

The Spirituality of Desire

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Today's sermon marks something of a milestone for me. Or perhaps I should say it helps mark something of a milestone. I guess it's somewhat predictable that when we reach one of those big birthdays we cannot help but step back and do some reflecting on who we are, on what we want out of life, and what direction or directions our lives are taking us in the future.

There's been a lot of this milestone stuff going on in our house the last week or so. Last Monday Carol turned 50 (am I allowed to say that in public?) and this coming Tuesday, I will do the same. Needless to say, I've had "fun" with the eight day difference in our ages. You know, reminding Carol that while my wife is in now in her 50s, I'm just a youngster still in my 40s. For some strange reason which I can't understand, I seem to be the only one in our family who finds this to be amusing!

In any case, turning 50 is part of the reason I decided to explore the relationship between desire and spirituality. But that's not the only reason. I think it's fair to say that in quite a few religions, desire and spirituality have not been on the friendliest of terms. Or at least that's how religion has been understood. Following one's desires, and by this is usually meant sexual desire, is the opposite of what it means to live a holy, sacred, or godly life. As you've probably guessed from our meditation and reading, I hope to paint a very different picture of the relationship between desire and spirituality.

But before I do that, I should probably make clear that today's sermon will not be focused exclusively or even primarily on sexuality. Last Sunday a church member jokingly mentioned to me that given today's topic, they couldn't wait to see what the slides on the screen would be. Well, sorry to disappoint but today is not going to feature Rev. Tim's sex sermon or any pictures or diagrams. Today will not be the kick-off of an adult version of the Our Whole Lives or OWL class which we offer to our youth in 7th, 8th, and 9th grade. Not that an adult OWL class isn't a good idea. In fact, I hope we can someday offer such a class.

For those of you who are new to Unitarian Universalism or unfamiliar with this program, OWL is a comprehensive sexuality curriculum Unitarian Universalism developed in partnership with the United Church of Christ. There are OWL curricula for all ages and we currently offer OWL, as I said before, for our middle to early high school youth. Having had both of my children participate in the OWL program, I can honestly say that OWL is one of the finest things we do in Unitarian Universalism. OWL teaches our children that far from being something that is bad or sinful or worthy of shame, sexuality and sexual desire are beautiful and natural parts of life. OWL helps our youth understand themselves as sexual beings, helps them clarify their own values, and helps them understand "the spiritual, emotional, and social aspects of sexuality."

And it is that spiritual aspect of desire that I want to focus on today. Not just sexual desire, although sexual desire is certainly a very important part of desire. The desire I'm talking about is the longing, the yearning, the deep-seated passion human beings have for connection, completion, fulfillment, and wholeness. This desire is found in the cry of the newborn to be held and to be loved. Desire is found in the yearning of lovers to experience their bodies and their beings as one. Desire is found in the irresistible urge to create and to discover that spurs artistic and scientific genius. And desire is most certainly found in the soul and the spirit as it longs to love and to be loved and to connect with and be at one with something greater than itself.

This understanding of desire as a longing of the soul or spirit stands in sharp contrast to how desire has so often been portrayed by religion. Think for a moment about that most famous of stories about the evils and negative consequences of desire – the story of Adam and Eve. In the story, Adam and Eve are experiencing the bliss of paradise in the Garden of Eden. But then temptation stemming from desire, in this case Eve's desire for the knowledge of good and evil, which God specifically forbids, ruins everything. Rather than controlling her desire as instructed by God, Eve gives in to it, picks the apple from the tree, and feeds it to Adam. Needless to say, God gets pretty peeved, fills Adam and Eve with shame and guilt for their disobedience and sin, and tosses them out of the Garden of Eden.

While few religious stories have done more to give a bad name to desire, I don't want to leave you with the impression that this very negative view of desire is only found in the Bible. In fact, some version of "desire is the opposite of spirit" is found, in one way or another, in most if not all major religions.

Let me give you just one example. At the heart of the Buddhist tradition are the Four Noble Truths. The first two of those truths are often translated or perhaps I should say mistranslated as "All of life is suffering" and "The cause of suffering is desire." Just as the Bible appears to link desire with sin and disobedience to God, Buddhism is often seen as connecting desire and suffering and as calling for the absolute elimination of desire.

And what have been the consequences of these perceived condemnations of desire by so many of the world's faith traditions? Countless generations of believers and followers viewing desire as something bad, as something to be ashamed of, as something to feel guilty about, and as something for which one will be judged and condemned not only in this lifetime but also in the next.

I want to spend the rest of this morning's sermon making the case for a very different understanding of desire – an understanding that sees desire not as a barrier to be overcome or eliminated, but rather as a gift of the spirit that calls us to seek, to yearn, and to be one with the all-encompassing love and life-force at the heart of existence.

And the best way I have come to understand the relationship between spirituality and desire is to distinguish between two different kinds of or levels of desire – what one of my professors in seminary calls small d desire and big D Desire.

