

In Praise of Passion
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2 Samuel 6:12b-17
Luke 10: 38-42

Elon Community Church
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Several years ago, the playwright Neil Simon gave the commencement address at Williams College. He looked out over the sea of youthful faces and told them that he could sum up in one word the guiding theme of his own life: passion. "Passion", he said, "is the force that has governed and motivated all my energies." He went on to remind the young graduates that academic degrees and career advancement were not substitutes for passionate living.

Certainly good advice, but the reality is that a twentieth century lifestyle can often sap the energy and wonder that make up passionate living. We are part of a culture where self-control is a virtue and emotional displays are deemed immature or inappropriate.

A few years ago, I was speaking with a board member of Safe Space, the nonprofit agency where I was the director. He gave me what he thought was a compliment. "I know it's difficult for you to deal with Mary", he said. (Mary was another member of the board.) "Mary", he said, "wears her emotions on her sleeve. You are much more controlled. That's what we need in an executive director." I smiled, but didn't know how to reply. I didn't tell him that what I really wanted to do to Mary was NOT something the manager of a domestic violence center should be thinking about! I was also a bit dismayed. Did I really want to be perceived as someone who always exhibits self-control?

In today's society we are taught to praise those who are "level-headed" and "even-tempered." We are told to keep a tight rein on our passions and to exercise moderation, professionalism, and civility. There is value in this kind of emotional discipline, but there is danger here, too. We can begin to lose the capacity to feel strongly. After awhile, few things excite us anymore. What we had praised as self-control has turned into complacency.

George William Rutler warns us to watch out for this forgotten, but deadly sin. He writes:

Hatred bangs drums. Lust bangs the pulse. Anger bangs the fist. But complacency slides into the soul, unmurmuring, uninvited and unnoticed, with a warm and quilted aura of coziness.

Sometimes this dullness of spirit infects churches. Gordon Cosby, founder and longtime pastor of Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C. tells about preaching at a mid-week evening service in a congregation somewhere in New England. The worship, he wrote, was particularly dull. Nobody sang the hymns; nobody smiled or reacted. The only thing that moved, he said, were the offering plates! Afterward he and his wife were depressed as they went back to their hotel room which was in a roadside inn above a tavern. They couldn't help but compare the sounds of laughter and music below them with the grim lifeless exercise in religion they had experienced.

Cosby wrote later: "I realized that there was more warmth and fellowship in that tavern than there was in the church. If Jesus of Nazareth had his choice he would probably have come to the tavern rather than to the church we visited." (Campbell, Locked In A Room With Open Doors, Word Books, 1974.)

Some of us have probably experienced churches just like that one. They seem to be filled with people who equate sour piety with real worship. We all may know someone like Liza Hamilton, a character in John Steinback's novel, *East of Eden*. Liza is described as:

"...a tight, hard little woman humorless as a chicken... with a dour Presbyterian mind and a code of morals that pinned down and beat the brains out of nearly everything that was pleasant to do."

It's no wonder that mainline Protestant churches are seeing declining memberships every year. John Buchanan, a pastor in Chicago, says that he has a friend who hates going to this type of joyless worship service. The friend has threatened to stand up in church and shout, "What's the matter? Somebody die in here?"

What a contrast to the way David acted as he danced before the ark on its way to Jerusalem! The text reads, "And David danced before the Lord with all his might." Here was unabashed enthusiasm, unbridled joy, unrestrained celebration. Here was the great king who humbled himself by stripping off his finery and then dancing before God. What David was doing was worship... worship with all of his heart and soul behind it... worship without kingly self-control... worship with a passion.

Today, many modern day churchgoers don't believe in letting themselves feel that strongly about their faith. We live in a society which has taught us to keep our options open. Many people are like shoppers in a store who, when the clerk asks if they need any help, respond with the phrase, "Just looking." For these folks, religion is a spectator sport, something to watch, but not really requiring much participation.

People who are permanently "just looking" drift in and out of much of life...they drift in and out of relationships without engaging in the hard work of long term love; they drift in and out of communities without ever dropping anchor; and they can float in and out of the church without ever feeling that they are truly involved, watching the proceedings from a safe distance.

People like this remind me of Michal, David's wife, who watches the joyful procession from a distance. The scripture reads, "Michal, the daughter of Saul, watched from a window. And when she saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord, she despised him in her heart." It seems the Michal syndrome, if I may call it that, is alive and well in some modern churches. It has infected the self-righteous members who are embarrassed by other folks in the same congregation or denomination, folks who speak out on controversial issues or who might upset the decorum of the service or the established traditions with different ways of doing things. Whatever the issue that confronts a community of faith, there will usually be a critical Michal, shaking a finger and crying "Shame!"

