

TEXT: Isaiah 49:1-7; John 1:29-42
THEME: You are called to a greater good
SUBJECT: Vocation
TITLE: Divine Therapy

Second Sunday after Epiphany
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Messiah Moravian
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“The human heart,” John O’Donohue writes, “is a theater of longings.” Discerning which of these longings is worthy of our lives and which will only leave us diminished is the first work of the spiritual life. Desire lies at the very heart of what it means to be human. Unless we feel free to own our desires, we will never learn how to recognize those that are more fruitful and healthy.

Jeannette was adopted as an infant by a couple in Accrington, England. They belonged to a Pentecostal church. When Mrs. W was angry with Jeannette she would say, “The Devil led us to the wrong crib.” For transgressing her mother’s boundaries, Jeannette would be beaten, sent to the coal bin under the house or confined to the loo.

Serious offenses resulted in being locked out of the house. She would only be let back in when her father returned from working the night shift. At sixteen Jeannette fell in love with Helen. Mrs. W arranged for an exorcism. When this didn’t work, Jeannette was kicked out of the house and had to fend for herself.

Later, on a visit, Jeannette told her mom that Janey, her new friend, made her happy, just happy. Her mother responded, “Why be happy when you could be normal?” “You do it on purpose,” her mom said. “Goodbye Mum,” said Jeannette. Mum didn’t answer. Not then. Not later. Jeannette never went back. She never saw her mother again.

What saved Jeannette was an unquenchable desire to live a meaningful life. The library became Jeannette’s sanctuary and books her home. She read through English literature from A-Z. By the time she was sixteen she was up to Katherine Mansfield. She won a scholarship at Oxford University.

Jeannette understood, in a very dimly lit way, that she would need to find the place where her own life could be reconciled with itself. She knew this had something to do with love. A line from a poem gave her hope. It urged love and desire and declared desire a challenge to mortality itself.

Not that she always got it right. She didn’t. Some of the desires she pursued were destructive. But her love of life, however broken and challenging, carried her through the dark times to a greater happiness.

Jesus asked, “What are looking for?” “What do you seek?” Answering this question is the beginning of the spiritual life. It is not an easy question to answer. The heart is a theater of longings. Discerning what we want more than anything else is how we come to know who we are.

Isaiah knew he was called to be a prophet from before the time of his birth. Jeremiah knew he was called to be a prophet from his mother’s womb, but he wasn’t happy about it. He, like Jonah,

did not desire the call given. Learning to desire one's call can be as challenging, if not more so, than pursuing the authentic longings of one's own heart.

Isaiah faithfully fulfilled his calling, but he didn't have much to show for his efforts. He laments, "In vain have I toiled, I have spent my strength entirely to no purpose . . ." His rhetorical skills produced only disdain.

Lionel Blue was a British Reform rabbi, journalist and broadcaster, and according to the *Guardian*, one of the most popular and respected religious figures in Britain. This based largely on the strength of three minute homilies he gave on BBC Radio 4.

For some years he deserted religion in favor of Marxism. He thought the republic of goodness seemed more attainable than the Kingdom of God. To his astonishment the still, small voice of God spoke to him through the clamor of a juke-box.

Marlene Dietrich was singing "Where have all the flowers gone?" Young girls had picked them and given them to their men who had gone off to war and got killed. Out of their graves flowers grew. Young girls picked them.

He looked up and saw a young girl and a boy at the next table. A vase of flowers separated them. The full tragedy of Europe came home to him. He knew the work he must do. So many people had to be reconciled to break the terrible repetition: the picking of flowers, the going off to war, death, flowers on graves, young girls picking them.

God had spoken. It was not enough to work for the republic of goodness; he had to spend his strength, however challenging the labor, for the Kingdom of God.

Isaiah despaired of restoring Israel after the experience of a devastating war and exile. His despair, his lament, is heard. God's response is counterintuitive.

"It is too light/slight/small a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach the ends of the earth." The prophet, unsuccessful in restoring his own people, is called to restore justice to all people. God's therapy for despair: a greater work.

Many of you have given much time and energy and money to the restoration of this congregation. You may wonder, like Isaiah, if your labor has been to no purpose. You, like many in most congregations in this country, may be tempted to lament?

Be careful. The divine therapist is unlikely to give you a shoulder to cry on. Our desire to restore the church will be judged too light/slight/small a thing. The therapeutic intervention for our despair will be a greater work: the reconciling of the human family, the restoring of creation itself.

The spiritual life consists in two movements. The movement inward is the work of discerning which desires are life-giving. To discern and befriend our authentic desires is to learn who we are and what we are called to do. The second movement is outward. It is acting in creative ways on the desire that defines us. Any congregation that embraces these two movements of the spiritual life will know the blessing of God.