

The Holy Longing  
Sermon UUFDC  
September 2019

READING #1

**Blessed Longing by Goethe** (translation by John O'Donohue)

Tell no one else, only the wise  
For the crowd will sneer at one  
I wish to praise what is fully alive,  
What longs to flame toward death.

When the calm enfolds the love-nights  
That created you, where you have created  
A feeling from the Unknown steals over you  
While the tranquil candle burns.

You remain no longer caught  
In the prenumbral gloom  
You are stirred and new, you desire  
To soar to higher creativity.

No distance makes you ambivalent.  
You come on wings, enchanted  
In such hunger for light, you  
Become the butterfly burnt to nothing.

So long as you have not lived this:  
To die is to become new,  
You remain a gloomy guest  
On the dark earth.

READING #2: excerpts from the first few pages of Ronal Rolheiser's "The Holy Longing"

"It is not an easy task to walk this earth and find peace. Inside of us, it would seem, something is at odds with the very rhythm of things and we are forever restless, dissatisfied, frustrated, and aching. We are so overcharged with desire that it is hard to come to simple rest. Desire is always stronger than satisfaction.

Put more simply, there is within us a fundamental dis-ease, an unquenchable fire that renders us incapable, in this life, of ever coming to full peace. This desire lies at the center of our lives, in the marrow of our bones, and in the deep recesses of the soul. We are not easeful human beings who occasionally get restless, serene persons who once in a while are obsessed by desire. The reverse is true. We are driven persons, forever obsessed,

congenitally dis-eased, living lives, as Thoreau once suggested, of quiet desperation, only occasionally experiencing peace. Desire is the straw that stirs the drink.

“Spirituality is, ultimately about what we do with that desire. What we do with our longings, both in terms of handling the pain and the hope they bring us, that is our spirituality. Thus, when Plato says that we are on fire because our souls come from beyond and that beyond is, through the longing and hope that its fire creates in us, trying to draw us back toward itself, he is laying out the broad outlines for a spirituality. Likewise for Augustine, when he says: ‘You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.’ Spirituality is about what we do with our unrest. All of this, however, needs further explanation.”

Spirituality is not something on the fringes, an option for those with a particular bent. None of us has a choice. Everyone has to have a spirituality and everyone does have one, either a life-giving one or a destructive one. No one has the luxury of choosing here because all of us are precisely fired into life with a certain madness that comes from the gods and we have to do something with that. We do not wake up in this world calm and serene, having the luxury of choosing to act or not act. We wake up crying, on fire with desire, with madness. What we do with that madness is our spirituality.”

(7) “Long before we do anything explicitly religious at all, we have to do something about the fire that burns within us.

## SERMON: A HOLY LONGING

All of us have been born in an era when the dominant cultural and political message is that we are first and foremost consumers, economic beings, people who, through hard work, can amass wealth that can then be spent on food, alcohol, vacations, vehicles, gadgets, pets, movies, books, etc. This is perhaps most starkly clear in terms of the marketing that we are constantly being subjected to; ads that suggest that a big smile, a hug, a lean body will all come from buying something. But it was also clear when George Bush the 2<sup>nd</sup> told Americans that the best possible response to 9-11 was to go shopping. This is the root of liberal economics—if the market is free to do its thing, more stuff will be produced and more of us will be happier.

But many Americans did not go shopping after 9-11, they sought to understand, to build bridges across religious divides, to seek out family, friends and community. And, most of us know that the newest flavor of Coke is not actually going to make our estranged sibling hug us or help us to look ten years younger than we are, even if the life-sized ad suggests otherwise.

My starting point for us today is that we are not consumers first and foremost. And, perhaps, this is obvious to many of you. But what has not been so obvious, at least to me until recently, is what we, as humans, *are first and foremost*. I wish to focus on what I believe is the most fundamental essence of who we are and how we navigate this world.

Just like after 9-11, when we are at our best, when some of the junk of modern society is stripped away, we find ourselves seeking integration, balance, wholeness. And that is why we are here, Sunday after Sunday. It is also why we do many other things on Mondays and Tuesdays. But, if you are like me, often it is not easy, or even possible, to articulate what it is that is bringing us back here or compelling us to do what we do on other days of the week.

Here there are nice people who care for us (not to be underestimated) and good food and comfortable chairs and soul-moving music. But most of us, I assume, are here for deeper reasons as well. And it is these deeper reasons, reasons that Rolheiser has so beautifully articulated in the second reading, that I think are at the heart of our humanity, at the heart of what we experience as humans on this planet. But I find that acknowledgement of our fundamental spirituality rarely happens, even in church.

