

Wrestling with: A Life of Passion
Sermon by Fred Joblin, St. Paul's United Church, Orillia
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Matthew 12 to Matthew 26

The last week of Jesus' life is described in detail in the book, *The Last Week of Jesus*, by Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan. I highly recommend it if you haven't already read it. In it, the authors describe how the events of that week connect to the political, religious, and economic issues of the time.

For example, the humble, peasant procession of Jesus riding a lowly donkey would have contrasted sharply that day with the pompous, imperial procession of soldiers on war-horses. For this was the occasion of the Jewish Passover holiday, when thousands of people converged on the city, and the imperial procession reminded people of Rome's domination and power.

Jesus' challenge of imperial and temple authority, starting right away with the cleansing of the temple, got him into serious trouble, and eventually led to his being disposed of just a week later. During that week his words and actions gave his followers much to ponder and celebrate, as well as fear, for once it became clear what was about to happen to Jesus, even his closest friends would, of course, desert him—well, except for the women, that is.

Normally, the "passion of Christ" refers to his suffering and dying, which is what Mel Gibson focussed entirely on in his movie, *The Passion of Christ*, giving us no sense whatever of the man and his motivations and inner state of mind and being. We have to explore the broader meaning of the word "passion" to get any sense of these things, and this broader meaning has to do with what he was passionate about: God and the realm of God—in other words, God's dream of a world of justice and peace brought about by love and compassion and nonviolence. So let's look at a few of the events of that week to explore what it may have meant for him—and what it may mean for us—to live this kind of passion.

The cleansing of the temple is the first burst of passion he demonstrates after entering Jerusalem. Why would he rush in and drive out all those who were selling and buying, and overturn the tables of the moneychangers? To understand, we need to know that by this time, the temple—a place traditionally associated with teaching and prayer and ritual—had become the centre of local collaboration with Rome. A few religious leaders ruled at the top and were wealthy and powerful, and their challenge was to be loyal to Rome in order to maintain their position, while not angering their Jewish subjects. They would waste little time in disposing of anyone who messed with their sweet but tricky arrangement.

Jesus was challenging this domination system in which the rich got richer and more powerful, and the poor got poorer and more dispossessed. Sounds rather familiar! As Borg and Crossan describe it, Jesus was symbolically shutting down the temple in order to protest how empty worship had replaced justice.

Jesus' challenge is also a challenge to us. As wonderful as worship is, it can indeed be a replacement for the work we have been called to do. Pierre Berton wrote years ago about the "comfortable pew" being a place where many people take refuge and do not go forth from it as Christ in the world. The message from this is clear: worship goes beyond a gathering such as ours here today; it includes a passionate commitment to live in God's way and bring justice to this world.

Throughout the week, Jesus is himself challenged on many occasions and subjected to trick questions. Having no official training and having a peasant background, he would have zero credibility in the eyes of those in "official" authority. It would be like a street person entering the hallowed halls of a university and speaking and acting as a professor. Not a bad idea!

This suggests to me that each one of us, no matter our perceived stature in the community, has the God-given right to speak our minds on issues of concern, share our hearts as we seek healing and wholeness in our community, and seek to meet the basic and spiritual needs of people here and around the world. We don't lack for those kinds of passionate people in Orillia—and many of them are right here at St. Paul's!

The most famous trick question posed to Jesus by some religious leaders is whether or not it is lawful to pay taxes to Rome. If he says no, he could be charged with sedition: denying Roman authority. If he says yes, the people in the crowd would go against him, since they resented Roman rule and taxation. On Jesus' request, his questioners show him a denarius, a Roman coin with the emperor's image on it—a coin no self-respecting Jews would carry or use, as they used another kind of coin with no graven image. Thus the questioners would be discredited as collaborators with the Romans for carrying such a coin—even before Jesus gives his famous reply, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." The coin may belong to Caesar, but to the Jewish listeners who knew that everything belongs to God, they would know that nothing, in fact, belongs to Caesar.

The implications for us are consistent with Jewish and Aboriginal traditions: everything belongs to God. We own nothing. We are stewards of what land and possessions we may have, but not owners, despite what our culture emphasizes to the contrary. Since all people belong to God's family, giving to God what is God's implies making sure all people are taken care of; all people are included in community; all are considered worthy of love and compassion.

As the week progressed, Judas apparently became more and more uncomfortable with what Jesus was saying and doing. Perhaps he was afraid they would all be killed and Jesus' little movement would end right there. Perhaps he became convinced that non-violent resistance would not work. Perhaps he hoped Jesus might be put in prison for a bit, be let out sometime soon, and they could all return to Galilee and carry on as before. Or maybe he thought the 30 pieces of silver could actually be used for some better good. But let's not forget that the other disciples also betrayed him, Peter most clearly of all, by refusing to acknowledge he even knew Jesus.

There is a kind of passion in what the disciples are doing here, but it's a passion more for self-preservation than for following a cause through at any cost. We can spend a huge amount of energy in self-protection, in looking for our own happiness, in seeking what we want out of life.

