

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isaiah 55:1-3; Romans 8:35, 37-39; and Matthew 14:13-21

Think about a crush you had as a young person. Picture the object of your longing and whatever you saw in them that made them so desirable. Remember how preoccupied you were with this person, how the intense longing distracted you from everything else, wove its way into your dreams and gave you both joy and despair. Did your crush ever return your feelings? I don't know about you, but some part of me knew, even in the middle of it all, that was not going to happen.

Many spiritual writers throughout the ages have pointed out that our longing for our crushes is a version of the longing we have for God. "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you, O God," St. Augustine wrote sixteen hundred years ago. Ronald Rolheiser says that our desire for physical intimacy is a piece of our desire to be one with every last part of Creation and this in turn is our desire to be one with the God who made it all. Longing for God shows up in us in so many ways, for example, the need to do something worthwhile with our lives, striving for security or artistic expression. Even the press to end pandemic restrictions prematurely or the recently increasing violence in anti-racism protests may be forms of longing that have been distorted. Sometimes we get confused about what we really desire, just as the object of my youthful crush and what I imagined him to be were two different things.

Delightfully, the readings this week tell us that God desires us as much as we desire God. Isaiah 55 begins in Hebrew with God calling, "Yo!" an eager, perhaps unpolished, lover, trying to get our attention. Then God offers us a prodigal bounty that is ours for the taking. All we need do is agree to be in a relationship with God. The "everlasting" nature of this covenant is not about our commitment going forward but rather about God bringing the benefits of the past into the present moment. God gushes for us! However, because God alone can satisfy our longing, God points out how illogical it would be to look elsewhere: "Why spend your wages for what fails to satisfy?" Why work so hard for fame or status, possessions or power, when God will give you what you want for free?

This is too easy; it must be a trap. So we tangle ourselves in making our lives the very best they can be. We set goals and strive to reach them. We will win so-and-so's approval. We will get such-and-such promotion. We will buy the right house or car. We will love and accept ourselves. We will avoid anything that we do not want to deal with. Our plans to save ourselves are what Paul has been talking about in Romans. He phrased our predicament like this: How can we be saved from sin's destruction? All our plans fail, but the love of Christ is always working for us and nothing – nothing! – can separate us from that love. Look at the list Paul gives of things we fear and pick your favorites: anguish, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril or violence. "In all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us." I was asked to read this passage at the funeral of a person who committed suicide and ever since, I have been stunned by its force: "neither death nor life... present things nor future things, nor powers, nor height nor depth nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

The familiar gospel passage is also about longing. Jesus was grieving the unjust execution of his cousin, but people needed him. So he stopped caring for himself to care for them. Even if we think Jesus is too busy taking care of something more important, like world peace or an end to human trafficking, he will respond to our needs. Even if what we have seems too little for the thousands in need, Jesus will provide that lavish prodigality of Isaiah 55 – with twelve baskets left over. If all this is so, maybe we should take some time to acknowledge our desire and God's desire as well. Prayer is as simple as that. Constance Fitzgerald wrote, "[Prayer] cannot be understood except within the context of desire, that is, divine desire coming to meet human desire and igniting in human hearts an unquenchable desire."¹ Yo! It's certainly hot enough right now. Come to the water already, will ya?

- ❖ When do you get most restless? What sparks it in you? Ask God for help in those moments.
- ❖ Consider the fears you can let go of because nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus." What would you like to do instead?

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¹ "The Desire for God and the Transformative Power of Contemplation" in *Light Burdens, Heavy Blessings: Challenges of Church and Culture in the Post Vatican II Era*. M. H. MacKinnon, SSND, M. McIntyre, M. E. Sheehan, IHM, eds. Franciscan Press Quincy University, pp. 203-204.