for me was the idea that desire is God-given and can be holy. Up until then I had thought of desire as something to be tamed, something to be ashamed of, something that if I prayed and perhaps fasted enough I could be rid of. I don't know if my parents actually taught me "I want doesn't get!" but I certainly learned that wanting was bad, desire to be guarded against.

In the garden of Eden, in the foundational myth that our ancestors developed to explain how things came to be, the first people were living in harmony with Creation. Their relationship with God and the world around them was clear – they took care of the earth and they walked with God. There was it seemed no other way. Until their desire was aroused. Their desire was aroused for the fruit of the one tree of which they were not to eat. And so they ate and everything changed.

Everything changed, because in eating that fruit, they had set themselves in rivalry against God. The serpent had said to the woman, "... God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

Suddenly they saw each other with different eyes. They realized they were naked. Their innocence was changed into a knowledge of good and evil. No longer were they in a naïve and simple relationship with God and their environment. Everything was different. Their desire led them to rivalry with God, and quickly they turned to blaming.

It wasn't me it was her... it wasn't me, it was the serpent...

They were separated not just from the environment, not just from God but also from one another. In setting themselves as rivals to God they set themselves as rivals to one another.

Their God-given desire became distorted and it is only a few chapters before murder comes into the picture. Cain kills Abel because he envies Abel's apparent easy ability to please God and within a few generations systemic sin is so embedded that God sends the Great Flood to cleanse humanity.

Now let's fast forward to Jesus and see how he deals with a similar situation.

Jesus has been baptized. He has been marked as God's beloved son. He is in the desert learning what this all means and starting to understand his mission and ministry. He has been fasting a very long time and he is famished. It is not surprising that he is hungry. And so he is tempted.

Jesus is tempted to stray from the destiny he has accepted as the beloved Son of God. Jesus is tempted by his desire for food and drink not to obey God but to set himself up as a rival to God. And this temptation continues. It would be much easier to get the things his human desire wants – food, fame and power – by separating himself from God the Father. But he does not do that.

In Jesus we see a new human, Human 2.0. A human who chooses to be obedient to God. A human whose desire to serve God is much greater than his desire for things which seem very attractive to us. Human 2.0 does not desire

rivalry with God which is also rivalry with other humans, but to be aligned and filled with God's own desire.

Here is a quote from the book I mentioned, *Mysteries of Faith*. McIntosh writes,

Christians believe that behind all our desiring, and working secretly within it is God's own desire, the desire of the Father for the Son and the Son for the Father, the desire we call the Holy Spirit. That is what awakens our own desire and into which we are beckoned: behind all the childhood stories of mistaken identities and long-lost parents who are finally found stands the very One who has truly loved us from all eternity who knows every hair on our heads. It is this yearning Holy Spirit who ignites our desire and draws us into the life of Christ. Being filled with Christ's yearning desire to do God's will is the truly great adventure – the one in which we must risk all if we would find all, called and claimed at last as God's own beloved child.¹

From this perspective, we desire because God desires and we are made in God's image. So what is it that God desires?

God desires the flourishing of all beings; God desires a universe living in harmony and on conscious relationship with God. This is different from the relationship in the Garden of Eden, were there was no other possibility. God longs for the children of God to choose to be in loving relationships with God, not in rivalry and competition.

And that of course, is the meaning of the ashes of Ash Wednesday – it is a reminder to us that we are not God and an invitation for us to offer ourselves and our desires in obedience to God.

¹ *Mysteries of Faith* p.93

Which is exactly what Jesus did. And through his work, we are given the saving grace which can transform our own desires so that we choose to desire the world that God desires, we choose to let go of rivalries and blame, we choose to let go of separation and instead to be reconciled with God and one another.

And so through the yearning of the Holy Spirit, we are drawn into the life of Christ and become filled with the yearning desire to do God's will. God's desire works in us so that what we come to desire is the fulfillment of God's plan for the universe.

In the reading we heard from Romans, Paul is trying, I think, to talk about this very thing. The distorted desire of humanity from the earliest days has made us competitive and brought us into rivalry with God and with one another. This is the sin matrix. This is the true meaning of sin which then gets played out in individual and corporate ways; sin is not just what we did or didn't do, it is the whole orientation of distorted desire which sets us up against God and against each other.

But the transformative love of God made available to us in Jesus, offers the possibility of freeing our desire and making it holy, making it that which calls us ever deeper into the mystery, ever deeper into the heart of God.

This is our choice. This is our free will. Will we choose to live out the desire of God, or to set ourselves in opposition to God?

Last week I shared with you the story of Abba Lot, as it was told to me. Today I share it again, with a slightly different ancient punchline:

Abba Lot once said to his spiritual father, Abba Joseph, "Father, I fast as much as I can, continue in prayer, keep silence and contemplate, and also, through abstinence, guard myself from impure thoughts. What else

can I do?" Then Abba Joseph stood up, raised his hands to heaven, and his ten fingers shone like ten flaming candles. He said, "If you desire, you can become all aflame!"