

In a few of my previous sermons here, you may remember that I quoted from Pastor William Willimon. Dr. Willimon is the author of nearly 60 books. I've got at least half a shelf-full of his books in my own library, ranging in topic from Biblical commentary, to the pastoral ministry and the Christian life. Prior to being elected as a bishop of the United Methodist Church in 2004, Dr. Willimon served for twenty years as Dean of the Chapel and Professor of Christian Ministry at Duke University. In 1996, an international survey conducted by Baylor University named him one of the Twelve Most Effective Preachers in the English-speaking world.

I tell you all this by way of preface to today's sermon. This message is Dr. Willimon's; it is not my own. In addition to being a prolific author and bishop of the United Methodist Church, Dr. Willimon also publishes a quarterly preaching journal called Pulpit Resource from which today's sermon is taken.

As you know, I have been focusing my messages during Lent on the Old Testament readings. In my five years of subscribing to Pulpit Resource I cannot recall a single time Dr. Willimon has selected the Old Testament reading as one of his preaching texts. And yet he did so today. So I would like to share some truly great preaching with you – Dr. Willimon's words, not mine.

Let us first begin in prayer. Please bow your heads and pray with me:¹

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Lord Jesus, your unquenchable light has shone into our darkness, your relentless love has reached out to our loneliness, and your resourceful determination to have us has drawn us in your grasp.

As we move, this Sunday, closer to your cross, give us the light to see your cross as our salvation, your cross not only as a sign of your great, eternal, unstoppable desire to have us. Amen.

"As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my heart longs for you, O God."

Thus sings the psalmist.

The idea that the human soul was made to long for God, to desire union with our maker, is a frequent theme of Christianity.

"You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts cannot find rest until they rest in you," wrote Augustine in his *Confessions*. Something in we human beings desires something, someone who transcends the whole of creation. We are frail, mortal, finite creatures who long to hide in the shelter of the Almighty. We flit from flower to flower like honeybees hoping to alight in that one place whereby we shall sip the nectar that preserves us from decay. We get into step behind the flag, we merge with the group, merging our frail identities into something larger than ourselves. But no group, no earthly project or mundane happiness satisfies our deepest desire, our restless hearts.

We ought to pay attention to that natural desire, said the Greek philosopher, Aristotle. That we experience hunger implies some end to our hunger, that is food. That we do not like being alone but desire companionship implies that we are made to be social creatures. We ought to pay attention to our desire, for that implies some object, some end to our desire.

In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, C. S. Lewis testifies to his own, from as far back as he can remember, desire for God. This desire is not fulfilled through any earthly means. All purely creaturely, earthly pleasure is fleeting. Why would there be a search, a desire if there were not the strong object of desire? Why would there be this sense of emptiness and need were there not some fulfillment of that need?

Yet before he is done with his searching, Lewis realizes in *Surprised by Joy*, that the object he has been pursuing is pursuing him. The God he wanted was all the while wanting him. His life became thus an illustration of the powerful draw of God's love upon a human being.

You get this in Augustine's *Confessions*. The book begins with, "I searched, I read, I wanted," . . . I, I, I, . . . and ends with "You came," "You touched me," "You spoke,"

. . . You, You, You. The God Augustine was reaching for was, all the while, reaching for him. Did not Jesus promise us, "And when I am lifted up, I will draw all unto myself"?

I think when Christians use the terms "conversion," or "born again," this is often what we are pointing to, that surprising, joyful moment, or that long, tortured process, when we awake to find that the God we thought we were pursuing was, all the while, pursuing us.

This is how the Bible tells it. Hardly anyone there is looking for Jesus. He looks for them. He intrudes.

Thus we come to today's Gospel. Some "Greeks" have come searching for Jesus (12:21). That's a bit unusual since throughout the Gospel of John, it's more typical that Jesus comes looking for people, rather than people come looking for Jesus.

Jesus responds to their search with enigmatic talk of grains falling to earth and dying, of losing a life to find it. Then he speaks of this time as a time when the Father shall be glorified. "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself" he says (12:22).

In a way, this is what Jesus has been attempting to do all throughout his earthly ministry, to draw people to himself. And now he is "troubled" (12:27) for he is about to go to die on the cross, and he speaks of that troubling hour as his hour of "glory." Where is the glory in that?

I'll tell you. It is the glory of a God who is determined to have us. It is the story of a God whose glory is to stop at nothing in order to have us, even death on a cross. "And when I am lifted up, I will draw all unto myself."

Remember, a people of God, a family, this was God's idea, not ours. God came to a rag-tag bunch of nomads, making a promise to be their God and to form them into God's people. That was the Covenant, a promise that God offered. Alas, the story of God's people is a story of all the ways that we broke, abused, and turned against that divine promise.

The prophet Jeremiah, in today's first lesson, foresees a day when there would be a "new covenant," written on the hearts of all people. Jesus says that day is coming, as he is being "lifted up." Now "lifted up" might be taken to mean that this Word made flesh, God come among us is at last ascending away from us, being lifted up from the grubby confines of earth to another, more heavenly world. But there is a double meaning here in this "lifted up." For here, in the context of the story that is working itself out among us, Jesus is being "lifted up" on the cross. He is being "lifted up," but not lifted away from us, but rather lifted even closer toward us. He is moving into the heart of our violence, our cruelty, and hatred. And this really is his true hour of glory. "And when I am lifted up, I will draw all unto myself."

Just for this Sunday, as we stand on the threshold of Calvary, take this as a working definition of the gospel, of the heart of the Christian faith: God deeply desires us and will do anything to get to us, even death on a cross.

And his cross, that instrument of cruelty, that sign of the complete cruelty of the human race is by his sacrifice turned into a great magnet that draws all into its field, a large net that catches sinful humanity within its cast. "And when I am lifted up, I will draw all unto myself."

Your life can best be explained as one long story of God's unquenchable desire for you. Every step you take, even the ones that you thought you were taking away from God are, in the great providential mystery of God's love, made into steps toward your Creator. Where ever you move, you are within the field of that magnetic draw of the cross. "And when I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself."

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Amen.

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¹ All that is contained in the section that follows is taken from: William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 37, No. 1, "March 29, 2009 – 5th Sunday in Lent" (Inver Grove Heights, MN: Logos Productions, 2008), 53-56.