

BETWEEN CLINGING AND DESIRE

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Reading: Genesis 2: 20-25 (RSV)

The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper fit for him. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh; and the rib which the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This is bone of my bones and flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of the Man. Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

Larry Widmer sent me a story recently about a woman who had spent the morning shopping. Her last stop was a wine and spirits shop where she purchased a very fine bottle of red wine. The wine was in a brown paper bag, lying on the front seat. On her way home she saw a Navajo woman walking down the highway in the same direction she was traveling. Our shopper pulled over to the side of the road and asked the Navajo if she wanted a ride.

The Indian woman said, "Yes, thank you," and got in the car, sitting in the front seat. They traveled on, each saying very little to the other. The Navajo kept looking at the bottle of wine. She finally asked the driver what it was.

"Oh," said the shopper. "It's a bottle of very fine wine that I got for my husband."

There was a brief pause and the Navajo said, "Good trade."

This story reveals in my mind an almost primitive distrust between women and men, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters. The resignation of Congressman Anthony Weiner of New York this week proves the point. Men like Arnold

Schwarzenegger, John Edwards, Elliott Spitzer, Bill Clinton, David Letterman, and thousands more are just a little relieved that the focus of the public eye has moved off of their particular scandal.

I read to you from the book of Genesis. It is a passage that is often used to explain the organic relationship between men and women, and is thought by some to be the foundation of marriage. It is sometimes read at weddings. There are those who believe that what God wills for the relationships of women and men is found in these few verses. It is all we need to know and the book is closed. Advocates of marriage between a man and woman only will turn to this scripture as part of their defense.

The problem is that the passage is a lot more complicated than we may wish it to be. Never mind that Adam and Eve had no parents to leave, unless you think that technically Adam was the father of Eve, in which case we have a whole other problem to muddle through.

The Hebrew word "*dabaq*" means to bond or join together. This bonding is heartfelt and passionate, not only in mortal relationships but also sacred ones. According to Genesis we leave our parents and cleave to our spouse. The English word "cleave" has two meanings. One meaning is to split or cut apart and the other means to join together. A meat cleaver is a tool to cut open an animal carcass for butchering. We might say in a moment of fear, "My tongue was cleaving to the roof of my mouth." The other meaning is what Genesis suggests, a powerful bonding together.

The use of "cleave" in the Genesis passage suggests the incredible power of passion that draws women and men irresistibly together. The power has so much

energy people will sometimes risk everything for this union – fame, wealth, power, and reputation. We greatly underestimate this re-creative power if we diminish it to a mere instinct or “drive.” The Song of Solomon reads:

Set me as seal upon your heart,
As a seal upon your arm;
For love is as strong as death,
Jealousy as cruel as the grave;
Its flames are flames of fire,
A most vehement flame.

Many waters cannot quench love,
Nor can the floods drown it.
If a man would give for love
All the wealth of his house,
It would be utterly despised.
(Song of Solomon 8: 6-8, NKJV)

The best of existential theology would insist that the power to cleave is not simply the force of hormones. It is also the profound energy that seeks the totality of the human being. The idea of Genesis is that Adam and Eve are not only two distinct persons. Each seeks after the other because it is only together that they are fully human, or to use Biblical language, “one flesh.” The 20th Century theologian, Karl Barth, suggested that Adam was not a complete human being until there was Eve. The obverse of that would be equally true. This insight into Genesis I think is organically true of human relationships.

The two become one but we can never lose sight of their singularity. Thus, when I participated in my daughter’s wedding a few years ago, the officiating United Methodist minister told the bridal couple to blow out their individual candles after they had lit their unity candle. I intervened and said no, “They have not died.” (Not

that marriage can't kill you, but symbolically to blow out a candle in the sanctuary is the gesture of death.)

It is interesting that this whole notion of passion and joining together almost immediately becomes an issue primarily of sex, and then marriage and infidelity. The ink is not dry on the scroll before people are thinking of sex. If you read rabbinic *Midrash* on this passage of Genesis, the conversations are dedicated to the issues of adultery and divorce. One example stipulates that two men have intercourse with a woman on the street. Has either of the men committed adultery? The answer is yes, the second one because she was made “one flesh” with the first man, despite her chosen profession.¹

Do you see what happens when we read too much Bible?

I think the heart of this problem lies in the idea of passionate cleaving, especially if we only mean an obsessive eroticism. If we are willing to recognize the double meaning of cleaving as coming apart and leaving we might have a better understanding of the real nature of our relationships. And to help us with this I turn to Buddhism's insights into the relationship of clinging desire and human suffering.

The Buddha taught us the Four Noble Truths. The first truth is that there is suffering in the world. This suffering is called “*dukkha*.” Ordinary suffering is a result of old age, disease, death, the presence of unpleasant people and so on. A second level of suffering is a result of change. Often we are comfortable with our circumstances, our relationships, our vocations, and so on. But these things change, causing us disappointment and pain. The third kind of suffering is called “conditioned

¹ See *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis I*, edited and translated by Rabbi Dr. H. Freedman (New York: Soncino Press, 1983), Vol. I, pp. 144-145.

states” that have everything to do with our sense of self, the “I” of me, or ego. Every self has physical and mental ideas about the way we should or want to feel, think, perceive, and so on. Of course, life is a constant challenge to the way we think things and others ought to be. Every thing and every person changes, and that causes us a tremendous amount of discomfort or suffering. All of these kinds of suffering happen. It is just the way things are. Suffering happens.

