

Praise for the Passionate

November 11, 2012

Mark 12:38-44

Once during an interview about seminary education and the preparation of future clergy, Dean Greg Jones of Duke Divinity School was asked, “What quality do you want most in future clergy?”

Dean Jones responded, “I think, passion. I would look for passion. I’m looking for students who have a passion for ministry, a desire for God, and a love for the church.”

Passion. Like so many words in the English language, this one is used to mean a number of different things, but most all of them boil down to an intense emotional feeling of some type.

I spoke last Sunday about one of the ways that Jesus said we are to love God is emotionally. And we really can’t deny that our emotions play a big role in who and what we are.

But emotions, or passions, have gotten bad press in the history of human thought. Without getting deep into the history of philosophy, which is probably not of the greatest interest for most of you, I do want to point out that many of the great early thinkers felt that the goal of life is to hold our emotions in check and make sure that reason is the dominant human characteristic.

All well and good, I guess. But think of how our emotions give our lives substance and meaning! Might it be that emotion is not the opposite of thought but rather another, perhaps even more complex way of thinking? One of the ways we perceive the world, move into reality is through our emotions – joy, sadness, ecstasy, heartache, grief, and love.

Yet even the grammar of our language has a negative view of emotions. We say that our emotions get the best of us. A person is struck by jealousy, paralyzed by fear, overwhelmed with emotion. One falls in love, is madly in love, green with envy, fighting mad, or insane with jealousy.

With emotions we are “bewitched, bothered, and bewildered,” as the song says. We become the victims of emotions. We say, “I’m sorry, I just got carried away.”

Many students of human behavior urge us to aim for what’s called the “golden mean.” We are to aim for that state in life where we are balanced, not too much on the one side or the other – our reason rules.

We’ve just come through a presidential election, one that produced a variety of emotions in most folks, not all necessarily good or positive, by the way.

Years ago, during one of the presidential elections, William F. Buckley and the author Gore Vidal were offering color commentary on the nomination process during the political convention.

Throughout their time together, Vidal kept taunting Buckley. Finally, Buckley, as we say, lost it. He let forth a string of insults and invective against Vidal.

Later, Buckley was quoted as saying, "He won." That is, Buckley lost it, gave in to his emotions, and thus allowed Vidal to defeat him.

Isn't it interesting that we say, when we have given in to our emotions, that we lost it? Apparently, to be a mature, thoughtful human being, one cannot lose it; one cannot give in to emotions. Maybe that's why the Greeks conceived human life as a long process of the utilization of reason and the suppression of emotion.

But then, here comes Jesus. An old lady passes by the temple treasury as people are putting their offering in the coffers. It isn't just that she gave but that she gave everything she had. All. Others gave more money, but she gave a greater proportion of what she had.

Why did she give it all? We are not told. Jesus simply notes the effusive, extravagant nature of her giving. She gave all, this poor widow. The one who had the least gave the most.

Still, the question remains. Why? What was her reason for giving? Perhaps there was no reason, because what she did was quite beyond mere reason. Perhaps she got carried away in her religious devotion. Most of us here have probably known or known of people who have done that.

If you ask them about their Christian commitment, how did they decide to follow Christ, you will find it was not so much a matter of their decision. It was an emotion, a feeling, or an extravagant example of someone carried away.

Perhaps being a Christian, for many people, is not a matter of decision and deliberation but a matter of feeling, a matter of the affections.

An excellent point was made in our discussion at our men's group this past Monday, and it is something that I, too, have felt for a long time. I fear that sometimes those of us in mainline Protestant Christianity may have over-rationalized the Christian faith, presenting Christianity as a matter of belief, doctrines and ideas, insisting that you get the same ideas about God in your head as we have in ours and then you're OK.

Beliefs are, indeed, a very personal thing, and I'm certainly not here to criticize anyone's approach to what is for them a meaningful faith.

But I would point out some potential dangerous pitfalls. It is very easy to become self-absorbed with our theology, leading to judgment and separation rather than love and acceptance. Or, it can lead to a refusal to be open to possibilities, to new ideas, new ways of looking at things. And by so doing, miss the wonders and excitement that God has in store for those who are open to his leading.

There was a lady who sang in a choral group that I conducted. She was by all accounts very learned and very smart as the world counts such things. She had even done her own translation of the Bible.

Whenever we would sing the Hallelujah Chorus or similar works, she would get this rapturous look on her face, gaze upward toward the heavens and look as though the Holy Spirit himself had taken up residence in her body.

But honestly, when it came to relating with other people, she could be one of the most obnoxious, judgmental people you could possibly imagine, very self-absorbed and ready to take issue with anyone who had a different view of things.

I really don't think that is the way Christ intended for us to communicate his message.

Now, what you believe certainly does matter. But we need to get it in the proper order. Because it's what's in your heart that determines how you live out what's in your head. And all the theological correctness, whatever that is for you, that you can possibly cram in your head will not substitute for the love of God in your heart, and living in that love in all actions and relationships.

The widow in Jesus' story – we don't know, but I doubt seriously that she worried too much about theology. But clearly she had a passion for doing what she believed to be the right thing, even if it took all she had. And I believe there is a lesson there for us.