However, if our passion is to do God's will, not our own, everything changes. We look at what we can give, not what we can get. We go beyond anything reasonable to give to others. We think of children around the world as if they were our own children, and we act in accordance with that. We ask ourselves: what is it that we would give our very lives for?

With the Passover meal—known to us as the Last Supper—Jesus has one last intimate time with the people who have misunderstood him and who will betray him and desert him. It's an amazing moment of remembering the Hebrew story of bondage, deliverance, and liberation from Egypt while at the same time inviting the disciples to participate with him in death and resurrection. Just as the Hebrew people found new life once they were free, so Jesus' followers would be free by following the path that leads through death to new life.

How often are we like the disciples, caught up in fear and ego and unable to follow the path we know we are called to follow? How often do we take the easy way out, or refuse to take responsibility for our actions, or hope someone else will do that needed job, or let a friend down, or avoid someone new in church, or put fences up between ourselves and others who are different, or give just a little when we could give a lot?

The good news is that Jesus would also welcome us to the table regardless. His passionate love for others was not dependent on their attitudes or actions. He loved them anyway and trusted that new life would come even to them. Just so, God's passionate love for us is not dependent on our attitudes or actions. God trusts that new life will come to us as well as we follow the path of love, even if the consequences mean suffering and death. The breaking of the bread, symbolizing the breaking of his body, and the sharing of the cup, symbolizing his blood that would be shed, mean the same thing for us as for them: trust that the path Jesus invites us to take with him will lead to new life.

After the meal comes the blur of events that take Jesus on his journey of prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, his arrest, his interrogations, his flogging, and his death by cruel crucifixion. Even in his deepest suffering, he remains true to himself and to his calling—still loving, still fully feeling, still forgiving, still accepting, still trusting.

And so it is with us. Even in our deepest suffering, be it from physical or mental or emotional pain, abandonment, betrayal, rejection, unjust treatment, losses of many kinds, disappointments, confusion, regrets, or great sadness, the Christ spirit calls us to be true to our calling to be still loving, still fully feeling, still forgiving, still accepting, still trusting. The promise is that new life will come, even if it seems impossible in the moment.

What are some signs in our times of this same life of passion that Jesus lived—and of new life coming in the face of seemingly impossible odds? The signs are everywhere, which is good news, because if we're going to survive the challenges of our time and bring about real justice and peace and sustainability on this troubled earth, we need what Eckhart Tolle calls a "widespread flowering of new consciousness." It's no longer enough, he says, to have just a few individuals like Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., the Dalai Lama, Mother Teresa, and Nelson Mandela to show us the way and bring about transformation. We need hundreds—thousands—millions of us to have their same passion for a new earth that lets

go of what Tolle calls “egoic illusions” of power, control, and attachment to things, including our minds—and to embrace a higher calling. This higher calling means the focus shifts from ourselves to what God wants us to do, trusting that God will be with us all the way.

I mentioned that the signs of this shift are all around us. The examples I’d like to close with all come from yesterday’s *Toronto Star*. Of course, there was the usual news of passions gone awry with sex scandals, abuses, and violence, but these other stories give me great hope that the passion Jesus had is alive and well in the lives of many, many people.

First was the story of the Tibetan monks demonstrating courageously for freedom from political oppression and religious restrictions. Second was an item telling of 35 students from a Jewish school spending their March break in New Orleans helping with the reconstruction of homes. I saw with interest that the *United Church Observer* is joining together with the *Humanist Association of Canada* to help pay for the Darwin exhibit at the Royal Ontario Museum, together providing \$90 000, when 40 to 50 corporations who were regular ROM sponsors refused, not wanting to put themselves in a “potentially controversial position”! Then there was the uplifting story of Justin Hines, wheelchair-bound from an early age and now becoming a successful musician; his mother did not give up on him, singing to him as a way of communicating from an early age. I was struck by the story of a former homeless woman, Lia Grimanis, now a successful businesswoman, who is advocating for a homelessness shelter in her upscale Toronto neighbourhood. Last, there was the story of Bob Kemp, the unofficial mayor of the St. Lawrence Market neighbourhood, who liases with the local police, politicians, residents, and associations to keep peace; who organizes toy and food bank drives, who organizes the putting up of hanging flower baskets, and who hires low-income hostel residents to keep the area looking good.

The news is just as good here in Orillia and in every community in the globe, even where great suffering is taking place. The Christ-spirit lives in all those who reach out to care, who never give up no matter the obstacles, who welcome the stranger, who feed the hungry, who forgive and reconcile, who sit with those who are suffering and dying, who pray for peace and well-being, who do more than their part in caring for the earth, who accept whatever the consequences may be from their actions, and who live from a place of love.

As we now move into Holy Week and join Jesus on the journey to death and new life, may we let go of any fear, any ego, any sense of limitations, and fully embrace the path God is choosing for us. By the passionate power of the Christ spirit, may it be so! Amen.