These things become suffering to us because of desire, the second noble truth. Suffering happens and it happens because of human desire. Now here is where Buddhism gets confused in the minds of a lot of people. They believe that the way off of the wheel of suffering is to eliminate desire. Well, that is rather naïve, isn't it? It is self-delusional to think that we can make the desires for food, comfort, sexual relationships, family, and meaningful work cease. We all have some sense of who we want to be and we have some hopes about what we would like to lose, such as weight, debt, a disease, or another person. The desire to be free of desire is desire. As soon as we think we have eliminated desire it comes roaring back like a wild herd of mustangs.

If you read Buddhist literature with any depth you know that Gautama has a very long commentary on this challenge of desire. In fact, you do not have to read very far before you understand that the problem is not desire. We cannot live without desire. The problem is that we cling to what we desire. Our desires become obsessions that we cannot let go of. Some become addicted to the object of their desire. When desire claims such a strong hold on our lives we suffer. In our culture

of sexual obsession we know that suffering rages across the globe, especially for women. This clutching to desire reminds me of a story about a small village.

The people of the village one day heard the most piteous crying and weeping and whelping they had ever heard. The groaning and sobbing was incessant and they all ran out to the center of the market to learn what was the cause of such a lament.

There in the middle of the market place was the wise clown Nasrudin. In front of him was a large basket of hot peppers. He would take a bite out of a pepper, chew and swallow it, and cry out in flaming pain. All around him were dozens of half eaten hot peppers.

“Nasrudin,” shouted a villager, “what are you doing?”

“I am looking for a sweet one!”

We experience a sweet and happy thing. It is lovely to behold, to taste, and to couple with. When the joyous desire becomes desperate domination it flashes hot and painful. When the fixation becomes addiction we are powerless to manage the suffering no matter how much it burns us. It is the clinging to desire that hurts us. Nasrudin once ate a sweet pepper and is driven to replicate that pleasure. He continues to eat the hot peppers because he clings to a past pleasure.

That is the problem with the things, or ideas, or fantasies, or people, or institutions that we latch onto. We fail to realize that no matter how much we enjoyed the first indulgence, things change. People change. Ideals and aspirations become faded. Our bodies become estranged.

When I was a boy my body was my friend. I remember my body riding on my bicycle without a care, swimming without ceasing in the Gulf of Mexico, hiking ten or

fifteen miles a day in the Appalachian Mountains. But it has changed and aged and we are increasingly disaffected. My pain only increases when I keep pretending that I have that young body. I inflict suffering on myself when I am blinded to the fact that there is no permanence in life, even my own corpus. The joy and hope it once gave me is gone.

And so I wonder if the relationship between Adam and Eve, between all men and women is bedeviled by the idea that we are to cleave to one another. If the Buddha is right, and I think he is, passionate joining and clinging together sets us up for suffering.

Let's take a sidebar. I am not saying that desire and passion are not fun, enjoyable, and satisfying. Passion is erotic, intellectual, skilled, and artistic. People can be passionate about their gardens, or bowling, or archery, or quilt making. Passion is fun and who does not want to have fun? I think the popular idea in both Western and Eastern religions that we should shun desire is wrong headed and impossible. The problem is always the clinging to desire, that kind of triple bonded, wood glued, welded, and riveted obsession with the object of our desire.

If that is the kind of cleaving that we take into any kind of relationship we will not survive it. Genesis may have steered us in the wrong direction. We will deem our marriages or friendships "boring," and try to find another means to satisfy the desire we think we remember. Thus we find all kinds of phrases like "seven year itch" or "starter marriage." Jokes by Rodney Dangerfield and Joan Rivers play on the constant tensions of sex and marriage. Rivers once quipped, "Before we make love my husband takes a pain killer." A couple of years ago I officiated at a wedding in which

I was addressing the bridal couple. Because I was talking to them the groom turned toward me. The bride pulled on his hands and insisted, “Look at *me!*” I thought to myself, “Well, this won’t last long.”

If marriage is clinging we are in trouble from the moment the preacher declares, “I now pronounce you husband and wife.” Buddhism teaches us to enter all relationships with a little circumspection. Enjoy one another and be wise to the reality that everyone changes with age and experience. Relationships have a future as long as we are not choking the life out of them. Look deep into the soul of the other. You know what I mean: Look past the graying hair and see a wiser soul. Look beyond the lines that ripple across her face and wonder about the love and care that put them there. And when her mind fades, hold her hands and walk gently through the remaining days of memory. The Japanese Zen poet, Ryokan, summarized it for us:

Where beauty is, then there is ugliness;
 where right is, also there is wrong.
 Knowledge and ignorance are interdependent;
 delusion and enlightenment condition each other.
 Since olden times it has been so.
 How could it be otherwise now?
 Wanting to get rid of one and grab the other
 is merely realizing a scene of stupidity.
 Even if you speak of the wonder of it all,
 how do you deal with each thing changing?

Such things cannot be explained to very young people. They cannot imagine it. They would think a premarital counselor mad who told them that one day the cherry blossoms will gently fall from the tree to become one with fading grass and brown earth. Can you love her from bud to blossom to compost? That’s the heart of real marriages. That is the true well of passion.

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