You know, church-goers sometimes get a little nervous when they see that the gospel reading is the story of the widow's mite, afraid that they are going to hear about money and about how we all need to give more to God and to the church.

And I certainly could have done that this morning. The story of the widow's offering lends itself well to a sermon about tithing and giving to the church.

But I wanted to take a little different approach to that today. I want us to think about personal sacrifice in the form of a passionate response to God's call upon us to offer all of ourselves in service to Christ.

One of the most significant aspects of being a believer and a Christ follower is being willing to make sacrifices. The widow made a great sacrifice of her resources when she put the two copper coins into the Temple treasury. But a great part of serving Christ also requires a sacrifice of our time, our desires; really our whole lives.

God requires much of us who claim the Christian faith. God wants more from us than simply warming seats in a church on Sunday mornings. God wants a priesthood of all believers. God wants every member in ministry.

God expects that we will take the Kingdom that began with Jesus Christ and we will do everything we can to help that Kingdom spread and grow.

But if we are going to be faithful in the work that God has called us to, then we have to be willing to push aside some of the things in our lives that are ultimately unnecessary. In other words, we have to be willing to make some sacrifices; and when it comes to being followers of Christ, sacrifice takes on many different forms.

The most powerful definition of sacrifice I have ever heard came from seminary professor Kendall Soulen. In his Systematic Theology class, Kendall offered this description, "Sacrifice is costly self-giving." Costly self-giving.

What does costly self-giving look like? I believe the widow of today's gospel lesson gives us a perfect picture of costly self-giving.

In Jesus' time, widows were the epitome of the poor and helpless. They had no status in society, no resources, and no one to provide or care for them. And so Jesus here lifts up the widow in contrast to the rich people who can give extravagantly to the Temple treasury and make sure others see them doing it.

Society tells us that the great people are those with money, power, and prestige. But Christ paints a different picture. Jesus lifts up the widow's gift as noteworthy because she has given literally her "whole life;" those two seemingly insignificant copper coins, which were actually all she had to live on that day. Greatness is not determined by the size of our gift, but by our willingness to sacrifice extravagantly in God's name.

I want to share a story with you. You might also consider it a biology lesson. It is a story about the way in which they train Arab Steeds so as to carry on that particular strain of horses.

These Arab Steeds are chosen for breeding and selected in much the same way as we are selected. We are a special people, chosen and called. The breeders of these horses select the best they have. They take the best of each year, each generation that comes along; they pull them out and then they train the horses to obey, to have intelligence, and to be able to do things that will require strength and skill.

Among other things, the horses are taught this: There is one supreme loyalty. When the trainer blows one particular call upon the bugle, it does not make any difference what the horse is doing, that horse is to go to the trainer; across water, over hedges, through barbed wire, against stone walls; somehow the horse is to get to the trainer when that particular blow is sounded by the bugle.

Then, once everything has been done to give the Arab steeds the best kind of training, here is what the trainers do. They take the horses and put them in a great corral at the top of a hill, and they leave them there without water a day and a night, and through the next day.

It is burning hot and those horses are without water. I don't know whether you have ever experienced it, but it is torture to have to go a long time without water. Imagine what it must be for those Arab horses; twenty-four hours without water. Yet, the trainer persists.

Another night goes by, and another maddening day. Forty-eight hours and no water, and night falls again. The horses mill around that great corral, butting themselves against the sides of it, feeling the water down there in the stream at the foot of the hill, calling to their fevered bodies – fifty-two hours, fifty-four hours, fifty-six hours, and still no water.

Then, in the morning, they see the trainer coming up toward the gate of the corral. There before them, down the hill, is the water flowing in the stream. The trainer slips the hasp of the gate and the great gate swings wide.

You can imagine the stampede that results as the horses tear down that hill towards the water. Then, when the stampede is at its height, the trainer back inside the gate of the corral blows this bugle, and only those that turn back are considered worthy of carrying on the bloodline of the Arab horse!

We know what it is to take that first sip of water after a busy day in the heat, or that first bite of food when we really feel hungry. The question for us, like the test of the Arab Steeds, is this; when we have our greatest desires within arm's length and God summons us, will we abandon that pursuit in order to answer God?

Will we turn away from what seem to be our greatest hopes and dreams so that we can answer the sounding call of God? Will we climb walls, ford streams, and weave through barbed wire in pursuit of God's call?

Certainly this is not easy, but it is what God asks of us. God is our one supreme loyalty, and we must live our lives such that all we do is faithful to that loyalty; even when it requires sacrifice.

God has already engaged in such costly self-giving himself. Jesus Christ made the ultimate sacrifice; laying "down his life for us so that we might live, and so that we might be a sign to the world of the power of the coming kingdom of God."

It is for this cause, the Kingdom cause, that we too are called to follow Christ's example and to sacrifice; to give of ourselves at a cost, even a great cost. This was the mark of the widow's gift. And it is God's call to us.

And I fully believe that if we can truly engage in costly self-giving, with extravagant passion, then our service in Christ's name will be complete and we will come to know and experience in its fullest sense the Kingdom of God on earth, as it is in heaven.

Jesus tends to do that to some people. Has he ever had that effect on you?