

## **“What Do You Want Me To Do For You?”**

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October 27, 2024

Apostles Anglican Church

Scriptures: Isaiah 59; Psalm 13; Heb 5:11-6:12; Mark 10:46-52

We had a problem in my calculus class. The homework enforcement policy was not working. While individual homework assignments were not graded, there was just an understanding that a pop quiz on concepts covered in the homework could be given at any time. This was a policy our teacher, Mr. Wilson, had enacted to treat his students like the adults they were quickly becoming. But with other classes, social calendars, and a list of extra curriculars that kept some of us away from home from when it was dark outside to when it was once again dark in the evening, something had to give. We weren't doing our calculus homework.

And this posed a problem, because the storied AP exam was only a few months away. So Mr. Wilson brought out the big guns. No, we didn't start having pop quizzes every class period, although I'm sure a few extra ones were thrown in there. Instead, we watched a movie. And I daresay it worked, because while I have forgotten many of the equations and formulae learned in that class, the film has stuck with me.

The film was the Edward James Olmos-led *Stand and Deliver*, a story of a dedicated teacher in Los Angeles and his class of gifted but unmotivated calculus students. They, like us, faced a looming AP exam and they, like us, were not taking their work quite seriously enough.

The teacher in the film, Jaime Escalante, taps into the bilingual nature of his classroom when he identifies the chief problem his students face: they lack the “ganas,” the desire to take hold of their lives, inside and outside the classroom. Their lackadaisical approach to their studies, behavior, and lives in general, will make them vulnerable to an indifferent at best and hostile at worst world, and it is they who will pay the price. Cultivating the ganas, a desire for excellence will give them the best shot at making something of themselves, on a calculus exam, sure, but more importantly, in their lives.

I think it helped at least some of us take our studies more seriously. And there are still times, when I am feeling a lack of motivation or I want to take the easy route, that I still hear in Edward James Olmos’ voice, that I need to have the ganas/the desire to show up in the world in the roles that God has given to me with a desire to pursue his best in those things. It is a lesson that has far outpaced any math I gleaned from that class. So maybe it is ok to watch a movie in class from time to time.

Desire can be a tricky thing. I probably don’t have to tell you the ways in which desire towards the wrong ends can derail and destroy. Then there is also the problem faced by the kids in *Stand and Deliver* - they have a concept of the right goal, but not a strong enough desire to see it through. So our desire can be misplaced, but it could also need to be ignited. Honing our desires, redirecting them when necessary, encouraging them where they are towards the good, then is a key aspect of our lives as Christians. As Jesus says in the Gospels, it is what comes out of our hearts that

defiles us (Mark 7:14ff). James K. A. Smith, who has written a good bit on the connection between desire and spiritual formation, puts this same concept in a neutral way, "Our wants and longings and desires are at the core of our identity, the wellspring from which our actions and behavior flow."<sup>1</sup>

We turn to our reading from the book of Isaiah for a picture of what it looks like for desire to have led not just an individual, but an entire nation astray. The first verse in our reading (Isaiah 59:9) begins with the word "therefore," and as my preacher growing up would say, probably with a few other preachers, "When there is a 'therefore,' you need to see what it is there for." So let's turn back to the beginning of the chapter and see what this therefore is there for.

Isaiah chapter 59 comes to us in the latter half of the book, after the people have been taken captive into Babylon. It comes in a section that is generally more hopeful and looks toward the promise of God's redemption, but the chapter itself, carries the theme of transgression and repentance, even as it points towards God's deliverance in the end (v. 20).<sup>2</sup>

Let's start in verse 1:

"Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save,  
or his ear dull, that it cannot hear;  
but your iniquities have made a separation

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, James K.A., *You Are What You Love*.

<sup>2</sup> See The Bible Project's work on the organization of Isaiah:

<https://bibleproject.com/guides/book-of-isaiah/#:~:text=Isaiah%20does%20his%20prophetic%20work,Judgment%20and%20Hope%20for%20Jerusalem>

between you and your God,  
and your sins have hidden his face from you  
so that he does not hear.

For your hands are defiled with blood  
and your fingers with iniquity;  
your lips have spoken lies;  
your tongue mutters wickedness.

No one enters suit justly;  
no one goes to law honestly;  
they rely on empty pleas, they speak lies,  
they conceive mischief and give birth to iniquity.

They hatch adders' eggs;  
they weave the spider's web;  
he who eats their eggs dies,  
and from one that is crushed a viper is hatched.

Their webs will not serve as clothing;  
men will not cover themselves with what they make.

Their works are works of iniquity,  
and deeds of violence are in their hands.

Their feet run to evil,  
and they are swift to shed innocent blood;  
their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity;  
desolation and destruction are in their highways.

The way of peace they do not know,  
and there is no justice in their paths;

they have made their roads crooked;  
no one who treads on them knows peace.”

Then begins our appointed reading for today, “Therefore, justice is far from us...” The people are in a a situation of injustice because of their own sin. With this theme of desire on my mind, I was struck at how the transgressions highlighted in these first verses of Isaiah 59 reflect a wrongly ordered desire. The people are quick to shed innocent blood and quick to tell lies, like a spider weaving a web of unrighteousness wrought from a desire to do wrong.

Isaiah uses the image of blindness to further describe the people’s predicament because of their sin:

“We grope for the wall like the blind;  
we grope like those who have no eyes;  
we stumble at noon as in the twilight,  
among those in full vigor we are like dead men.”

