

Sermon: Season of Desire
Scripture: Matthew 24:36-44
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
Date: December 1, 2019

I grew up in Richmond, Virginia for the most part and there really weren't apple orchards around so it wasn't until I met Tracy, my wife, a CT New Englander, that I came to appreciate the fall tradition of picking apples at an apple orchard. Raising our girls in Vermont we always went to the Shelburne Apple Orchard in October and since we moved here we've insist on driving up north a bit to keep the tradition alive, although now it's always accompanied by a little bit of grousing – wow, their expensive down here, where are the picking poles to get the high ones, are there more trees somewhere. But still it's a tradition we love and frankly apples are a miracle! These gnarly trees that aren't much to look at have all summer been just methodically converting sunlight, rain and the material of their own bodies into these bright red, green or yellow orbs of absolute delightful deliciousness! I mean, it really is incredible. Who can pick an apple from a tree on a crisp cool autumn day and not at least entertain the idea that there is an extravagant loving creative presence behind this created world?!

This puts me in mind of one of my favorite but somewhat lesser known Christmas carols that derived from New England called “Jesus Christ the Apple Tree.” It goes like this:

The tree of life my soul hath seen,
Laden with fruit and always green:
The tree of life my soul hath seen,
Laden with fruit and always green:
The trees of nature fruitless be
Compared with Christ the apple tree.

It's a carol that uses the image of those delicious miraculous fruits as a symbol for Jesus Christ. It's an interesting symbol given that it was the apple – at least how it is usually rendered – that Adam and Eve desired and was the instrument of their fall from grace. “Whatever you do don't eat from the fruit of that tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the desire for that leads to a splicing and dicing and judging that should be left to God. The carol though rehabilitates the apple and speaks of Jesus Christ as the apple tree, the right object of our ultimate desire: The tree of LIFE my SOUL has seen, laden with fruit and always green.

While the carol doesn't contain the usual Christmas images of birth and manger, star and shepherds and angels, it does speak beautifully of the heart of Advent, the four weeks leading up to Christmas, which is ultimately the season of desire. This is why we read scriptures about a time where things will be put to right, where justice and peace will reign, where truth and wisdom will be heard, where love will be all in all, scriptures about watching and waiting for Jesus to come again to usher in the final fulfillment, it's why we open calendars day by day and light candles in preparation. It's all for the purpose of stoking our desire for God and God's coming reign of love. So for Advent to come right as we are feeling the world and our country are teetering towards an abyss of sorts is perfect and is supposed to enflame our hearts towards hope and expectation for something, something that will set it right: “as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be at the son of man's coming...therefore keep watch so you will be ready.” (Matt. 24:37)

But the church, of course, is not the only institution in the business of stoking desire at this time of year. The Christian church might have initiated the season of desire called Advent in order to set people's hearts and minds

towards God and God's purposes, but there is a more aggressive and in many ways more effective machine that works overtime at full-tilt to stoke our desire for things that can be packaged and sold, the machine of the marketplace, which is in many ways a god we are more devoted to than God, and it runs at such a fevered pitch that that church hardly has a chance.

But all things are possible for God and so our Advent question is where will our desire be focused and how will it be stoked. The church tries to encourage our desire towards a deeper and more enduring hope while our culture continually pulls us back up to the surface and says, "hope schmope, buy this and you'll feel better, look better, be better, right now!" But St. Augustine makes in his *Confessions* says it plain: "you have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." We were made as human beings to desire God, the wisdom and love and peace that are of God's essence and yet our desire, as Gerald May says in his book Addiction and Grace, becomes attached to things that are much less than God.

