

March 19, 2006
Dr. Lewis F. Galloway
Jeremiah 7:1-15, John 2:13-22

“A Passion for God”

The title of today's sermon, "A Passion for God," has caused me some anxiety. I don't usually pay too much attention to titles. As preachers, we are trained to think of the text, not the title. It is the word "passion" that concerns me. Does talking in the church about passion make you a bit uncomfortable? In a culture that has a juvenile fixation on sex and in a church that perpetually struggles to develop an adequate theology of human sexuality, we have a hard time knowing what passion is all about. As Presbyterians, we say that we do everything "decently and in order." Where does passion fit into the practice of our faith?

The word "passion" makes me uneasy for another reason. We see so much religious and political fanaticism that we are skeptical about any sort of passion. We are afraid of the emotions that demagogues stir up in their followers. Such passion leads people, in the name of God or politics, to deny the right of others to worship, or, to act violently against those who disagree with them. We have seen how religious passion can be manipulated to promote racism, abuse women and empower suicide bombers. William Butler Yeats, in his poem "The Second Coming," describes our time: "The best lack all conviction and the worst are full of passionate intensity." To consider that someone could kill another person in the name of God should make us think twice about religious passion.

Yet, the Bible speaks to us about God whose passionate love for us evokes an equally passionate response. Called by God to speak the word of God in the final days of Jerusalem, the prophet Jeremiah is a man of passion. He sees the ways in which the people go to the temple for reassurance without giving up their idolatries, stopping their exploitation of the poor or repenting of their immorality. They need religious rituals to prop up their illusions that everything about their lives is just fine and that God is on their side. They believe that, so long as the temple stands in Jerusalem, their enemies cannot harm them. Full of passion at the foolishness and hypocrisy of his people, Jeremiah stands at the gate of the Temple and warns the people not to trust in their vain imagination. He warns them not to think, just because everybody talks about "the temple of Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord," that such mistaken confidence in a building is going to save them ... God does not value external rituals when the human heart is corrupt. With passion, Jeremiah calls the people to change their ways. He calls them to practice justice, to live with integrity, to care for the poor, the widow, the alien and to let go of their idols. Jeremiah's passion leads people to God and away from all that devalues and destroys life. It is a God-affirming and life-affirming passion.

Like Jeremiah, Jesus' life is marked by a holy passion for God and for the people of God. In John's gospel, Jesus walks into the temple grounds, makes a whip of cords and launches an attack. He drives the money changers and the animal sellers out of the temple; he overturns the tables and spills the money on the ground. Jesus starts a riot in the house of

God for the sake of God. When the disciples remember this event, Psalm 69 comes to their minds: "Zeal for your house will consume me." The word "zeal" comes from a Greek root that means to boil. On that day in the temple, Jesus was boiling hot for God.

We have a hard time thinking of Jesus as a man of passion. We have difficulty seeing in him the same hopes, fears, desires, joys, dreams and sorrows that stir our souls. We say that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. Therefore, just as he shares a divine life with God, so he shares a human life with us. Some twenty years ago, when the film of Kazantzakis' novel, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, was made into a movie, many people were deeply troubled by the film. It depicted Jesus as having the same needs, temptations and desires that we do. Jesus is a man who loves his friends, rails at injustice, finds joy in simple things, has compassion for the outcasts, stands up to angry mobs and endures abuse and torture because of his love for God.

In John, the story of the cleansing of the temple is placed near the beginning of the gospel. The other three gospel writers place the story of the cleansing of the temple in the last week in the life of Jesus. For them, it is one of the events that leads to his crucifixion as a dangerous blasphemer who subverts the faith. By placing the story at the beginning of the gospel, John tells us from the beginning that Jesus will bring about sweeping change, a new understanding of faith and a new experience of God. Jesus says that God's house is no longer a holy place, but a house of business. Those who traffic in the paraphernalia of religion, but not religion's true heart, are driven out. Jesus says, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." Thinking that Jesus is speaking of Herod's temple, the Jewish leaders misunderstand. Jesus is speaking of his own life, death and resurrection. The death and resurrection of Jesus will be the sign that vindicates the new faith that Jesus proclaims. We call Holy Week, which is the culmination of the season of Lent, the Passion Story. The cleansing of the temple announces the passion of Jesus. He is the temple of the Lord. Through him and in him we come to worship God in spirit and in truth.

