



Reflection for August 19, 2020: Bernard of Clairvaux

7If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. [John 15:7]

*Set me as a seal upon your heart,/ as a seal upon your arm;
for love is strong as death,/ passion fierce as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire,/ a raging flame.*

Many waters cannot quench love,/ neither can floods drown it.

- Song of Songs [8:6-7]

Bernard of Clairvaux [1090-1153] was a man of contradictions. The son of a landowner whose education prepared him for a secular life, he joined the Benedictine Abbey at Citeaux at the age of 23. Two years later, joined by his brothers and friends, he founded a monastery at Clairvaux that followed a more strict version of the Benedictine rule. In the ten subsequent years he founded sixty other monasteries. He became one of the most influential figures in the Christian world: advising the pope, preaching that being open to the mystical dimensions of doctrine is more important than intellectual analysis, advocating the Crusades against the Albigensians and against Jerusalem. He is perhaps best known today for his commentary on the Song of Songs, where he most fully develops his mystical understanding of God's ongoing presence. Here are two quotations for which he is best known:

There are those who seek knowledge for the sake of knowledge; that is curiosity. There are those who seek knowledge to be known by others; that is vanity. There are those who seek knowledge in order to serve; that is Love.

The measure of love is love without measure.

What makes Bernard's meditations on love so timely, I think, is the way that he expresses the longing that is inherent in loving. Longing is the feeling that most of us share during this pandemic. We see and feel longing everywhere we turn: longing for a routine that we may have once taken for granted or thought was boring; the longing for a hug, for the physical presence of companions, for a sense that the path forward is clear and uncluttered. Bernard reminds us that this longing may awaken in us a deeper capacity to love.

Love may bring a peace and wholeness not found anywhere else, but love continues to grow only when we embrace the longing in which it begins. Restlessness that seeks satisfaction is not love; desire that seeks possession is not love; fear that seeks protection is not love. Love is precisely the longing that opens our eyes to unexpected possibilities and to unrecognized relationships. Bernard shows us a spiritual paradox: The peace that love brings is ever-deepening longing.

While I was reflecting upon Bernard of Clairveaux this week, a friend sent me this meditation from the theologian Henri Nouwen. It seems a fitting modern application of the teachings of this medieval mystic:

Being is More Important than Doing –Henri Nouwen

I suspect that we too often have lost contact with the source of our own existence and have become strangers in our own house. We tend to run around trying to solve the problems of our world while anxiously avoiding confrontation with that reality wherein our problems find their deepest roots: our own selves. In many ways we are like the busy executive who walks up to a precious flower and says: "What for God's sake are you doing here? Can't you get busy somehow?" and then finds the flower's response incomprehensible: "I am sorry, but I am just here to be beautiful."

How can we also come to this wisdom of the flower that being is more important than doing? How can we come to a creative contact with the grounding of our own life?

May we learn to love with a longing that allows us to *be*, rather than compelling us to *do*.