One of the most influential books about this question of what is driving me and you, what makes church appealing, what makes me want to sit quietly, and get in touch with something that I cannot name or really ever fully know is Ronald Rolheiser's book, *The Holy Longing*, published in 1999. Rolheiser is a Catholic priest, now 71 years old. He was born in rural Saskatchewan, in central Canada. His ministry has focused on helping us

postmodern men and women cope with loneliness, fear and restlessness. *The Holy Longing* is his most popular book.

In the poem I read earlier by the same or similar title depending on the translation, *Holy Longing or Blessed Longing*, Goethe has phrases: a strange feeling comes over you; a desire for higher love-making; in such hunger for light; you become the butterfly burnt to nothing. I think Goethe is getting at something akin to Rolheiser's premise, which is this:

***We are all born with a fire, a desire. As a result, our most fundamental decisions are about what to do with that desire.*** But one problem is that that desire can be powerful, it can be all-consuming. As Rolheiser notes, it is imperialistic. It commands our attention and makes us sometimes feel as if we are crazy, crazy if we follow through on its impulses, crazy if we do not.

Let's look a bit more at this desire, this fire, this powerful impulse. This desire has been named Eros by some. In Ancient Greek cosmology, Eros was initially one of the original gods- spawned out of Chaos. Eros emerged in consort with Gaia (Earth) and Tartarus (Abyss/ Underworld). Eros was life-force, the energy and power to create, to bring order and harmony into Chaos. Psychotherapist Glenn Fleisch writes that, "The power of Eros is to unify discordant elements of the universe, to develop a higher sympathy of love that binds us together in a communal spirit of life. This elemental or primal life-force lives within all sentient beings and organisms- and is *the* most potent power in all the universe. In the human being, the Eros refers to the primordial body of love- of feeling, sensitivity, and openness. Our original body is one filled with primal forces of energy, connectedness with all of being."

John of the Cross, a Spanish mystic, begins his discussion of the soul's journey with the words: "One dark night, fired by love's urgent longings." // Irish poet John O'Donohue wrote that, "There is within each of us, at the soul level, an enriching fountain of love....Love is the threshold where divine and human presence ebb and flow into each other."

So far now, we have this constellation of ideas: that we have a fire, an eros, a love, inside us that is demanding, that must be attended. But the next significant point is that these demanding urges, longings can lead us toward integration or disintegration. A healthy soul keeps us energized and glued together, despite the chaos. A healthy soul acknowledges the chaos, but is able to channel the eros life force for integration.

Integration takes work.// It is tempting to avoid the work. //This is how many of us use screens (wall size or hand held), alcohol, and sugar—to avoid the work of integration, to try to suppress the fire, the desire. But eros, the fire makes us vital. When there is no passion, no energy, we are asleep, depressed, not alive. So avoiding the work comes at great cost.

To illustrate, Rolheiser begins his book with the examples of three women who help us to understand the Holy Longing at play in each of their lives. The first is Janice Joplin who was exceptionally musically talented. She had huge energy and led a big life. She achieved fame

and fortune for a short period of time and then died tragically young, exhausted, at the age of 27: the ultimate disintegration. The second is Princess Diana, who clearly had two forces operating at once—a desire to be a good citizen, to use her position to make a positive mark and the other—to be beautiful, desired, ogled over. She, too, was a powerful woman. But for her, neither force seemed to gain total control nor did one seem to more consistently rise to the surface. Her life exemplifies both forces, integration and disintegration, at play in equal measure. Then there is Mother Theresa who demonstrated a ferocious tenacity for helping the untouchables in India, seemingly denying much of her own personal desires. But Rolheiser calls her a “very erotic woman,” “a dynamo of energy,” “a human bulldozer.” She was considered a saint and eventually, consecrated so by the Catholic Church, three years ago. She led a life of integration, channeling her powerful energy in a life-giving way. I don’t want to overplay this because I think it is dangerous to extract elements of a person’s life for a certain lesson; Mother Teresa, like the others, no doubt had her flaws.

But the point here is that I think each of these personalities has a different feel to us and it is this feel that is instructive for my point today: that we are all living our spirituality all the time and it is some effort to channel it for integration. So none of us are very surprised when Rolheiser suggests that Mother Theresa was able to tilt toward integration more often than the others. She used her seemingly boundless energy, boundless desire to create a better relationship with God, others and the Earth.

