

Palm/Passion Sunday, April 9, 2017

Rev. Dr. Jean Halligan Vandergrift
The Purpose of Following Your Passion

Matthew 21:1-11 & Philippians 2:5-11

INTRODUCTION TO THE MATTHEW READING

During the three years leading up to this point in Jesus' ministry, he has been traveling from place to place in Palestine and surrounding regions, preaching, teaching, and healing as part of the good news of the coming Kingdom of God. He has attracted a growing entourage of followers and disciples, as well as critics. He has intentionally turned his focus to the capital, Jerusalem, and the Temple, to face both groups of people with the love and leadership of God. Matthew writes about Jesus' entry into the city as the arrival of an alternative kingship. Listen for the reading from the prophet Zechariah that he intentionally inserts. The Hosanna verses, also, are a connection to their Hebrew heritage, reminding them of how, as pilgrims coming to the Passover, they sing prayers to God, and ought to welcome the One whom God is sending to them.

READING:

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them." And he will send them immediately.*' ⁴This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

⁵ 'Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'

⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸A very large crowd* spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

'Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

¹⁰When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?'

¹¹The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.'

INTRODUCTION TO THE PHILIPPIANS READING:

The apostle Paul is in prison – again – for preaching the good news of Jesus Christ. While he’s been trapped there, the church in Philippi has prayed for him and sent provisions, along with one of their members to help out – Epaphroditus, was his name.

Paul founded this church and is particularly fond of the people and its ministry, so they’ve kept in correspondence. This letter is to thank them and to return Epaphroditus to home so he can recover from an illness. Paul always uses his letters to teach, as well, and draws upon other materials than his own theology. This passage about the mind of Christ may have been a hymn that the Philippians were familiar with, maybe having sung it in church.

READING:

⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was* in Christ Jesus,
⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹ and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

SERMON:

Speaking at Tulane University’s Commencement in 2009, comedian Ellen DeGeneres told the graduates: “Follow your passion. Stay true to yourself. Never follow someone else's path unless you're in the woods and you're lost and you see a path. By all means, you should follow that.”

It’s fairly common these days to hear the advice: “Follow your passion.” What do you think people have in mind when they say this?

Probably many different things, but in general, “passion” is viewed positively in our day. It usually refers to what you love to do, that which makes you light up with excitement and joy. Something you could do, losing all track of time. Or that for which you have strong feelings. Maybe something that

God has put on your heart to accomplish.

If you are going to take this advice and follow your passion, be kind to yourself, because it usually takes a while to pinpoint. Normally, there are some twists and turns, and a degree of trial and error on the way to your passion. Especially these days, because, at least in many places in the U.S., we have so many choices. Am I right, youth? How are you supposed to know what you want to do with the rest of your life? You're probably interested in *many* things. You may not be able to name your passion until later.

I entered the University of Florida with a desire to be an architect, a sort-of passion that didn't take, but at my ordination interview, an astute member of the committee asked me what connection there might be between architecture and ministry for me. I came up with some answer that I no longer remember, but really, it wasn't until many years into this profession that I realized that the passion the two share is getting to design something that doesn't yet exist and finding a way to 'build' it step by step.

One thing I hope you will remember today: Jesus affirms discovering and following your passion. "More power to you," I think he would say. Because this is certainly what *he* did.

We don't know much about his growing up and young adult years, but he apparently tried being a carpenter, and given his parables, he sure knew a lot about agriculture. But all the while, Jesus was drawn to the synagogue and Temple, and the spirituality of life, eventually becoming a rabbi, at least in practice, if not credentialed.

At the age of 30, though, John the Baptist really fired him up, and Jesus made a commitment through baptism. He came through wilderness temptations, and partly due to the injustice of the way John was arrested by King Herod, Jesus was inspired to carry out *his* passion for the Kingdom of God. He began his public ministry teaching this good news that God is alive, love in action, and leading those that willingly partner. By God's power, Jesus healed what ailed people, and following his passion drew others to him.

The phrase "the passion of Christ" is usually used just for the last week of his life on earth, but I contend that Jesus was following his passion for the reign of God *before*, indeed, all the way back to the beginning. But in any case, his movement grew and swelled to a kind of tipping point, and his passion brought him to the gates of Jerusalem!

Now some might interpret Jesus' rise to popularity as a rags to riches narrative, the kind that our society holds up as the American Dream: start from where you are, find out what you like to do, work hard at it until it catches on and takes off! Then you'll make money and be a success. What I've just described is the mind of our culture concerning the purpose of passion.

But *what* is on Jesus' mind as he follows his passion? I'm sure that it was more than what Frank Sinatra sings: "I want to find I'm king of the hill, top of the heap!" Instead of a duck boat parade, as fun as that is, Jesus, remember, rode in on a donkey!

I really enjoy the HGTV show *Fixer Upper*. I could watch Chip and Joanna renovate houses all day long, but when that show gets really on target is when they fix a property for someone *without* means or clout, like the Vietnam veteran Bill Graham and his wife, whose home was way too small and not accessible.

Phillips Brooks, 19th century Boston preacher, puts passion in perspective: "If what I am in the habit of thanking God for is mainly food and clothes and house, it will not be easy for me to realize the deepest purpose for which God gives me those things; it will be very easy for me to take them as if the final purpose of them was that *I* might be warm and well-fed!"

So instead, these have the right idea: food for the hungry at Open Table, Medecins sans Frontieres providing medical care, Mary Grace Henry making hair accessories so the profits can support the education of girls in Sub Saharan Africa, TriCon's mission trip to the Navajo nation.

So here is the second thing to remember: if we follow our passion to its real, deeper purpose, it will eventually, somehow, lead us to the needs of others and to the suffering around us, so that we can figure out a way to bring our passion to bear on this situation and serve others!

Doing so goes right to the root of the word "passion," the Latin root, "patior," to suffer. Jesus teaches us by word and example to follow our passion to *compassion* and commitment; to feeling *with* others and going the distance. *This* is the mind of Christ that Paul sings about in the letter to the Philippians: to follow his passion to its purpose. He didn't exploit his power and position of equality with God, but emptied himself, becoming a servant. Have *this* mind in you, church!

Christians have tried to comprehend and interpret the crucifixion of Jesus over all these centuries since, and we must continue to study and talk and pray over its meaning. Where I've come to in my theology is that God would have rejoiced had Jesus' entry into Jerusalem ushered in the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven; *if* the acclamation of palms had signified that *all* hearts were entirely open and eager for the authority of God; *if* the vision of Philippians 2, that every knee shall bow and every tongue confess had taken place right then and continued! But in our God-given freedom and our propensity to allow *fear* to rule our hearts, our lives, and the systems we set up, a freedom that, in great love, God doesn't deny us, if folks like us, and every day, determine that we will reject the One coming in the name of the Lord, even beat, torture, and kill him in order to get rid of God in our midst, well, then, following his passion to its deeper purpose, Jesus chose to *continue* to love them and us, to the end, all the way, go the distance, way down into the darkness, through the cracks of imperfection, completely into that broken-hearted tragedy, to a faithful death, even death on a cross, but to do so with full compassion throughout his being, in his heart, and on his lips: "Father, forgive them."