

## **“WHEN LIFE ROBS OUR PASSION”**

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We are halfway through a seven-part sermon series on renewing our spiritual passion. We are tacking like sailors through the wind-blown choppy straits where passion meets spirit, like one sea meeting another. If you can navigate that spiritual Cape of Good Hope, you can probably sail anywhere in the world. And I mean thrive, not just survive.

We have considered the upside of passion, finding it after we have lost it. We talked last week about how passion is the right word to define vital faith. We have paused over the downside of passion, disillusionment with its accompanying shock, anger, and dismay. Today we are about spiritual exhaustion, our wearing out, lethargy, dullness and apathy.

You hear it everywhere and its not getting easier. You ask how friends are and they say: “I’ve got to cut down. I have too much on my plate!” They say, “I meant well signing on for all of these things. But I feel drained, distracted and listless.” Busyness, weariness are epidemic. Apathy is the upshot. A vague hope for things to get better isn’t enough.

If the signs of spiritual tiredness are at first creeping and gradual, they become unmistakable over time. Maybe we miss details and no longer root out sloppiness in our work as we did before. Maybe irritations that were manageable before now lead to conflict with others. Maybe we find ourselves physically ill more often; exhaustion and immunity are related. Maybe a bitter spirit settles into us, and does not depart. Maybe we drift off fantasizing about quitting and just getting away from it all. Lettie Cowman shares a revealing moment like this in her African colonial history entitled *Springs in the Valley*.

“In the deep jungles of Africa, a traveler was making a long trek. Coolies had been hired from a tribe to carry the loads. The first day they marched rapidly, they went far. The traveler had high hopes of a speedy journey. But the second day these jungle tribesmen refused to move. For some strange reason, they just sat and rested. Upon inquiry as to the reason for this strange behavior, the traveler was informed they had gone too fast the first day. They needed to *wait for their souls to catch up with their bodies.*”

Tell me about the tribesmen commuting into the concrete jungles awaiting their souls to catch up with their bodies. Maybe it is parked on a stoop outside Grand Central Terminal. Do you ever feel your soul trailing your body? Where can we talk about this?

My youngest daughter Lise called me on Tuesday. Last February she was hired into what is really a lifetime opportunity. She works with bright, remarkable colleagues. She loves it and strives hard against the natural learning curve to get good at what she does. Along the way, as she calls to say hello or update me, I notice it is 9 pm and she hasn’t even left the office. Then she is headed to the gym before she gets home to fix dinner.

Some of you need to teach me about how to parent grown children. This is *terra nova* for me. I see a point to make, I want to make it, but I am careful because she is an intelligent adult. Already she does a lot better than I know how. Computers are just the start. "Lise, just to tell you, working 85 hours a week is not a long term plan," I say. But she has this drive, these standards, she wants to get it right. And I mean *just* right. Don't look at me like that. I have no idea how she got that way, where that comes from.

She called me Tuesday because after an already long week. She had worked all weekend until two in the morning. "Dad, I was in the office and I felt so tired that my head couldn't make any connection with my hands." She could still laugh and that helped reassure me. But the head-hand disconnect is the first sign that the soul will soon trail. Lise talked to the firm's founding partner, who is a wonderful human being. Julie had no idea what Lise was up against. She tried to help Lise and was not requiring those hours.

Imagining our busyness proclaims us essential in the schemes of the world, we miss how it becomes a spiritual disease of clutter, distraction and cluelessness. We make our schedule sacrosanct, like some sacred cow lumbering down the corridor. "No, you can't touch that! Let's kneel down and pay homage to the idol of productivity." Know from the start, I am not preaching against hard work, but against becoming numb, against becoming deadened, missing blessings right in front of us, neglecting what matters most.

All of the many vital things we want to do seem so good. How can the result be so bad? Let's seek alternatives together. For on this score, like Paul, I'm the foremost of sinners.

Our gospel story is actually a day in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. And what a day it is. Luke vividly describes staggering need bombarding Jesus from all sides for 24 hours. Jesus first taught all morning in the synagogue. We know it must have been draining because they report he taught as one with authority. That means he was fully invested in his message, not merely going through the motions. If I do that twice on a Sunday, I have a half-hour slumber date face down waiting for me on the leather couch next door.

During Jesus' sabbath teaching, someone in the back pew erupted, threatening him. That seriously elevated his stress. Jesus dealt handily with his outburst, with something more than a stand-up comic's clever wisecrack to put some jerk in his place. He healed this angry, blurring fellow of his deep-seated malady. *So who is this Jesus?* they all ask.

