



## How Jesus Heals us Through His Church

- Andrew Comiskey

We are a people of desire--desires that can drive us toward noble and true expressions of our humanity, and desires that can reduce us to the animal kingdom--the rat in the wheel.

The only way that transformation can occur is through Christ and His community. As we come broken into the church, His faithful love can transform our desires. This is with the help of the church, not in spite of her. Jesus' body on earth has the authority to convert the rat into a saint. I will use my own story of healing from homosexuality to demonstrate how Jesus, through His community, transforms our desires.

25 years ago, I began this process of transformation. My starting point was as a practicing homosexual. Today I can join with the Psalmist in proclaiming: "You, Father, have satisfied my desires with good things, so that my youth is renewed like the eagle's. The Lord works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed."(Ps 103:5,6)

My oppression had to do with misplaced desire. God's justice involved the realignment of my desire through the power of His transforming love. That love elevated my sight as to who He was, and the higher purposes He intended for my humanity.

Growing up, I faced goodness and brokenness, like all of you. All of our families possess both, as all are fallen subject to sin in all of its depth and complexity. In my case, I had loving parents who were nevertheless a bit detached from me. That left me hungry emotionally, and vulnerable to false ways of getting my needs met. This was especially true of my father. I had not a good connection with him, and that contributed to a great hunger for masculine love and affirmation.

In my culture, one can readily embrace the homosexual world as a way of finding masculine love. It is a perverse and idolatrous world that promises in vain to take away one's deep desire for love. That was true for me. I began to hunger for more. There, in the gay world, I began to realize that another human being could not satisfy me. It had to come from God.

God who? I was not a Christian. But people were praying for me, including my faithful mother. One day I came home after a night of partying, bearing the deadly pallor of sin. My mother looked straight into my eyes and said: "You need Jesus!" She was right--I needed a Savior who was more powerful than my misplaced desires. For the first time, I began to cry out to the God who revealed Himself in Jesus Christ.

Jesus invited me into a life I knew nothing about. His persistent mercy made all the difference in my ignorance and rebellion. It reminds me of the story of the prodigal son. When I turned a little toward Jesus, He ran toward me and closed the gap created by my sin and shame. Luke 15:20 reads: "While the son was still a long way off, the Father saw him, ran to him, threw his arms around him, and kissed him." Jesus revealed the Father's love to me--a love far more powerful and patient than the perverse objects of my desire.

The church embraced me as a healing community. This occurred at first more in spite of myself than through my obedience. Once I backslid, and went out partying with some friends. Right away I could see that I was in the wrong place--these people were not my people anymore. I was a Christian, born of the Spirit. So I ran out of the party, and did not stop for a mile or so. I was in a strange city at midnight; I had no idea where I was going.

On the right side of the street, I saw a gathering of people, spilling out onto the pavement. I ran by them and recognized a few. These were people from my church, holding a revival meeting in that downtown area! I joined them, and immediately felt like I was at home. "These are my people," I thought. "This is where I belong, in fellowship

with those who worship the same Father, who bear the same Spirit." Church became home--I knew that without the community of Christ, I would be lost, subject to the powerful and perverse "fathers" of my other community.

Gratefully, I found a church that gave people room to be converted--to discover over time who the Father really was so that we could be changed through our devotion to Him. There I grew as a worshipper of the One. That transformation occurred as I experienced the continuous witness of grace and truth through members of that body.

My story reminds me of how Jesus related to the Samaritan woman. (Jn 4) If you recall, Jesus meets her at a well, and asks her for a drink. He offers her "living water." That special drink symbolizes the Spirit of resurrection poured out on human hearts, able to satisfy the deepest desires within us. What makes this offering all the more remarkable is the nature of the woman. She would have felt great shame in Christ's presence, disqualified from holy love. Why?