This is the result of disordered desire - to be completely lost even when the way is lit and clear. For the people of Israel, it meant decades of exile in Babylon. For us, it means broken relationships, pain to ourselves, and others, and the constant friction of living against the grain of God’s will for our lives.

In many ways, we live in a culture that tells us our desires ought to be the leading force in what we decide to do. If you want it, go and get it. But this is a dangerous game. If we are not checking our desires against the standards God has given for us, they will leave us grasping around like we can't see in the middle of the day.

So how then ought we order our desires? For the answer, we go to someone who was literally blind.

Bartimaeus lived those words of Isaiah daily, though the text gives us no indication that he was some great sinner. He knew what it was like to stumble around at noon like it was dark. He knew what it was like to be overlooked and forgotten. He knew what it was like to be totally dependent on others for his needs. And maybe that last one had something to do with his recognition of who Jesus really was.

Bartimaeus calls Jesus the Son of David, an honorific title that had messianic connotations in Jesus' day. Bartimaeus must have been paying attention in synagogue, because he knew that the one who would come to save the people would come from the lineage of David. Bartimaeus is the first person in Mark's gospel to use this title for Jesus. It shows that he has not only been paying attention despite his lack of sight, he has been looking and hoping for the Messiah to come. Sometimes it is the ones whose need is great who desire to see the Lord the most.

And so he brings his desire to Jesus: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Allow me to paraphrase something I've heard Fr. John say: Sometimes the shortest prayers

are the best ones. Not only does Bartimaeus have the right desire, to receive mercy from God, he knows where to direct his request.

And I think we ought to commend and learn from Bartimaeus' persistence in his desire to be made well. The first time he cried out, those around him told him to be quiet. This may strike us as a little odd, because the crowd that has gathered around Jesus would be the type that would encourage the blind to come to him to be healed, but perhaps Bartimaeus was making things awkward - people in need have a tendency to do that, or perhaps it is better to say that we have a tendency to be uncomfortable when people's needs are on display. But this didn't phase Bartimaeus. The text says that he cried out all the more for the mercy of the Son of David.

He got Jesus' attention. Mark gives us the detail that when Jesus sent word for him to come, that Bartimaeus "sprang up" and came to him. You can see his faith and confidence in Jesus even in the way that he came up to him. But Jesus doesn't heal him right away. He has a question for Bartimeaus. "What do you want me to do for you?"

Bartimaeus might have thought the answer to Jesus' question was too obvious for him to answer, but he answers anyway. He wants to receive back his sight. Have we considered, have we sat with the reality that God *wants* to hear our desires and needs? The overreach of the prosperity gospel or a "name it and claim it" theology shouldn't prevent us from honestly bringing our desires to the Lord and asking for

his will to be done. Sometimes, this will of course highlight that our desires need to be changed, but Bartimaeus receives his sight.

We should also note that Bartimaeus' faith is borne out in what occurs after he can see again. Did you catch the last part of the passage? It says that he began following Jesus. Bartimaeus knew that he was encountering something much more important than getting his sight back. He had found the King, just as his first request had anticipated. It was indeed the Son of David, the Son of God, who had healed him, and Bartimaeus was now in for the long haul.

With our desires, we have then the need to direct them towards the good things that God has for us, most notably himself, and we need to have the persistence and courage to seek those good things out. But what is the role of God's Church in this question of desire?

After I had decided on the theme of desire for this message, I was surprised to see the theme appear at the end of our passage from the book of Hebrews. The reading is an encouragement to grow in maturity of faith, moving from milk to solid food as the writer describes it. The passage then ends with an expression of the author's desire: "And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises." In other words, the author of Hebrews desires that we would show the desire to grow in our faith. The Church is a house of desire formation. We come here to hear the word of God, to



receive the Sacraments, to do these things in community with one another, and to go out from here into the world with our desires shaped by those realities.

There are many places out there that are seeking to shape our desires. Our own flesh seeks to shape our desires after our passions. Those who seek our money seek to shape our desires toward the thing they are selling. In this politically charged time, political parties seek to align our desires with every little phrase of a party platform. Be careful who you allow to shape your desires. In the spirit of Hebrews we also ought to pray for one another that our desire would be for greater maturity in the things of God, that when we see Jesus passing by, we would have the desire to pursue him above all else, calling out for his mercy and healing.

When I have been a part of team sports, it seems easy for me to get swept along into the common goal of the team. As simple as moving a ball down a field one way or another is in the grand scheme of things, a good coach will make it seem like the most important thing in the world. And so teammates put aside the spats they are having off the field and the worries of their day and they play with all their hearts.

Friends, we have such a greater goal than winning a game. We are tasked in the church with partnering with God in his renewal of all creation. We are led by none other than Jesus himself. Let his mission, and he himself, be our desire.

Isaiah 59, though it begins as a litany of wrong that has been done, ends with the hope of God himself intervening on behalf of his people:

“He saw that there was no man,  
and wondered that there was no one to intercede;  
then his own arm brought him salvation,  
and his righteousness upheld him.

...

“And a Redeemer will come to Zion.”

He is the object of our desire, Jesus and none other. We who are blind, if we are paying attention, will see him as he passes by. Don't miss the opportunity to call out to him for mercy and healing.

What do you desire this morning? May all our desires be summed up in the way that he taught us to pray: “May his Kingdom come, his will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Amen.