

## God as our Beloved

It's not surprising that the Psalmists address the thirstiness, the hunger, the desperate ache of being human. At the heart of being human is a strong connection between sexuality and – to our surprise – spirituality, between our sexual nature and our spiritual nature, between our sexual being and our spiritual being. Maybe that's an idea we have to think about for a bit; for many people, it's a new idea. Sexuality and spirituality are usually seen as opposites, in tension with one another.

But both rise out of a sense of our own incompleteness, out of a hunger for our lost wholeness, a search, we could say, for “the other half of us.” Both represent a yearning for God, and the closest many people get to experiencing God is something they call sex, hence the desperation, the obsession, the insatiable hunger, the abandon with which they throw themselves into it, “with all the noisy generosity of a St. Bernard in heat.”

Sexuality is God's gift. And sexual longings are the most natural of all; they are to be honored, exalted and glorified. They are a God-given zone in which life is lived at its most exquisite intensity, with its greatest energy, and life becomes fascinating, colorful, vivid and purposeful. Of course, and here's the catch, it does not work well if you mistake your lover for God. That's what must be remembered. It does not work well if you mistake any person for God and expect that person to satisfy your longings, because life's deepest spiritual truth is this: If God does not become our beloved, the thirst and the longing will remain. The only ultimately satisfying beloved is God. And God wants from us the emotions, the energy, the passion, the longing we usually reserve for human love. And only when we give these first to God can we satisfy one another.

But here's the problem: If our sexuality dries up, if our sexual nature dries up, bad stuff happens. Now here we must be very clear. Sexuality is not dependent on what is crudely called sex. They're not the same thing. Sexuality is that God-given gift that allows us to connect deeply to others and to in that connection experience transcendent joy. It's the creative energy that empowers us to change the world. It's the deep Yes within the self, that says I am loving and loveable, desiring and desirable, as God made me and as I am now. And it's as possible in celibacy as it is in marriage. But if our sexual nature, our sexual side, dries up, if we no longer see ourselves as sexual beings, as capable of love and being loved, as capable of desire and being desired, so does our spiritual being, our spiritual nature, our spiritual side, and we may become incapable of feeling about God the way we were created to feel about God. And it becomes very difficult to encounter the presence of God.

And so we go back to the psalmists who thirst for God, pant for God, long for God, remember him on their beds, think of him through the watches of the night, find satisfaction in his embrace. You see, God does not want from us just our book-learning or just our dogged household chores. Is that all you want from those you love?

Meanwhile, the hunger runs so deep. The image in Psalm 42 is of powerful thirst. It's a deer braying over a brook gone dry. The deer cannot live without it, is desperate for it.

Likewise we are so thirsty. We want to feel a certain way. We want someone to make us feel good by the way they treat us. We want satisfaction in our work. We want to know that we matter to someone. We want someone to see all of us, the good and the bad, and still remain deeply committed to us. And these are not feelings we can deny without cutting off large parts of our inner life.

Now it is true that what we want is simply not fully available until Heaven. Go back to the deep spiritual truths of Genesis 1-3. We were created by God to live in a perfect world but because of our own self-absorption we do not. And we hurt. And it's O.K. to hurt. It's what a person created to live in a perfect world naturally feels – there's no way around it – in an imperfect world with eyes off God. But until we acknowledge our own deepest hungers and dissatisfactions, and quit trying to cover them up with work or lust or drink, we will not pursue God with the passion of deep thirst. And if we do not pursue God with the passion of deep thirst, if we do not give God our sexuality, we are dangerously vulnerable to addiction, to compulsively sinful habits, to whatever will relieve the pain we are not otherwise addressing. And we will keep going to the hardware store for a quart of milk.

The point is: There is a God-shaped hole in our hearts that will never be filled with anyone or anything but God. And the pain we feel, and the hunger and the thirst, is our homesickness for our true home. But now, as you turn again homeward, God will wrap you up in his love. God runs to you when you are still a long ways off. God is delighted by you. And step by step, we see past the dogma and ritual, past centuries of abuse and violence in the name of God, past the unbelievable things religion has said about God, the unbelievably dark things religion has said about God, and we fall in love with God.

Do whatever it takes to fall in love with God. It's all part of encountering the presence of God. What would it take in your life? Maybe it takes beginning your day with morning prayer. Maybe it takes ending your day with evening prayer. Maybe it takes recovering silence in your life, and entering into that silence, into heartfelt communion with God. Maybe it's taking a verse like Psalm 42:1, "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God," and carrying it with you all day long. Do whatever it takes to fall in love with God. Consider whatever beauty you can imagine and how much more beautiful God must be. Look beyond what is lovable and desirable here and now to the One who made them, who is infinitely more lovable and desirable.

Fall in love with God. Time will become eternity. You will feel filled with previously unimaginable power. You'll touch the heavens. You'll be utterly released from the past, released from the self. You'll feel a radiance inside. You'll sense again the enchantment of creation. You'll find yourself in passionate engagement with all that you do, with the people that you know and the people that you will meet, with the work that you do, with the ideas you encounter, with the places you find yourself in, with all that you see and hear and experience. Life itself becomes an offering, a sacrifice back to God. And you feel so privileged and glorified that you want to go around touching people, blessing

them, communicating your great happiness, the Good News, the secret of how the whole universe is a place of joy and freedom and love overflowing with rapture.

So give thought now to how you will learn to love God. What will you need to learn? What will you need to unlearn? What will you need to do? What will you have to schedule in? What effort will you have to make? How might you need to structure, or rather restructure, your life? This isn't easy. It may be mastered at first only in snatches. The seventeenth-century English preacher and poet John Donne, understanding our psalmists wrote this prayer to God in his Sonnet 14:

That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend  
Your force to break, blow, burn and make me new.

...

Take me to you, imprison me, for I,  
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,  
Nor chaste, except you ravish me.

– Dale Pauls