First, she was a Samaritan, a product of Jewish and Canaanite ancestry. That mixture signified idolatry--the Jews pursuing the gods of other nations. Thus she was conceived in shame. Also, she was a woman, and Jewish leaders were forbidden to freely engage with women. Lastly, she was a sexually immoral woman, whose shame and brokenness drove her into degrading practices. Disqualified from real love, she sought love in the wrong way, through cyclical, dead-end relationships.

But Jesus had other plans. He meets her and relates to her as an object of divine desire. He offers her His unfailing love in the form of "living water." He knows that only a higher love can satisfy the true cry of her heart, and set her free to become who the Father intended her to be.

Jesus demonstrates this to her through relationship with her. So must we as Christ's body model the same way of relating to seekers who like her are full of shame, and bound to sin. The body of Christ continued to do that for me. I would sometimes come to church with a dark and unbelieving spirit, ready to dismiss every good thing as irrelevant to my life.

The love and acceptance of fellow Christians broke that spirit. Their love was like "living water" to me, poured out upon the thick shame coat I wore, able to dissolve the lies with the power of love. Such encouragement kept me coming back for more. Real love satisfies. It breaks the power of lies, and keeps us on the pathway of transformation.

Jesus appeals to our greatest desire--our need for love. And He promises to satisfy our desires with good things. He does so through His Spirit--the living water--that He pours out upon us through the consistent love of His body. Jesus said this to the Samaritan woman about the power of such love: "Whoever drinks the water that I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." (4:14)

But Jesus is also wise. He knows well that we can refuse that living water by continuing to draw from false sources of love. God used Jeremiah to describe this: "My people have committed two sins: they have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water." (Jer.2:13) Wise and truthful in His mercy, Jesus exposes the false wells we have dug in a vain effort to satisfy our needs, our way.

That's why, immediately after offering the Samaritan His Spirit, He exposes her sin. Jesus asks her to call her husband--He gets personal with her. She stammers out, "I have no husband." Jesus then reveals His awareness of her string of broken relationships with men. (vs.16-18) These unions were her toxic wells. He sheds light on them to reveal His all-knowing Lordship. And at the same time, He reveals to her and to us that only He can satisfy our souls. To refuse the awareness of sin is to forfeit the gift of His Spirit, the living water capable of quenching our deepest thirst.

The community of Christ can help us here. In love, we can gently encourage one another to examine false sources of desire that we may be tempted to draw from. We must do so humbly, well aware of our personal vulnerabilities toward false feeding. I am grateful for my brothers and sisters who over the years invited me to look at my motives in certain relationships. That freed me to admit my sin. I could then receive forgiveness and gain the objectivity I needed to live within certain limits.

When I was just exiting the gay community, a good friend helped me to understand my particular temptation as just one of many that were common to all. He employed his struggle against heterosexual fornication and pornography as a model that I could follow, even though the objects of my desire were different. That difference did not exempt me

from playing by the rules. I had to learn to deal with my sin and struggle as honestly as did my fellow traditional sinners.

We serve each other well when we gently point out another's sin, especially in the sexual arena. It is a gift. This is because sexual sin reduces its players to something less. To be bound by lust in any direction binds us to the animal kingdom. We become rats on the wheel, running like addicts toward our next fix, never satisfied. On the other hand, God's love for us is powerful and expansive. He wants to empower us to get off the rat's wheel and set forth onto the awesome journey toward becoming all that He intends for us. That higher view of His purpose for our sexuality and relationships becomes apparent as we seek Him through His body.

I committed to a Bible-based church that at the same time held fast to the power of the living water to set captives free. There I discovered that I, like all the men and women in that church, was created to bear God's image in how I related to the opposite-sex. (Gen.1:26,27) Further, like Adam, God created me with a good yearning to "not be alone." (Gen.2:18) That meant that I was not exempt from having to work out my salvation as a man in relationship to women. I had to learn how to learn to love in a way that fit with my new identity as one sourced in the living water, created to love others the right way.