One of the challenges for this church, Elon Community UCC, as for many mainline congregations, is to keep fueling and feeding the creativity, energy, and passion of its members. Since we believe that faith is a matter of the mind as well as of the heart, we must work together at keeping the two balanced. It is a thin faith, indeed, which has lost its heart and become purely an intellectual pursuit or a comfortable routine.

We the people of Elon Community Church want our faith to engage every part of our bodies and souls. We are willing to work hard to make our worship inspiring and programs meaningful. We are volunteers in our communities, promoters of justice and peace. And this is all good. But, if you are like me, you may also be prone to a sense of frustration and fatigue, of being pulled in too many directions.

Some of us might act like the proper and critical Michal, but others of us might be more prone to behave like Martha in the story we heard read from Luke. We start out with energy, enthusiasm, and action, but we can lose perspective and become tired and irritated. It is easy to get so caught up in the details of "doing church"... programs running smoothly, building projects finalized, outreach efforts funded... that we might miss the reason why we come here at all. We may pause a moment and find ourselves like Martha as she tried to coordinate all the details of dinner for a crowd when Jesus stopped at her place. The text reads that she was "distracted by all the serving."

"Distracted by all the serving." At times this fits us so well, too, we well-intentioned folks with a giving nature! Our fast paced "do-gooder" lifestyle can leave us feeling exhausted and fragmented. We work, take care of ourselves and those we love, volunteer, sit on boards, write our legislators, give to charities, the list goes on and on. There are too many things to be done, too many people to care for.

We are good at serving, but sometimes we forget why we are doing it. We need to hear the words of Jesus to Martha, "My child, my child, you worry and fret about so many things, yet only one thing is needful."

And then, like Mary, we should try to choose "the better part", let some other things go, just sit in stillness. For stillness is also part of passionate living. It is the counterpoint to action, the centered place from which it is possible to turn a passionate attention upon things of the spirit.

So how do we stay a passionate people? Jesus said, "Anyone who does not welcome the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it." We must reach back into the recesses of our minds and recapture a childlike capacity for wonder, for joy, for intensity of feeling. We must cultivate such an attitude in our faith, our worship, and our day to day living.

Our neighbors in the Third World have much to teach us in this regard. They often have a better sense of the rhythms of life than we do. Like David, they know when it is time to dance!

I discovered this truth about fifteen years ago when I visited the village of Cachi Alto, a tiny community at an elevation of fourteen thousand feet in the Andes of Ecuador. I had traveled there with a group of seven other Americans to tour some mountain villages that had been involved with the Heifer Project. I came away transformed by the people I encountered.

On the day I remember, we had just visited the village sheep corral in Cachi Alto. The community had started a weaving business which was bringing much needed income to families in the village. We had eaten a meal of mutton in one of the homes, and after dinner, the entire village accompanied us up the mountainside to a windswept field where guitars and wooden flutes were produced and the singing began.

One of the young men began to dance. The next thing I knew, he had reached out his hand for mine, inviting me to join in. I hesitated just for a second, my North American reserve battling with my desire to join in a spontaneous Latin dance. I am forever glad that passion prevailed over inhibition! I jumped up and soon found myself dancing away with abandon on a windy mountaintop in Ecuador. Other people in our group and from the village also leapt up, children joined in, and I could only think afterward that we had all been caught up in one of those moments where, as C. S. Lewis says, we were "surprised by joy".

Perhaps it is the people of Cachi Alto, or the world's poets, artists, and musicians, who know best what it means to live passionately. When we allow ourselves to be passionate about our faith, we may find ourselves changed in unexpected and powerful ways. We leave the safety of the sidelines and join the dancing parade, not worrying about how we look or what people might think.

Barbara Brown Taylor, a prominent theologian and preacher, believes that the Divine Energy that infuses all things, God's creative Word, has a power that is not dependent on our efforts to channel or civilize it. She writes:

The word that created heaven and earth, the word that became flesh and dwelt among us, the word that blew through an upper room, and set believers' heads on fire- that word is still loose in a world that cannot contain it, still seeking those who will hear it and speak it.

And I believe that this Word is seeking those who will hear it like Mary, speak it like Moses, and dance it like David. It seeks those who are unafraid of passion, those who make for themselves a life that stands for something, a life that longs for something. It is seeking you and me. And, I hope we will dance!