

“LIFE’S HIGHEST PASSION”

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I am aware of Mychal and our youth planning a summer mission trip to Grand Rapids, MI. It’s going to be great. One such mission trip I led visited native-Americans in Black River Falls, WI. Winnebago UCC was between pastors. So we helped fix up an old parsonage for the new pastor. Sound familiar? You probably could have used a few more Indians here. God knows, our Fairfield County UCC churches sure have lots of chiefs.

Anyway, apart from our repairs, we also led worship that Sunday. I preached and the youth sang along with my strumming guitar, a merry band were we. During a break while working we found a dusty scrapbook in the parsonage. It amazed us to learn that the founding pastor of that church ministered there for *17 years* in the 1800s before finding his first convert. Once the first key conversions happened, many quickly followed.

But can you imagine... *17 years*? How do you deal with delay of gratification? How long can you give your best as none of your efforts show any reward? As for me, I’m humbled by such a faith. I’m not that good of a Christian. What’s more, the story shows how for some faith is deeper than rules and abstract doctrine. For some faith is no less than *passion*...Somewhere on his three missionary journeys, circumnavigating the entire known world, Paul the Apostle wrote: “But one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal to the prize of the upward call of Jesus Christ.” When faith is passionate it *exceeds* the pat boundaries of the rest, going through the motions. It strains ahead, like that pair of thoroughbreds hurtling along some dirt track. Have you ever known anyone so passionate about anything?

I have. That again takes us back to Grand Rapids, MI where I attended college. I played on a hockey team who had an exhibition game against the Detroit Red Wings Alumni team. We had to import AHL players from the Muskegon Mohawks to fortify our ranks. They were a stellar band of athletes, many in their 50s, some in their 60s, even 70s. My wing assignment? NHL Hall of Famer, Terrible Ted Lindsay. I’ll never forget that game.

Defenseman Black Jack Stewart, also a NHL Hall of Famer, put his stick between legs and good-naturedly lifted me off the ice as I lingered in front of *his* net. I was 21; he was 57, my age now. You wonder about his nickname? Well, he hated that name Black Jack because he considered all of his hits clean. And I’m sure all of them were, except for that one maneuver he pulled on me in front of *his* net. Never mind he was the hardest hitting defenseman of his era. Once he returned to an NHL game after rupturing a disc, another time after a minor skull fracture. So how badly do we want it, whatever “it” is?

Perhaps you are wondering how we did. We skated a lot faster than they. But no human being can skate as quickly as they could pass a hockey puck. Tic-tac-toe. Goal! It felt like the Washington Generals vs. the Harlem Globetrotters. We lost to the greybeards 12-3. I felt embarrassed. A party for the players followed at the Holiday Inn. Laughing at

myself, I approached Lindsay, asking him, “How do you do it?” Terrible Ted, 5’7” of pure fury, smirked his famous smirk and was silent. I asked him and kept asking him until he told me. Those men enjoyed their golden years by rising at 5 am 5 days a week to find ice time to play together. Have you ever known anyone that passionate about anything?

Passion is a fine word to describe the kind of faith this church can commend, at its best. Why? Passion catches up others in its wake. It carries us forward in its purposefulness. Bart Starr, of last week’s vanquished Green Bay, said of Vince Lombardi, “He taught me you must have a flaming desire... It can’t ever wane. *It’s got to glow in you all the time.*”

The most envied people, I submit, are not the rich and famous. People most envy the passionate, those possessed of great goals, those who radiate something. Glowing that glow, those devoid of passion—which is, frankly, most people--want to be like them. The passionate swear off half measures. Passion Sunday is called that because it marks Jesus entering Jerusalem, knowing his painful destiny. Jesus fulfilled his destiny.

That brings us to our gospel story. Days after Jesus was crucified, Cleopas and a friend were walking to a village called Emmaus. They walked a road to nowhere special seeking a place to get away from the disaster their lives had become. Despair gripped them. They had invested a lifetime of hope in three years with Jesus. And all that hope had been dashed as easily as a Roman emperor stepping to crush a beetle with his sandal. They trudged numbly, as on broken legs, to escape an agonized moment, to get away from a place—Jerusalem—that had become so excruciating, they could no longer stay.

As they did, a stranger approached. First, he was unaware of it all. Then he was suddenly insightful, understanding, and empathic, all at once. He knew why things could not have gone otherwise. Broken legs no more, their pace quickened to keep up with the exchange. They bid him to stay with them and break bread. He did. And their eyes were opened to see the risen Christ. “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road,” they gushed, “while he was opening the scriptures to us?” I gladly learned at our last bible study I’m not alone at finding those words incandescent.

