

# OUR DEEPEST LONGING

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Romans 12:9-21 - Let love be genuine

This passage from Romans has been for me, since the late '60's and early '70's when I was moving toward the decision for ministry, one of the most formative passages and one of greatest impact.

As some of you will know, the piece of writing called "Desiderata" which appears on the back of today's bulletin became popular at the same time, at least among my generation, and almost had a kind of cult following. It was a statement that seemed to contain so much power and wisdom. I think part of what made it really attractive was that it was presented as anonymous, found in Old St. Paul's church in Baltimore dating back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. More recent evidence indicates that that is not true. It was written by Max Ehrmann in 1927, and had been added to a collection of devotional writings published by the pastor at Old St. Paul's Church in Baltimore. A header on the page said "Old St. Paul's Church, 1692." The date was the founding date of the church and had nothing to do with the writing. And the fact that it was written by Max Ehrmann in 1927 doesn't make it any less powerful. I remember sharing it with my minister, and his first response was that it sounded a lot like Romans chapter 12.

There are indeed some amazing similarities, and so I want to read it this morning. You have it printed on the back of the bulletin so you can follow along with me if you like. Some churches these days regularly have a scripture reading and a contemporary reading because there are so many writings that come out in our time that are really deeply devotional, spiritual, inspirational, writings. And so it is a way of expanding our scriptures. We have the Bible in its primary place, but we also recognize that God is speaking to us through so many other writings. So I want you to listen to the words that are probably familiar to most, but which may be new to some, of you. They are words that I just love to hear again and again and again. So consider this something of a contemporary scripture reading.

*Go placidly amid the noise and haste, and remember what peace there may be in silence. As far as possible without surrender be on good terms with all persons. Speak your truth quietly and clearly; and listen to others, even the dull and ignorant: they too have their story.*

*Avoid loud and aggressive persons: they are vexations to the spirit. If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain and bitter; for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself. Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans.*

*Keep interested in your own career, however humble: it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time. Exercise caution in your business affairs, for the world is full of trickery. But let this not blind you to what virtue there is: many persons strive for high ideals, and everywhere life is full of heroism.*

*Be yourself. Especially, do not feign affection. Neither be cynical about love, for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment it is perennial as the grass.*

*Take kindly the counsel of the years, gracefully surrendering the things of youth. Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune. But do not distress yourself with imaginings. Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness. Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself.*

*You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars: you have a right to be here. And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.*

*Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you conceive Him to be; and whatever your labours and aspirations, in the noisy confusion of life keep peace with your soul.*

*With all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world. Be careful. Strive to be happy.*

Now as Mary [Pattie Fellner, today's lector] said, if that's not enough, today's anthem adds a little bit more. And if that's not enough we can always find you more and more. I find that to be somewhat humorous because there's a way in which sometimes we just keep looking for more and more and more as if we haven't quite fulfilled our . . . our what? What is it we long for? What is our deepest longing? What are we trying to achieve through all of this, finding direction and spiritual guidance? To where? What's the goal? What are we trying to get to? And when we read these things and try to follow them and we feel like we're still coming up short, we think that perhaps we need to find some more and some more. What is it that we're missing? What gives us the sense that we have to have something better?

I wanted to argue with Mary and say "well, wait a minute; if it's not enough it doesn't mean you need more. Somehow we need less." There are times when I feel like we need less, and maybe that's what Paul and Ehrmann are trying to accomplish. They are trying to reduce the whole mass of literature and stories and traditions, trying to reduce everything to something very concise so it's more portable. Maybe they are trying to reduce it to something that's short enough to read every morning when we get out of bed--something that will remind us of all the wisdom we've ever forgotten, and that will bring it all back afresh so we can live our whole day just as if we've walked out of church having heard the best sermon ever.

The experience of worship--coming into a beautiful sanctuary like this, the music, and so on--in some way lifts us out of the ordinariness of daily life and takes us to that larger transcendent realm of the sacred. It is so important for us when we go back to our daily lives to have had that break, you might say. But the other side of spiritual life is to take all the insight and the wisdom and the power of the transcendent and translate it into good living day by day. How do we do that, and how do we hang on to that feeling? What is it, and how do we name it? Everybody has experienced that feeling at one point in life--coming to the place of feeling like "Ahh! Now I've got it; yes. And if I could just hang on to this and go through day by day . . ." Then something happens and we lose it. But we long for it. It's our deepest longing, some kind of a state of the heart and soul that is in touch with the centre of life and that guides us so that we're not doing these things about which Romans 12 warns us--don't repay evil for evil, and that sort of thing--or, in the Desiderata, "Be yourself. Especially, do not feign affection."

It has a lot of positive things, but it's got the warnings against the negative, against these mistakes we make when somehow we get so scared that we start pretending in our lives. Maybe we pretend something that is too important for pretence, like love, because somehow we are feeling desperate inside; or we feel hurt because we have been wronged. And at some moment we just lose that ability to . . .to what? To stay cool? That's the contemporary language for it, isn't it? To stay cool. We react with a vengeful response, and if it's only momentary we're

lucky. For some people it's a deep bitterness that rots their souls for years because the evil somehow hooked them. Paul says it so briefly: "Do not repay evil with evil." And that means trusting God. "Vengeance is mine," God said. Well, that sounds like there's a big, horrible, God up there who is going to punish everybody; but that's not it. What it says to us is the other side--that we don't have to be the ones who are trying to punish the evildoers. Even if the evil has been done against us, we don't have to ensure that they get what they deserve. We don't have to do that. We don't have anything taken away from us. Each of us is still a child of the universe, a child of God with a right to be here.