That was a challenge to me. But my good male friends did not let me off the hook. A part of me wanted to hide in my homosexual struggle, to be treated as special, somehow exempt from the dance of heterosexual love. My friends did not let me hide there for long. "Get in the game!" they urged. That meant to start living out the truth that Jesus defined me, not my past. As I continued to grow in my security as a man among other men, I began to feel and think differently towards women. God began to release my heterosexual desires.

The journey had just begun. Heterosexual desire alone does not make one a good gift for another. That requires the deeper, harder work of learning to love others sacrificially, with or without passion. I also had to face and forsake the comfort of my aloneness, the glorious selfishness of deciding things for myself. Loneliness has its rewards.

Gratefully, God led me to a beautiful woman who became my wife. With Annette, I emerged out of my aloneness and into a whole-enough man who could love another well. The support and example of more mature Christian couples was crucial here. At our pastor's encouragement, Annette and I began to minister to other sexually broken people in our church. Soon after, we started to have kids. Four children later, the first now in college and the rest all teenagers, I can say with authority that it is more difficult to raise a family well than it is to come out of homosexuality! But it is also much more joyful, and deeply satisfying.

Jesus through His body is faithful to transform our desires. Our passions may be broken in different ways. But the Source of our healing is always the same--God's living water poured out upon the dry, shameful, and sinful ground of our hearts. He grants us His love as the means and the end of our healing. As the church learns to love as Jesus loved the Samaritan, broken ones will realize that hope more and more.

Our desires are changed as we discover His love for us in the His community, the church. We respond to that amazing offering of love through our worship of Him. He gives us His all; we in turn give Him our hearts as we devote ourselves to Him. We worship Him out of gratitude. We pour out our affections and our thoughts--we yield our bodies to Him as acts of worship.

Worshipping the true God transforms our desires. While sexual sin and other forms of idolatry enslave our desires, real worship liberates them. That has certainly been the case for me. Worshipping Jesus with my community has been a continuous source of healing. He realigns our desires according to His will as we pour out our love to Him in worship.

Perhaps that's why Jesus named the Samaritan woman as a true worshipper of the living God. In John 4:21-24, Jesus describes her as among the true worshippers who will worship God in Spirit and in truth (v.24). In a few verses, He exposes her sin then identifies her as a holy worshipper; Jesus takes one devoted to sin and makes her one who glorifies God through her devotion to Him! That's the power of divine love. His love transforms misplaced desire into holy devotion.

In so doing, we are not only compelled to give ourselves to Him in worship-- we also cannot help but make Him known. The power of His mercy transforms our very purpose in life. God is not just content to satisfy our desires through realigning our sexual and relational orientation. He also wants to grant us a whole new focus in life--Himself, His Kingdom come now! There is nothing more satisfying than knowing we, out of intimate communion with the Lord

of the universe, become agents of restoring others. I am in awe of how Jesus has sent my friends and I all over the world to make known the power of His living water! The privilege of making Jesus known is perhaps God's answer to the deepest desire of the human heart. To be aligned with God's purposes for us--nothing surpasses that.

Back to the Samaritan woman. Immediately after Jesus declared her a true worshipper, she leaves her water jar and begins to fulfill God's purpose for her life. She declares Jesus as Lord to the people of her town (vs.28-30, 39-42). Revival broke out in Samaria through this raw evangelist. Having received living water hours earlier, she freely made her Savior known. As a result of her witness, many entered into communion with "the Savior of the world" (v.42). Her transformation of desire provoked the same change in many.

The body of Christ must take up that call of transformation. All of us are people of desire. And Jesus wants our desires--the good, bad, and ugly. When we gather in His name, He wants to meet us like He did the Samaritan woman--granting us freedom from shame and sin as we receive His love and give back love to Him. In the process, we enter into the reality of God's high and holy purposes for our lives.

Without the body of Christ, "living water" will remain merely a good idea. But when we seek to extend that water to one another, we will answer the cries of broken hearts. We will see revival break out, even as the Samaritan did. We will witness Jesus' transformation of our desires, and of many others. We will become the healing community of Christ--His very Presence in the world today, extending living water to those who hunger and thirst for truthful mercy.