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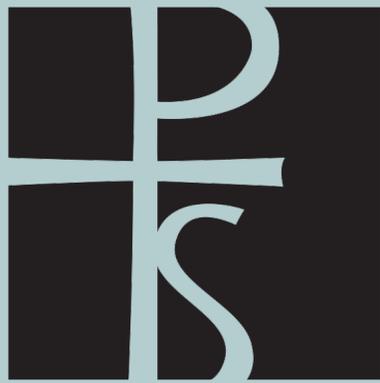
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Yearning Theologically

(1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1)

M. Craig Barnes

President M. Craig Barnes delivered this sermon in Miller Chapel on Wednesday, September 2, 2015, at the opening communion service of the 2015-2016 academic year.

Holy God, we have gathered here to place our lives in front of your Holy Word. Be gracious in this moment to our seeking of it. Use your Word to open our hearts and our souls to the grace spread across this table, the grace for which we have insatiable thirst. This we ask in the name of the Word made flesh, Amen.

Desire. We all have it. We confront it every day. It is part of the created package. So it is striking that in spite of their manifold differences all the great religions share a common anxiety about desire. They do not trust it. They have seen how much trouble we get into with it. And so they prefer to regulate the passion out of us with laws, and morals, and obligations, and spiritual detachment. Or if you are in the contemporary church you just keep everybody busy with programs and committees. Then, they are too tired to desire.

This is an old religious agenda, and it drove the Apostle Paul crazy. In his day people offered animal sacrifices in pagan temples and then after the sacrifice the meat would be sold in the markets. Leaders in the church in Corinth were forbidding Christians from eating this meat, but Paul does not really care about the religious history of a piece of meat.

Apparently, though, he thinks they can have a conversion experience because he says it is okay to eat anything

that used to be in a pagan temple if you eat it with thankfulness, for the earth and its fullness are the Lord's. His point is that everything you desire was created by God and that makes it blessed. But precisely because it is blessed, that means you cannot take everything you desire. We live with limits.

Remember from the beginning we were created and placed in a garden where we could not take all of the fruit. You cannot take your neighbor's blessing; you cannot even covet it. If it offends someone to eat the meat offered to idols, it is not worth it. Do not hurt others. Do not hurt yourself chasing desire, for then it leads to addiction.

So I believe Christianity and the other religions of the world are correct to try to harness our desire. But, even though it has to be governed we have to remember that desire is still a created gift from God. We are born literally crying out for breath. Then we spend our lives desiring more breath, more food, more water, and more blessings. If you are like me, every morning the first thought you have is a confrontation with your hunger (it stays with me all day long). Desire.

More profoundly, nothing of human greatness or beauty or inspiration has ever been achieved apart from desire. No injustice was ever fought without a passion and a desire and a love for it. Certainly no couple ever fell in love apart from desire.

The great problem with desire is that it is a hard thing to satisfy. In his book *The Awakened Heart*, Gerold May has written, "There is a desire within each of us, in the deep center of ourselves that we call our heart. We are often unaware of it but it is always awake."^[1] This desire is always for more. This is what motivates our achievement in our work. It is why we desire the "A." It is why we desire to improve, to succeed, to impact, to leave a legacy behind. We bring the same desire into our relationships. We ask our dates, "Where is this relationship headed?" (My, how I hated that question!). When we get married we ask our spouses, "Are we growing together as a couple?" We ask our friends, "Why don't we spend more time together?" These questions are inevitable. They just come with our soul that has been wired to desire more.

Now there is a companion to desire that can also be found in the soul, and that is called discontent. Our desire and our discontent live right next door to each other; they are very much in cahoots. You can see the partnership that they have played out in any romantic relationship. It begins with the fantasy. We say, "I have found the person of my dreams." Then it moves pretty quickly to the second stage which is, "This is almost the person of my dreams; I'm just going to have to make a few improvements." Then we get to the third stage, which is when we say, "This is going to be harder than I thought." And that is pretty much where the relationship remains as we continue to run back and forth between discontent and desire and discontent. Whether we are desiring in our love, in our work, in our service, in our leadership, or in our own bodies, if we pay attention to the deepest part of the heart there is always some level of discontent there. This is not a bad thing.

G.K. Chesterton has called it a divine discontent, which reminds us that at the end of every achievement we have once again come to the wrong star. He says that is what makes life so splendid and strange. The true happiness is that we do not fit because we come from someplace else. So, like desire, discontent has also been placed within your soul to remind you that your real desire is for the God who desires you.

This is why we come to worship. And it is why we study theology. It is to become clear again and again that the desire is for the Holy. That is what we do here: we bring here our lives that have known both success and dev-

astating hurt; lives that have known both love and loneliness. We confess that in all these things we have been made to long for a God who is greater than either our moments of glory or our moments of devastating loss. Even the glory has a note of discontent in it; it makes you yearn for more, as does certainly the heartache.

If you have been to the symphony, you know that before the performance begins all the instrumentalists are out there doing their own thing, tuning up and practicing various measures of music. To the audience this sounds like a strange cacophony of chaos up there. You wonder about your choice for the evening. This must be what our disharmonious desires sound like to heaven.

But then the concertmaster stands and plays a note called "Concert A." She or he plays the note long and slowly until all the other instrumentalists join in. Now they are focused. Now they are ready to play beautiful music. This is what theological study is supposed to do, and it is what worship has to do. It plays the long slow note that reminds you that your chief end is to glorify and enjoy God.

Whether you realize it or not, I believe that you came here to seminary because you do not want to spend all of your life tuning up. You want the many notes of your life to contribute to what the Apostle Paul said, "That which is true, and honorable, and just, and pure, and pleasing, and commendable." At your funeral, you want somebody to stand up and say you lived a beautiful life and you just kept spreading that beauty all around. You lived a life of passion. You were not afraid of the higher or the lower octaves. You refused to vacate your desire and stay with some awful monotone in life, playing it safe. If that is the way you want your legacy to be, you have got to get the desire focused.

Because you did not come here just to know more *about* God. The desire is to know God. That is what the soul yearns for: knowing God. So if you carefully listen through all of the research, all of the text in the library, all of your scholarship, and even through every parsed verb, if you listen carefully through your moments of joy in the seminary community, and if you listen carefully through your moments of disappointment and hurt caused by the community, you can still hear the long slow note called the Word of God.

But remember that you will never even satisfy that desire. We are but creatures who will never be able to exhaust or fully know God. To love God is to constantly encounter Holy Mystery, which is the Manna of the soul. And Manna has to be taken every day. You never fill up on it. So let us be clear that contentment comes not from satisfying desire. Contentment is found in rightly directing desire and getting it tuned. But we will always desire more of the mysterious sacred lover, and isn't that a wonderful way to conduct a life?

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

[1] Gerald May, *The Awakened Heart: Opening Yourself to the Love You Need* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993), 1.