

- **What do you want?**

- Desire

I'm here to bring you a few bits and pieces as we get ready to head back to homes and work. I want to pick up on something Jay [Sivits] talked about yesterday and which she has expanded upon this morning, a question she has presented us. She asked, "What are you longing for on your spiritual journey right now? What do you desire of God?" She urged us to name our desires, the spiritual ones God is giving us and I'd add, the ones we're actually living out at the moment.

- Stories

So by way of meditation, I have four stories about desire for you. If they seem unconnected — well, that's because they are.

- **First: Little disciplines or unbearable desire? (Lamps of flame)**

Here's a power-packed little paragraph from Annie Dillard's book, *For the Time Being*:

'One of the best stories of the early Christian desert hermits goes like this: "Abbot Lot came to Abbot Joseph and said: Father, according as I am able, I keep my little rule, and my little fast, my prayer, meditation and contemplative silence; and according as I am able I strive to cleanse my heart of thoughts: Now what more should I do? The elder rose up in reply and stretched out his hands to heaven, and his fingers became like ten lamps of [flame]. He said: Why not be totally changed into fire?"'

Doesn't that kind of desire sound frightening? Actually frightening, it does. Many of our genuine spiritual longings do. They can be frightening to us ourselves and to those around us. They're frightening because it scares us to imagine what it would mean if God doesn't show up, doesn't fulfill our request. If you ask to be totally changed into fire — what if you stayed cold? But these desires are also frightening because they might come true!

- **Second: Learning to desire**

We had a time in our church a while ago when some people were hearing a choir of angels joining us when we were singing in worship. It was really cool. At one point, I sheepishly admitted to a friend that I kinda, sorta, sometimes wished that I could have ears to hear them or see them. And this friend recognized my diffidence, and simply urged me that it was OK for me to desire that, OK to ask God for that gift of hearing. As it turned out, I never did hear the angels there, but I did learn from that conversation to acknowledge my spiritual desires to Jesus (and that in itself was a great gift, though of a different sort).

- **Third: God himself asks!**

King Solomon had the immense privilege of being asked point-blank by God himself, "What do you want? You can have riches or global influence or wisdom." This is in Kings and Chronicles. Here are the details from 2 Chronicles 1:7–12:

[At] night God appeared to Solomon and said to him, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you."

Solomon answered God, "You have shown great kindness to David my father and have made me king in his place. Now, LORD God, let your promise to my father David be confirmed, for you have made me king over a people who are as numerous as the dust of the earth. Give me wisdom and knowledge, that I may lead this people, for who is able to govern this great people of yours?"

God said to Solomon, "Since this is your heart's desire and you have not asked for wealth, riches or honor, nor for the death of your enemies, and since you have not asked for a long life but for wisdom and knowledge to govern my people over whom I have made you king, therefore wisdom and knowledge will be given you. And I will also give you wealth, riches and honor, such as no king who was before you ever

had and none after you will have.”

How cool to be greeted in a dream by the Lord himself, to be asked about your heart's desires, and to have those desires affirmed! Wouldn't that be amazing? I think it's worth asking whether perhaps that *has* happened to you, or might be happening right now: that God himself is appearing to you and asking you what you long for.

- **Note: The "true vine"**

In John 15, as you've read, Jesus says "I am the true vine." So is there a *false* vine? I guess this is a troubling dimension I would add (or tease out of) what Jay's been talking about. There are false vines, ones that are either idolatrous or just inaccurate (not really in sync with what's really in our hearts). In both cases we need not only to desire, but to learn to desire truly, accurately, honestly from our hearts. And our hearts are amazingly difficult to know.

- **Fourth: An illusory desire uncovered (Parker Palmer)**

Parker Palmer tells this story in his book, *Let Your Life Speak*. He had won an invitation to take the presidency of a college, and he was pretty tickled and he was pretty sure he was going to take the job. But he knew he was going to miss teaching and writing, so he wasn't sure about it. So since he's a Quaker, he submitted to the "habit of faithfulness" they call a "Discernment Committee," where people gather to pray, listen, and talk about a momentous decision. In the course of this, someone asked him, "When you imagine actually having this job, what is that appeals to you the most?" He realized with a flash of honest insight that it would be seeing his picture in the paper with the words "President Palmer" under it. He unmasked a real desire, but one that he realized he didn't want to feed. This insight was God pruning him.

- **Only one thing counts**

Whatever our desires are, the words of Jesus in John 15 remind us what their root must be. (Pun intended.) All other desires must stem from a longing to be a branch connected to the vine? Even if you have some particular fruit in mind, he commands you only to "abide in him." This is a great mystery. He does not command you here to "be a fruitful branch." He knows that a branch of the true vine *will* be fruitful!