

August 8, 2021
Eleventh after Pentecost / Proper 14

Meditation: "Passionate?"

How many of you have ever heard of the Trojan war? How about the Trojan horse? The Greeks and the Trojans were at war. A member of the Trojan royalty married Helen, daughter of the Greek King, and, naturally, he took her to Troy. The Greeks wanted Helen back and thought she was worth starting a war over. With a little help from their friends, the Trojans managed to hold out for 10 years. Finally, the Greeks built a large, hollow horse, hid some soldiers in it, and told the Trojans that the horse was a peace offering, a gift. Meanwhile, the Greek fleet sailed out of the harbour. The Trojans pulled the horse into their city, and, at night, the soldiers hidden in the horse crept out, opened the city gates for their comrades who had returned after dark, and they wiped out Troy. This undoubtedly gave rise to the saying of looking a gift horse in the mouth.

This is what the crowds surrounding Jesus are doing. They are looking a gift horse in the mouth. In other words, they are suspicious of the gift that Jesus is offering. No, that's not quite right, they are suspicious of the giver. "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" They are so suspicious of Jesus that they fail to notice that their complaint against Jesus, who is offering them the bread of life, mirrors the complaint of the Israelites against Moses in the desert when they were hungry and in need of the bread of heaven, manna. They are so suspicious of Jesus that they fail to notice that Jesus is calling himself 'I am', the name God gave Moses at the burning bush. They are so suspicious of Jesus that they fail to notice the humour here; that the Bread came from the house of bread (beth lechem), or the play on words bread of life (lechem, lechaim). They are so suspicious of Jesus that they fail to notice the gift that Jesus is offering; the gift of eternal life. Boy, are they missing out big time, and all because of their suspicious minds.

We have been raised in a culture that prides itself on its scientific knowledge. We have to be able to prove, or disprove, something before we are willing to accept or reject it. For this reason we question everything around us. We have to know how and why, and until we can answer those questions we seem unwilling or unable to look at the thing itself. This doesn't sound very different from the crowds surrounding Jesus, does it? Just like them, we are often incapable of just graciously accepting a gift because we are suspicious of the giver's motives. We want to know what the catch is. And there's always a catch, isn't there? The tele-marketer wants to give us a free set of steak knives, but first we have to listen to some guy who wants to sell us a vacuum cleaner. Some letter we get in the mail tells us we have won a trip to Disneyland, but first we must listen to some lady who wants us to buy a timeshare. Some email that says we must buy

thousands of dollars worth of gift cards to send to someone so the CRA won't have us arrested for tax fraud. We have become cautious and jaded in much. How would we have reacted to Jesus' offer of eternal life? Who wants to live forever anyway, if it's just going to be an eternity of all the problems we already have in our lives? No, it's better just to keep your head down, your nose clean, play it safe, and go about your own business. Sadly, this has led to our becoming indifferent to just about everything. Vaclav Havel, author and former president of the Czech Republic, once said, "The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference." With such apathy, it's no wonder so many in our society are bored or depressed. There is no fire in the belly, no passion.

Have you ever seen anyone mooning around with no passion for life? Just try listening to one of your kids, or grandkids, or great grandkids some rainy day late in August. Mom, Dad, there's nothing to do. I'm bored! How about someone just going through the motions at work, counting the days to retirement, or more likely the days until they are fired? Or a couple who have become disinterested in one another and stay together because it's easier than either addressing the problems in their relationship or separating? Or even, a community, like a church congregation that are just coasting, and wondering why membership is down and nothing exciting ever happens anymore? I'll wager it is all the minister's fault!