What next? Peter begged Jesus to help his mother-in-law. She was burning up. Jesus could not care for strangers and neglect those who'd given up everything to follow him. That would send the wrong message. So Jesus rebuked that mother's fever much as he had rebuked that catcaller's brokenness, healing him during Jesus' sermon. And she was healed. So healed that she baked some knishes and served them up herself.

Word of that spread quickly, as it will. Before they knew it, their front porch looked like one of the hospital scenes from *Gone with the Wind*. Damaged people everywhere. Except Jesus didn't freak out, like Scarlett. He laid his hands of healing on all of them. And all were healed. We know this involved a vast legion of physically and emotionally

disabled persons, awaiting Jesus' healing touch upon Peter's mother-in-law's porch. We know that because it says the healing began at dusk and it wasn't done till dawn. Up all night. Shades of my Lise last weekend. So why didn't Jesus flirt with spiritual burn-out?

The end of our story explains why. Remember, hard work differs from busyness. After his all-nighter, they found Jesus. Bone-tired, he had escaped them, seeking a refuge. "Hey, Jesus. More sick have arrived. We need you back. You don't want to disappoint." Jesus answered, "I don't think so. I'm done. Remember, I'm not Mr. Fixit." Actually, Jesus really said, "I have a big message to get out there. So let's you and I keep moving."

I would say three things about this, the third being most important. First, let's not underestimate how Jesus lived his life. He did not fly out of LaGuardia. He did not take commuter trains. He did not drive I-95 at rush hour. When Jesus finished in a place, he and his followers walked. Or they took a boat. They ambled from town to town. Long interludes of silence buffered them. Anyone care to go walking the green hills of Galilee? Sounds good about now, doesn't it? It was effort, yes. But it moderated the craziness. The point is Jesus' rhythms were buffered by natural barriers technology has eliminated. Do you know how cities create green spaces as a buffer against unrelieved concrete? Ask how you can create some green spaces in your spiritual life, retreating into solitude.

Second, what I see in Jesus' impossible day is recognizing when enough is enough, then setting a boundary. After impassioned teaching and preaching, healing a detractor possessed of malaise, helping out his friend's mother-in-law, and then everyone else in the county whose arthritis was throbbing, Jesus was able to say this is enough already.

Frankly, Jesus does this often in the Gospels. He says enough already by leaving them behind for reflective recovery. How healthy is that? More than healthy, it is holy. And it eludes us. Do you give yourself permission to say enough after you have given more than your best? If you don't, I am giving you that permission today. Give guilt a holiday. Let today's troubles be sufficient unto themselves, he said in his Sermon on the Mount. If we refuse, maybe we imagine that what we do is more important than what God does.

Third, and most important, spiritual exhaustion or burn-out is not about doing too much. It is about *the wrong kind of too much*. If we make sacrifices for something we believe in, for a cause whose vindication means the world to us and lights up our eyes, it will amaze us the lengths we can go without exhausting ourselves. Like last week's two high-bred steeds who came to trot more than a score of miles without needing to rest. When it is the right self-giving, connected to God and each other, we can soar. Sometimes the self-giving we need most only needs to differ from our stifling routine. If we can get that break with new sacrifices, we find our way back into our routine self-giving. Have you ever tasted this? Brief runs where you amazed yourself. You found that by emptying yourself, you life never felt so full; by exhausting yourself, you felt exhilarated.

So if you are dragging down the street, only to see your soul trailing badly behind, come and see us. Get back to church. No one else much discusses this. We can help you live as God's beloved child rather than one more galley slave to the idol productivity. Amen.

God of truth and grace, Holy Spirit who prays for us when we are too flabbergasted, we wrestle ourselves away from the bustle to quietness; we fasten ourselves to stillness where we can hear ourselves breathing and reflect without deadlines shouting at us.

Unabashedly, we pray for ourselves. We pray for poise and vision to discern what is essential from what is merely important, as Jesus did in the face of endless human need. As we steal away for repose, to let our souls catch up with our bodies, separate for us truth from illusion, right from wrong, that we may love more firmly what you've revealed. Help us live life as a gift too precious to be wasted with mindless, scattered busyness.

Yes, let us answer and probe human cries of hurt. For in such calls, we hear your call. But never let us forget that you outfit us for joy and would remove everything blocking it. So it is that we pray for our lives spent together as spiritual brothers and sisters in FCC. Having recovered our belovedness as your people send us to share it in a hurting world. Amen.