Might we understand our following of Jesus in perhaps a way we have not before, as life’s highest passion? But what about faith as passion? That is not usually how we describe our faith. We associate passion with romance and revolution, with incredible achievement or dangerously irrational actions, but not with going to church. Maybe that is because, like the marriage that becomes so familiar it feels more like frayed house slippers than a breathless night in Paris, we have spiritually lost something along the way.

Faith *is* life’s highest passion. I am not talking about zealotry. For mere zeal burns itself off and exhausts itself after whatever epiphany or miracle we have received fades away. Faith *is* life’s highest passion. I am not talking about fanaticism. Fanaticism lacks the calm assurance that is the hallmark of those living on both sides of the resurrection.

I speak of passion not in some trivial sense of Madonna finding new ways to outrage and titillate at the Golden Globes. I use the word passion in a deeper diagnostic sense.

Let's just say that maybe being a Christian is the art of being passionate about the right things and in the right way. It's about what matters most and what is most worth doing.

Like the woman who is incurably curious, whose desire to know burns full on at age 87. She *devours* real books. Do you know her? We might say she has *passion for learning*. Or like James Meredith, the first black student at the University of Mississippi, who was supplied 500 federal marshals to escort him in, who had basketballs bounced above his dorm room *all night for semesters* to keep him from sleeping. That is *passion for justice*. Or passion like Claude Debussy, writing *Claire de Lune*, interpreting a poem, converting impressionism into chords. I marvel at it every time I hear it. He had *passion for beauty*. Faith as a passion is like all these passions, except it is even higher, even loftier. Why?

Faith is the passion of those whose love for God has lit their torch for loving humankind. Nothing exceeds that. When someone loves God that much, we call that passion faith. When someone comes to care more about God's dream for us, proclaimed by prophets and interpreted in Jesus' parables, even more than they care for their personal dreams, we call that passion faith. Because with God's dream—what Jesus called the reign of God—all of humankind will bask in God's glory. But our dreams mostly glorify ourselves.

Of course, some will understandably suspect talk about faith as passion. After all, this is New England. As one professor said about Congregationalism in these parts, "Some are cold, but few are frozen." Others want to push back because they fear how strong feeling can do real damage in a religious setting. But remember, I mean passion in a sense more profound than letting feelings run rampant, unchecked, ruling the day. So I close with a parable, a fable even a child grasps, as told by a theologian 180 years ago.

Long ago a wealthy man ordered from abroad a match pair of faultless and high-bred horses. He acquired these commanding specimens because he wanted the pleasure of driving them himself. So he did. After a year, anyone who had seen these horses before would have been shocked by what they saw. Their eyes had become dull and drowsy. The gait lacked style and decision. Why, they could no longer endure anything. They could hardly be driven a few miles without having to stop. Sometimes they balked and came to a complete standstill, although the owner lit into them on for all he was worth. The animals acquired bad habits and vices. In spite of food in abundance, their strength was falling off. Something had to be done. So the owner called the king's coachman.

After one month with the royal coachman, there was not a pair of horses who held their heads so proudly, whose glance was so fiery, whose gait was so handsome. No other pair of horses could trot mile after miles without pausing. How did this come about?

The owner was not the coachman he pretended to be. But the coachman knew what these steeds were capable of and drove them accordingly. What does it mean? Life is one thing when it's about the human understanding of being human. But life becomes something else altogether, something at once glorious and purposeful and passionate, when lived according to the measure of the one who created and redeemed human life.

Cleopas and his friend felt that glory, purpose, and passion surge again within their veins while trudging to Emmaus, a lonely road to nowhere. How can we know it as well? A lawyer asked Jesus that once. Actually, the lawyer asked for the one greatest commandment, trying to trap Jesus. Simple, Jesus said, love the Lord God with all of your heart, all your soul, all your mind. Oh, one more thing, love your neighbor as yourself. The lawyer asked Jesus to reduce passion to mere rules and Jesus gave him passion.

I like how we say in the Congregational church, we do not check our minds at the door. Maybe today we are saying, if we refuse to check our hearts and souls, at the door, it will become heartfelt and soulful. That is precisely how I mean that word passion. Such a faith as this could be the divine energy that changes us and transforms our little world. Amen.

Living Triune God, may your Spirit fall afresh on your people gathered here today. May the world know your desire for all people to praise and give thanks, for all people to know healing in our differences, for all of us to find our destiny and thrive in that pursuit. In our differences, bring unity; in our lethargy, bring energy; in our despair, bring hope!

Surprising and generous God, your Spirit is among us, sending us into new adventures, opening new doors, exploring possibility beyond our dreams. Opening for us that dream which Jesus called your kingdom, help us all to serve in such a way that makes room for you to reign, for your purposes to be fulfilled, for the reconciliation of heaven and earth. May we be filled with the desire to respond, with passion for your purpose, for the centeredness that only you can bring. Grant us new life in the Spirit this day, we pray. Amen.