Small d desire is rooted in our very human need for survival. We hunger for food, thirst for drink, yearn for sexual gratification, and so on. Small d desires are healthy and essential for life for without them, we would not survive for very long and not be able to experience the best things in life – happiness, joy, and love.

Small d desires are good and healthy if we stay in right relationship with them. But that is easier said than done. You see, too often our small d desires become not simply instruments of survival and happiness, but also the source of craving, habit, and even addiction. And as is the case with so much in life, those cravings and addictions are often rooted in fear - fear of not being the person others expect us to be, fear of being judged or condemned by those near or far, and fear of not living up to the expectations dictated by culture and society.

And once fear takes charge of our lives, small d desire becomes all-consuming and the source of the very kind of suffering talked about in Buddhism. No matter how much we try to numb or eliminate our fear with craving and addictions, the fear returns. We are never satisfied, never complete - never truly free to be ourselves and to be truly happy.

So what are we to do? Is there an alternative approach to desire – a path leading us away from the negative consequences of the fear and craving that lead to so much unhappiness and sorrow in our lives and in our world?

One answer that has come from religion, as has already been noted, is to try and suppress and eliminate desire through guilt and shame. In this view, there is no such thing as small d or big D desire, only bad d desire. Desire of any kind is sinful and is a cause for judgment and condemnation from God and religion. When we follow desire, we are privileging our own needs above God. To follow desire, in this view, is the height of sin and selfishness.

But as I said earlier, there is also within most if not all the world's religions, another perspective on desire, a perspective that sees desire as not only being emotionally and physically healthy, but also as the path to understanding, experiencing, and becoming one with the creative and sustaining love at the heart of existence.

This religious path of desire can be found in the Sufi tradition within Islam, which we heard about in the story Rich told us earlier. This path can be found in the Bible in the extraordinary book known as the Song of Solomon or the Song of Songs, which portrays two lovers longing for one another in the same way that God and humanity long for one another. And this path can be found in the Eastern traditions like Buddhism in the variant of Buddhism known as Tantric, which sees desire as the path to spiritual enlightenment.

And that leads me to the second kind of desire, what my teacher used to call big D desire. Unlike the voices of fear and guilt that so easily turn our small d desires into craving and even addiction, big D desires are rooted in love, in the human heart, and in who we really are and yearn to be. The famed

British writer D. H. Lawrence captured something of the essence of big D desire. "People are not free when we are doing just what we like. People are only free when they are doing what the deepest self likes."

And the various mystical sides of the various religions I mentioned earlier point out, our deepest self is the desiring self – the self that longs for love, for connection, and for unity with the oneness, the spirit, and yes the love at the heart of existence. Some call that unity God; others call it wholeness, fulfillment, or simply love.

One of my favorite definitions of this kind of desire comes from Buddhist teacher and psychologist, Tara Brach. In her wonderful book *Radical Acceptance*, Brach points out that the Latin root of the word desire means "away from a star." Stars are the energetic source of life and it is this aliveness that we desire to connect or re-connect with. Big d desire is our yearning for the energy, the aliveness, the creative love at the heart of existence. As the early Christian thinker Irenaeus once said, "The glory of God is a human being fully alive."

And how does this aliveness, this big D desire manifest itself? As a voice, a yearning, a longing to be who we really are rather than who or what the voices of fear and guilt, judgment and shame tell us we should be. Like that young girl sitting under the open sky from our reading, life is calling us to lean into and live into our deepest longings. Desire is at the root of what the Quaker writer Parker Palmer calls our inner teacher – a voice calling us to lead lives that are whole and undivided – lives in which we, as Parker says so well, belong to ourselves and grow into "our own authentic selfhood."

At the beginning of my sermon I mentioned that turning 50 has inspired me to reflect on what it is that I desire in my life and what my inner teacher is saying to me. And although I may not yet fully understand what the message is, I keep coming back to a deep-seated need I am feeling to savor and appreciate the beauty that is all around me and within me – to savor the beauty of my family and my relationships, to savor the beauty of our church community and our faith, and to simply savor the beauty and blessing in everything and everyone. As I begin a new decade of my life, I simply want to see, taste, hear, smell, touch and experience the beauty of all.

So my question and my prayer for all of you is this: what is your inner teacher, what is your deepest desire saying and calling you to do? Maybe its calling you to grow, to love, to serve, or to create. Maybe its calling you to live with more gratitude or to love more fully. And maybe its calling you to simply listen and to follow the spirit of life and desire – a spirit that lives in us and among us – a spirit that calls us to be our deepest selves, our best selves, our authentic selves. Listen for the spirit. Listen for the voice of desire. Let it be your guide and your inspiration. There is beauty in your desires, there is truth in your desires. May they bring you joy and laughter, may they keep you singing and dancing, and may they always lead you to love and delight.

Blessed Be.