Now I think the struggle in that is that we tend to turn it into a kind of perfectionism, as if living this is some ideal of the way we are supposed to act--sort of like being a saint, but we can't all be saints. Maybe one or two of us are saints. Who's a saint? Who has made it? Who has achieved? Put up your hand! Put up your hand if you have any doubt about that. You think you have fallen a little short of sainthood? Probably everybody thinks that. We turn it into something that doesn't seem too realistic in ordinary everyday life, and so it's that challenge of how do we live the ordinariness of everyday life.

I came across an article recently about a book, which is also about a book, that I thought was really fascinating. I found the article on a website called "Beliefnet"<sup>1</sup> to which I subscribe. It has a vast array of different articles on spiritual kinds of things. The article is an interview with an author named Donna Freitas who is a professor of spirituality and religion at St. Michael's College in Vermont. It doesn't say anything about the College but I assume it's probably a Roman Catholic institution. So here's a professor of spirituality and religion talking about how in that tradition women get trained how to be according to the models of the saints and the ancient mystics and so on. It seems so unrealistic because these were women who devoted their whole lives to a monastic style of life or something like that. Freitas says that, today, this doesn't work for us. We need a spirituality that works in the ordinary, everyday muck of life. And so she's written a book entitled *Becoming a Goddess of Inner Poise*.

The book is about a kind of literature that she likes to read a lot and which she calls "chick lit." Does anybody know what that means, "Chick Lit"? It's a trivializing term for literature whose main audience is young women. She has taken a look at this literature and looked below the surface. What she sees is the modern spiritual quest. It even has gender specificity. As I read it I just really long to find someone who has written the equivalent thing about men's quest, because of course today we have discovered, and we're coming to accept, that spirituality is not identical for men and women. There is a gender dimension to spirituality. And so there's a women's spirituality that has a little bit of difference from men's spirituality, and of course this book is about the women's side. One of several books she particularly focuses on is entitled *Bridget Jones' Diary*, written by Helen Fielding. I haven't read it, but I have seen the motion picture. It's a fine motion picture. It's the story of a British woman, thirty-something, just struggling along to make her way. She overeats and she's a little overweight, she drinks a little bit too much, she's been in and out of relationships with men but she's never found the right one, and she's getting a little worried about that because she's in her mid-thirties. And it's a wonderful romantic comedy, a delightful piece.

Freitas, the author of this article entitled "The Tao of Bridget," is describing Bridget as in a way the modern version of a mystic, one who is trying to find that "inner poise." Bridget says she really loses her inner poise when she drinks too much or is in some of her relationships with men. It's a humorous look at life, but underneath there is that sense of not just wanting to be promiscuous, but wanting to enter into relationships with men. And yet there's a sense of an

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<sup>1</sup> [www.beliefnet.com](http://www.beliefnet.com)

inner value set that she still hangs on to. She's not looking for a puritanical way of life, but rather a way of life that's engaging the fullness and the pleasure. It's not just a solitary way of life of finding her own spiritual depth; it's very relational with her friends and with men. But, underneath, she's trying to find that true relationship with herself and with others that is not turning away from life and that still enjoys chocolate a lot. There's even a part of this interview where the interviewer says to the author "Tell me about chocolate spirituality." What that comes to is taking chocolate symbolically as for some people one of the deepest pleasures of life.

I learned an interesting new word a while ago. It's "anhedonic." Have you ever heard that word? It's sort of the opposite of "hedonist." A hedonist is one whose life is all about pleasure. "Anhedonic" means a psychological disorder of a person who cannot experience pleasure. It's associated with depression, and so on. In a way our spirituality in the old paradigm of Christianity has an anhedonic streak in it, and part of the change in our world today is learning that the pleasures of life, also, are God-given, and that we find part of our spiritual fulfillment in those pleasures. So here's this author looking at someone like Bridget Jones as a symbol of the modern quest. That quest is how to take the whole of life and to enjoy life--the pleasures, the relationships, the day-to-day moments of who we are--and to engage that in a way that doesn't disconnect from the spiritual centre of life. It's practical spirituality that we're seeking.

So as we read passages like Romans 12 and the Desiderata, it's very important for us not to slip into that anhedonic habit of ours--that purist perfectionistic habit--and to develop a demand that we all become saints. That's not the only way of spirituality. There is a way of life that celebrates all of the life that God has given us, and that enables us to enjoy the pleasures and the fullness of life without losing an "inner poise" as Bridget called it, and without losing that sense of connectedness to our own centre, to our spirit centre, without feeling that we're torn between holiness and profanity--that there is an integration of the real ordinariness of life and the spiritual depth of life.

And there's no easy formula that allows one to say "There, I've got my life set up so that it's all cool, and I'm righteous all the time." Rather, it's a way of life that's a daily challenge. Maybe they will do a sequel to *Bridget Jones' Diary* in which she'll get married and have kids, and then we'll have a story about Mom and parenting and children and all of that. It will be a story of someone just trying to work her way through that, maintaining the inner poise, maintaining that sense of spirit that allows us to respond to everything that comes along that's still connected to the true centre of life.

I want to close by reading the opening words from Romans 12 again. "Let love be genuine, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good, love one another with mutual affection, outdo one another in showing honour, do not lag in zeal, be ardent in the spirit, serve the Lord, rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer, contribute to the needs of the saints, extend hospitality to strangers." And so the whole teachings of our tradition in Christ become encapsulated in a way that allows us to live them every day of our lives without walking away from life, but embracing the whole of this wonderful life that we've been given as children of the universe.

We turn now to hymn 299 which is Walter Farquharson's expression of living with a sense of wonder in life which I think is very much a part of this kind of practical spirituality, embracing all of life and celebrating the wonder in every moment. The hymn is "Teach Me God to Wonder."

Transcribed and edited for publication by Sue and By Reesor