

Desire

Song of Solomon 7:10-13
by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones
First Central Congregational Church
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Note: Part of our *Inspire* series in collaboration with the Joslyn Art Museum.
This sermon inspired by [Salome Dancing Before King Herod](#) by Georges Rochegrosse.

As I prepared the sermon for this week, I kept listening to the song “Wild” by the South African singer Troye Sivan. The refrain of the pop song is

Never knew loving could hurt this good, oh
And it drives me wild
'Cause when you look like that
I've never ever wanted to be so bad, oh
It drives me wild
You're driving me wild, wild, wild

Sivan’s songs have been described as “an infectious celebration of sexual desire.” A fitting complement to this painting of *Salome Dancing before King Herod* by Georges Rochegrosse. The Joslyn Art Museum describes Georges Rochegrosse’s painting as such: “Frequently, literary or historical sources serve as pretexts for sensational and titillating images.” And in this particular painting “inspired by the biblical account of the death of St. John the Baptist, minute details of setting and human physiognomy encourage the viewer to share with the painted audience the lithe dancer’s provocative performance.” This is a painting meant to both exhibit and evoke our desire.

Now, we are of course trained to take a detached, sophisticated approach to art. Nude bodies in art are okay, because they are art. As if great art couldn’t intend to inspire our desire. Though I’m certain that Michelangelo didn’t expect a detached reaction to his statue of David.

Art, even great fine art, inspires our desires. But desires are slippery things, and they make us anxious. Plato, for example, thought pleasure was wrong, that it polluted the soul, and that the enlightened person must rise about desire and pleasure into the realm of abstract reason. And some of those ideas clearly infected Christian thinking.

Yet there are other theologians with other approaches, like the contemporary writer Natalie Carnes who declares that “God is desire itself.”

So today we will explore how art inspires our desires and the role desire plays in transforming us to goodness in the image of Christ.

Salome Dancing before King Herod hangs in the European galleries on the north side of the Joslyn’s main building. In that room are a handful of painting from the Orientalist style, this being the largest one.

These Orientalist paintings are fascinating. They come from the middle and late 19th century when classical forms of painting were at their most developed. These paintings represent classical painting just before modernism burst upon the scene. They exhibit great detail in an attempt to paint very realistic images. Clearly these were skilled painters, even if they lacked the innovation that became prized later.

Orientalism emerged as part of a Western European fascination with the exotic that arose particularly after Napoleon's invasion of Egypt. The "Orient" here isn't limited to East Asia but was pretty much everything east of Western Europe, including Greece, Turkey, Egypt, and the Middle East, regions that are actually part of Western civilization.

But Orientalism perpetuated racist stereotypes. Though painted in a realistic style, these paintings were fantasies, exoticizing their subjects. Here, for instance, a biblical subject matter excuses the prurient details of the painting. For isn't that what the story of Herod is about? His own prurient lust after Salome and the dangers it leads to?

Edward Said, the great cultural critic, published his masterpiece *Orientalism* in 1978 criticizing how 19th century Europeans had fetishized the East in ways that presented lasting implications for global politics. And one point he made was how these artists had created sexual fantasies. He wrote, "What they looked for often—correctly, I think—was a different type of sexuality, perhaps more libertine and less guilt-ridden."

And so the danger with desire is that the object of our desire can become objectified and commodified. Which can lead to exploitation and attempts to possess and control that can become violent. Thus the culture-wide conversations we are having right now about sexual ethics and toxic masculinity.

In contrast to these images of commodified, fetishized desire, we read this beautiful love poem from the Song of Solomon. What glory that our religious tradition contains such a rich resource for celebrating love and desire. Dianne Bergant points out in her commentary on the Song of Solomon that what it celebrates is "mutual love, not an unequal relationship." Here is mutual love and desire at its very best and most beautiful.

The 17th century Puritan theologian Richard Baxter proclaimed that "We shall never be capable of clearly knowing till we are capable of fully enjoying." God has created us to enjoy, and it is through our enjoyment of God and God's world that we are transformed into our best selves. Contemporary theologian Belden Lane writes that God desires to "draw the whole of creation into a community of mutual respect and love, giving common praise to God."

In preparation for this sermon series, I read a new book on the relationship between images and Christian theology entitled *Image and Presence* by Natalie Carnes, a professor at Baylor. She contends that "the problem with our own desire is that it is too weak, too easily satiated, too quick to terminate. We are satisfied with golden calves."

Instead we need a desire not satisfied by idols, a desire not satisfied by commodities. We need a desire that grows and enriches us. In other words, we need to desire God and to desire like God desires, enjoys, and loves us.

For example, today is World Communion Sunday, and Natalie Carnes points out that in communion our desire for food "is ordered toward that which is never entirely consumed." And since we are remembering Christ in the meal, we also remember "a life beyond us, which

precedes us, [and] prepares us to enter into a desire [that is] beyond us and preceding us.” We enter into a “fullness that shatters boundaries.”

The desire for God transforms us, stimulating our creativity. Through Jesus we share in God’s glory, and “the divine presence come to us . . . transforming us into an image with still greater likeness to God.”

So, our desire for God teaches us to see in a new, transformative way. We begin to gaze upon all things with love, just as God does. And, Carnes declares, “To see the world in this way . . . requires resisting the will to master the world. It demands, instead, opening the self up to the transformations love can accomplish.”

I’ve now been married for over nine years, and marriage has worked its changes upon me. Marriage has revealed to me my rough edges. I’ve learned things about myself I might not have learned otherwise. Or even really wanted to learn. So to be a better husband, I’ve had to work on myself.

Being a father these last three and half years has revealed depths of love I wasn’t even aware of. Joys and delights I didn’t know of.

Loving my husband and my child have transformed me. This is what good desire, true enjoyment can accomplish.

And so with God’s love for us. God’s love and desire for us can open us up and transform us. Let me close with another quote from Natalie Carnes about God’s desire for us:

For God looks upon us as clothed in Christ—as if we are God, inexhaustible and infinitely unfolding. God loves us as if we are Christ, and such love makes us little christs. Thirsty for us, Christ looks upon us as if we are Christ’s very body, and so the Father looks upon us as if we are Christ, and desires us as if we are Christ. So looked upon and desired, we can become christs.