Passion is of vital importance. It is passion that sustains individuals, relationships and communities. More than that, it is passion that leads to new birth. I'm not suggesting that everyone sign off right now and go fulfil the first commandment; "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" although that couldn't hurt in the area of rekindling some passion and excitement in marital relations. What I'm saying is that passion, that fire in the belly, is what spurs us to dare to be extraordinary; to get involved with the extremes of life, to love extravagantly without concern as to the cost. Passion is not to be avoided at any cost. Today's lesson from Ephesians, if we had read it this morning, speaks of passion: "Be angry." Anger is a passionate response to hurt or fear or frustration. Anger in and of itself is not evil or sinful. Just think of Jesus' righteous anger when he cleared the temple of the moneychangers and those selling animals for sacrifice. But a word of caution is also found in the Ephesians passage; "be angry, but do not sin." We need to be careful of how we direct our passions. Jesus said, "I came that all may have life, and have it abundantly." What can it mean to have life in abundance but to live life to the fullest; to be full of passion; full of passion for ourselves, for others, for God, for life itself? Thom Shuman, a minister with the Presbyterian Church USA, says, "Passionate communities give everything, including themselves, to God, by giving everything to others. They keep

company with God by keeping company with those God loves; the poor, the oppressed, those without a voice, the widow, the orphan, the neighbour, the other.”

It will come as no surprise to you that I am passionate about the church. It really upsets me when people use the church more like social club or a place that exists solely to meet their own needs and desires, instead of as an agent for social change. It makes me angry that for the last couple of hundred years the church has gone down a path that says the most important thing is personal salvation and that is about getting into heaven when you die, instead of salvation being linked to the entire community of life and the importance of the here and now. Think about it, if eternity started before time itself, and continues afterward then right now, right this minute is part of eternity, and the life we are living today is part of eternal life.

Another thing I am passionate about is decent, affordable housing for people. For almost two decades I have been involved with Habitat for Humanity. I have helped build houses. I have acted as the lead person for a group who were major sponsors of a build. I have served on the board of directors of a local affiliate when they were just starting out. I do this because I see the results. Having decent, stable housing means less tension in the household. Less tension means people sleep better, and do better at school and at work. Children doing better at school means they stay in school longer and have more opportunities when they enter the labour force, and parents doing better at work means they have more opportunities for advancement. Having decent, stable housing means fewer illnesses, less reliance on social support systems, and less interaction with the legal system. All of this helps break the cycle of poverty, and helps build a stronger, healthier, more vibrant community. As much as I admire the work of Habitat for Humanity, it focuses on home ownership as a means of improving the lives of individuals who want to improve their lives. But homeownership is not a possibility for everyone. In the last couple of years, I have learned about Indwell, an organization that seeks to provide affordable housing and supports for those with mental health issues and/or addiction issues. More than just housing people, it is the supports that change the lives of their residents. That's why I am giving up a Saturday afternoon, and a little shoe leather (neoprene?), and walking next month to raise money for the work Indwell is doing in London and St. Thomas.

Being passionate about something comes with a cost. Being passionate can cost us time, energy, or even money. It can even be risky, or downright dangerous. Jesus found that out. God's passion for us is the reason for God limiting Godself, for entering into the finite, for entering into time and space, for becoming human, and for risking death at the hands of people who couldn't fathom that God wanted to offer them the gift of eternal life, let alone what that might mean. Jesus knew he was risking life and limb to deliver this

bread. He said, "the bread I will give is my flesh." When we dare to be passionate about some issue, we too face risk. We may face public ridicule for our beliefs. Congregations and denominations divide over all sorts of issues, such as reconciliation with indigenous peoples, the ordination or marriage of same gender couples, or whether Adam and Eve had belly buttons. Think about it. Those things pale when compared to Christians in some parts of the world, who face death for refusing to abandon their faith. If we allow our culture, which divides everything by twos (black and white, good and evil, sin and virtue, matter and spirit), to set our thought patterns, the idea of being passionate about something can be unnerving, because it might mean we are on our own. But if we listen to the teachings of Christ and accept the gift of eternal life, it means that we are never alone. God is with us. And because God is with us, we are freed to be passionate individuals and communities who take a stand for what is right and just, whether that be feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, speaking out against human rights abuses, or worshipping our God. So, let us not be suspicious, rotting corpses, but be people of passion. A passionate heart is good medicine, but a suspicious spirit dries up the bones.

I only have one question. What are you passionate about?