

Sermon: On Desire
Scripture: Matthew 6:19-24
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
Date: May 21, 2017

In the first movement we heard sung these words: “desire, what we *think* we want, stirs in us, the broken creature of our lives roars... and tears the waters and leaves them wounded and poisoned.” And though Arnesen’s music is beautiful, lush and stirring, the poet, Euan Tait, in this piece, has indelicately put his finger on a core wound in the human soul which leads to so much of the wounding we do to one another and to the earth, thus the title the Wound in the Water.

Euan Tait though takes Jesus’ lead and points us where Jesus would have us look within ourselves, uncomfortable though it may be, and that is at the nature of our desires. And what better symbol is there for human desire than money. Jesus spoke far far more about the subject of money than he did about heaven and hell or even love? One out of every 7 verses in the Gospel of Luke references finances in one way or another. But it’s not money per se that is at issue, rather the inordinate desire for it. Paul goes so far as to say in I Timothy “the love of money is the root of ALL evil.”

In the 5th century Augustine of Hippo, theologian and philosopher from Northern Africa, suggested that a core aspect of human nature was the experience of the constant renewal of our desire, that we are never completely satisfied, always want more. This is not *necessarily* a bad thing except when our desires become disordered. Augustine posited that there was a great chain of being in which all things are good so long

as they participate in God, the source of their being. But when we pursue the lower things on the chain of being for their own sake and forget their true end, which is in service to God and God's goodness, our desires become disordered. So, for instance, Augustine, speaking from personal experience as quite a playboy in his teenage years, said that sexuality is a good and right thing but becomes disordered when sex becomes the focus rather than the deeper love we desire. Or, more to the point of our cantata today, we desire to create but when our creating involves the rape and abuse of the earth, we have placed our desire to create above our love and desire for God. Augustine explains human sinfulness saying "we have an immoderate urge toward those things at the bottom end of the scale of good and we then abandon the higher and supreme goods, that is God's truth and God's law." Not to put too fine a point on it Jesus says "you cannot serve money and God, it's gotta be one or the other".

The problem with Augustine's theory and Jesus' teaching, is that such a perspective on human desire is completely at odds with our consumer culture. We have a society that thrives off of the constant renewal of our desires. In fact our system escalates our desires and trafficks in what has been called "the organized creation of dissatisfaction," placing its faith in markets above all else as the primary means for achieving the public good. And the problem with handing it all over to markets is that the priests of the free market, be they economists or major CEO's or advertising agents approach the human being in quite different terms than Jesus and his church does.

William Cavanaugh writes about this in his book Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire.^{*} In discussing the basic approach of free market capitalism he contrasts the Christian perspective on desire with the market perspective saying “a market is free if individuals are free to choose their own ends based upon nothing more than their own wants.... however [from a Christian perspective]... we desperately need NOT to be left to the tyranny of our own wants... True freedom is not just following whatever desires we happen to have but cultivating the right desires.” Freedom from a market perspective is the freedom FROM any interference in the pursuit of what we want and freedom from a Christian perspective is freedom TO direct our desires towards the good ends to which God has designed His creation.

So Jesus says “seek ye first the kingdom of God and all else will follow, all else will be in its proper place” while Free Market Capitalism says “seek ye first a free exchange of goods and all else will follow.” Jesus says “you cannot serve both God and money” and Free Market Capitalism says “sure, go ahead and serve God in church and in soup kitchens, just don’t let your belief in God curb the flow of market forces.” The invisible hand of the market has its way in our lives and our world for good in certain ways, true, but for ill in many other ways and, from a faith perspective, there’s only one invisible hand that should have its way in our world and that is God’s and God’s alone.

“Desire, what we think we want, stirs in us and tears the waters and leaves them wounded and poisoned.” And that is the result not of a Judeo-Christian theology where God gives humans dominion over the earth, but a free-market ideology where we have collectively given over

ourselves to the love money, where the bottom line is not the good of God's creation but profit. Disordered desire is the intimate sin of the human heart but the consequences of that sin to the earth are breathtaking - species going extinct and polar ice caps melting and air that poisons lungs and waters that are wounded and nations at war and refugees who cry out in the shadows of sinking boats all as we continue to stoke the open maw of human desire!

So what is to be done? What are we to do?

Forgive us O God. Forgive us.

Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, you take away the sin of the world, have mercy on us and give us a taste of YOU that our desires might be re-ordered and we may desire above and before all else what you desire, the salvation of your beloved creation. Amen.

*Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire, by William T. Cavanaugh, Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI, 2008, pp. 1-15.