So for instance, the heart of human desire is to know that we are loved in some ultimate sense by God but we seek out the affirmations of others which tend to be based on what we DO not who we ARE. Or we sense an emptiness within ourselves and try to fill it with a myriad of activities and products when more authentic relationship is what is needed. Last week I took an 8-day silent retreat at a Jesuit retreat house on the north shore and you want to taste emptiness, you want to be realize how often you rush towards distractions – if your anything like me – then take an 8-day silent retreat. It highlights such things but it also is punctuated with these near breath-taking moments in the emptiness where you suddenly catch something of God's beauty and love. It is God's beauty and love that our

soul's desire and when we experience it even for a moment we everything else pales in comparison... or maybe I should say everything you realize is actually shot through with God:

His beauty doth all things excel:
 By faith I know, but ne'er can tell,
 His beauty doth all things excel:
 By faith I know, but ne'er can tell
 The glory which I now can see
 In Jesus Christ the apple tree.

For happiness I long have sought,
 And pleasure dearly I have bought:
 For happiness I long have sought,
 And pleasure dearly I have bought:
 I missed them all; but now I see
 'Tis found in Christ the apple tree.

In the Season of Advent, we are reminded that the true object of our desire is no object at all by rather a presence, a relationship with God. But this doesn't necessarily mean being detached from the things of this world. In fact the incarnation, the Word of God made flesh, that we celebrate at this time of year and throughout all the year is a miraculous and exuberant embrace and affirmation of the material world, not as the stuff we need to shed in order to be spiritual, but the very stuff by which and through which we can come to know God more fully. As Christians, by saying that Jesus is God en-fleshed, incarnated, we are saying that the things of this material world are the things of God. We take a loaf of bread and a drink of wine or juice or we sit on the seaside and watch the gulls diving into the surf or take a bite of an apple and we say these elements are the very pathways to God!

But right there is the key – *the pathway*. The problem with attachment and addiction is when the pathway becomes the end in and of

itself. The monotheist tightrope is understanding the material world is not the equivalent of God nor is it opposed to or against God, rather it's the passage to God. In other words it's not about becoming detached from this world in order to find God, but through the things of this world to become attached to God.

Our consumer culture gets us all turned around on this account. William Cavanaugh in his book called Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire, says:

“Most people [in our culture] are not overly attached to things, and most are not obsessed with hoarding riches. Indeed the United States has one of the lowest saving rates of any wealthy country, and we are the most indebted society in history. What really characterizes consumer culture is not attachment to things but detachment. People do not hoard money, they spend it. People do not cling to things, they discard them and buy other things.... Our relationship with products tend to be short-lived; rather than hoarding treasured objects, consumers are characterized by a constant dissatisfaction with material goods. The dissatisfaction is what produces the restless pursuit of satisfaction in the form of something new. Consumerism is not so much about having more as it is about having something else; that's why its not simply buying but shopping that's at the heart of consumerism.” (p.34)

It's not the stuff per se that we are addicted to, Cavanaugh argues, but the process of acquiring and the machine must always keep that process going if it hopes to stay afloat. “The economy,” Cavanaugh says, “as it is currently structured would grind to a halt if we ever looked at our stuff and declared ‘It is enough. I am happy with what I have!’” Or I might add from here in church, the economy would grind to a halt if we were to ever finally say – “wait a minute, it's not more stuff that I desire but it's God that I desire! All this time I have been running and running after what I thought

would satisfy me. Where can I find my rest from this treadmill, from this restlessness?"

I'm weary with my former toil,
Here I will sit and rest a while:
I'm weary with my former toil,
Here I will sit and rest a while:
Under the shadow I will be,
Of Jesus Christ the apple tree.

Our rest is found under the shadow of Jesus Christ the apple tree. In the season of Advent the church calls us to stay awake, to watch and wait, to eagerly expect the coming of Christ, to set our desire upon the coming of God, upon God's justice and wisdom and peace, and our relationship with God, for that's what our souls have been aching and longing for and if we taste the fruit of that tree we will understand finally that it can satisfy beyond all measure.

This fruit doth make my soul to thrive,
It keeps my dying faith alive:
This fruit doth make my soul to thrive,
It keeps my dying faith alive:
Which makes my soul in haste to be
With Jesus Christ the apple tree.