According to Rolheiser, one of the ways to promote integration is to “will the one thing,” something Mother Theresa clearly did. Yet, I think most of us identify with Princess Diana, we want to do good, we want to help those who are less fortunate, but we also want to experience everything else! We want to travel and to stay home; we want to take care of people and places we care about and meet new ones; we want to eat healthily and to indulge in things that are not as good for us; we want to sit quietly and be surrounded by our friends. But this is to risk Janice Joplin. Mother Theresa understood that with every choice comes a renunciation. Marrying one person is a renunciation of any other; eating at one restaurant is to not eat at any other that evening; accepting an invitation is to close oneself off to another, perhaps yet unreceived invitation.

Our energy and our love do have limits. And I think this is why we are here today, because we know we need help with integration, with renunciation, with willing the one thing. We are smart to know that we cannot do it on our own.

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Pre-industrial societies, like the ones I studied and lived among in Tanzania, have taboos and strictures to help mediate this energy. One must honor the ancestral spirits. One must have children. One must obey one’s elders.

On its own, our energy, our fire is raw, too demanding. The Bible says that no one can see God and live. If we look at this language metaphorically, it means that divine energy needs to be approached with caution and reverence. I on my own am not going to be able to live

in community or perform rituals. So honoring elders, remembering ancestors, performing rituals, living in community, avoiding shame, these were all ways of filtering raw, creative, spiritual, sexual energy so that it did not destroy us.

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Conveniently, Rolheiser has a recipe for ensuring that we have as much support as possible for achieving integration. He says there are four essentials of a healthy spirituality. One way to think about these is as habits. For pre-industrial societies had it figured out. We are too weak individually to do this work of integration on our own. We need habits and communities to support us. And, for all its benefits, modern society has eagerly abandoned as many strictures as possible in the pursuit of rights without responsibilities, individuality without context and progress without wisdom.

Rolheiser's four elements are as follows: private prayer and private morality, social justice, mellowness of spirit and heart, and community as an element of true worship. These allow us to more consistently be in touch with our deep source of energy and to properly contain it as well.

Like most ideas, books, messages that I respond to with a grand "ah-ha," I did so to Rolheiser's work because I was already on the path of making spirituality the foundation of my way of being in the world. Teaching at a Jesuit Catholic university has been a huge influence on this direction. But Rolheiser brought together pieces that I had not been able to link on my own. As I finish this morning, I want to explore briefly the four essentials of a healthy spirituality and encourage you to think of ways that you already practice these or might begin to practice them.

Private prayer and private morality—in order to be spiritually healthy, we have to have a deep, private faith, one that makes claims on our time and energy, one that we choose instead of activity. The Jesuits have a wonderful prayer practice called the Daily Examen during which one reflects on the day just passed and seeks to find what was most consoling and least consoling about one's day in the belief that God, the Holy Longing, Eros, love, the fire of integration was most alive, present during times of consolation and farthest from us during moments of desolation. Repeated attention to when we are at our best, our most integrated helps to make it more common even if those moments are counter-cultural or run against the grain of the world around us. With private prayer, one can be in touch with one's own morality and way of being in the world.

Social (and I would add environmental) justice—this requires moving beyond ourselves, beyond consumption. Time spent in service to others, as I know many of you do, is a powerful way of channeling our fire. I find that working alongside others for a common goal bigger than any one of us helps me to see the fire in those who are different than me and to appreciate their path and way of being in the world. The work I do at Xavier around sustainability has always felt holy, for I work with people from across the University on making progress toward a huge, long-term goal of zero fossil fuel emissions and the

appropriate teaching for such a brave new world. It feels like the huge nature of the work brings out the best in us.

Mellowness of spirit and heart—we need things in our lives that keep our hearts mellow and grateful, such as good friends, healthy leisure, creativity. A relaxed and joyful heart is important. Anxiety, bitterness, these are enemies of an integrated spirit. I have known for a long time that one of the times I feel most like myself, most content, most integrated is during potluck meals at my home. I invite 4-8 people to bring a dish, we eat good food, talk, laugh, and learn. It is pure joy. When are you most relaxed? Joyful? Does it happen regularly?

Community—Finally we return to this fellowship, this community. We cannot do this on our own. Your impulse to be here is a healthy one, to be present for each other as we all seek integration. To share with each other moments of desolation and consolation.

So there we have four ways that we can help each other with integration, with willing the one thing: private prayer and private morality; social and environmental justice; mellowness of spirit and heart; and community.

I want to close with Rolheiser's words from the beginning:

“It is not an easy task to walk this earth and find peace. Inside of us, it would seem, something is at odds with the very rhythm of things and we are forever restless, dissatisfied, frustrated, and aching. We are so overcharged with desire that it is hard to come to simple rest. Desire is always stronger than satisfaction... Spirituality is, ultimately about what we do with that desire.”

Spirituality is our defining nature, so we come here to be more in touch with who we are and want to be .