Have we become so tame in our faith, so lacking in passion, so conventional and so prosaic that we no longer bear, deep within our hearts, this passion for God? Presbyterians have jokingly been referred to as "God's frozen chosen" because of our historic rationality and disdain for strong emotion. Where do we show our zeal for the Lord? In the book of Revelation, the risen Christ speaks to the church in Laodicea, "Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth." Tepid Christianity is nauseating. Are we not the body of Christ, the church, the temple of the Holy Spirit? Are we not more than a marketplace where people trade in the baubles of religion, hide moral failure behind the thin veneer of piety and bless the status quo?

In recent years, the rock singer, Bono, has created quite a stir in political and religious circles because of his passion for God. He grew up in Dublin as the son of a Catholic father and a protestant mother. As a child, he knew both violence and poverty. He saw how faith could be destructive and violent. He learned later how faith could build a life of passion and purpose. His faith has led him to work for debt relief for the third world nations, an end to the African AIDS epidemic and an effort to eradicate global poverty. Last December, he was named Time magazine's Person of the Year. Last month, he

spoke at the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C., in the presence of President Bush, members of Congress, judges and other business and political leaders. When he spoke, he sounded more like the prophet Amos than a rock star. Bono said:

One of the things that I picked up from my father and my mother was the sense that religion often gets in the way of God. For me, at least, it got in the way. Seeing what religious people, in the name of God, did to my native land... and in this country, seeing God's second-hand car salesmen on the cable TV channels, offering indulgences for cash... in fact, all over the world, seeing the self-righteousness roll down like a mighty stream from certain corners of the religious establishment...

He cleansed the temple and then he went on to call for a spirit of compassion to lead us to generosity and justice for the suffering people of Africa. Bono's spiritual passion has led him to be a fierce advocate for God and for suffering people in God's world.

I believe there burns in the heart of this congregation a true passion for God. This passion for God does not make us irrational, sentimental or trivial, but wise, tough and full of zeal. When we are full of passion for God, we are not easily swayed by every new trend that blows through town; but we are single-minded in our dedication to fulfill the purposes of God. True passion does not make us intolerant of the convictions of others but helps us see God even in those with whom we disagree. We often think of John Calvin, the father of our Reformed faith, as a severe intellectual and cold man. This caricature of Calvin ignores his passionate convictions, the warmth of his heart and his compassionate spirit. We forget that image on Calvin's seal was the hand of God holding out a flaming heart.

I see this passion in your hearts. I see the flame of spiritual passion in those who are involved in Care Corps, a ministry of presence with those who are lonely, grieving, sick or in need. I see this passion in someone who is starting a new Bible study; I see it in our members who are working to establish a pre-school for at-risk children in the Westminster neighborhood, supporting a downtown ecumenical ministry to homeless youth, reaching out to victims of domestic violence or volunteering with our New Day program for families in the midst of divorce. God has given each one of us the gift of faith and many talents to use in serving others. Sometimes, all it takes is for the Holy Spirit to set our hearts on fire with a passion for God.

A long time ago, a member of the congregation I served in Norfolk told me that his spiritual life was dead. He went through the motions of the Christian life; but there was no fire in the altar of his heart. I urged him to do two things: get involved in some need beyond himself and spend time each day praying, reading the Bible and listening for God. He began to volunteer with a group of other men in the church at a hospitality house for seamen who came to Norfolk on cargo ships from all over the world. He got up early to pray and read the Bible. For a month, nothing changed. Two months passed. Three months. Then I began to notice a new spark of life in him. He seemed genuinely concerned for the seamen he met who were far from home. He began to connect what he read in the Bible and what he experienced in prayer with his work at the hospitality house and his relationships with others. God lit a the fire of holy passion in his heart.

In our closing hymn "Spirit of God, Descend Upon My Heart," we will sing the familiar words:

Teach me to love Thee as Thine angels love,
One holy passion filling all my frame;
The baptism of the heaven descended dove,
My heart an altar, and Thy love the flame.

True passion leads us to take risks for God, share our faith, welcome visitors, practice compassion, give sacrificially and love with abandon. God has built an altar in your heart. All it takes is for the fire of the Holy Spirit to light its flame.