

19 July 2015 (8<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost/16<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time)  
Lafayette Presbyterian Church  
**“United By a Common Passion”**  
Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

The most successful, and certainly the most cohesive, groups are united by a common passion. Prevailing wisdom would say that when people are able to look beyond their individual interests to a single goal, they are not only more powerful, they are also joyful because of their unity. Success and harmony are difficult byproducts to argue with: part of the reason why unified groups are so successful is that their energy isn't being drained by constant division and infighting. The members are able to apply their efforts to accomplishing the common passion they share. For young people who go through basic military training, it is the first time many of them experience the power and meaning of functioning as a team, and the joy of sacrificing their personal desires for the good of the whole. When a group gathers to build a Habitat for Humanity house, or to cook Thanksgiving dinner for the homeless, or to push through legislation that will benefit others' lives, the individuals involved in such efforts are proud of what they've done. All the hard work and long hours they've contributed pale in comparison to the final outcome, and the shared joy of life together. These experiences in which we are united by a common passion often restore our faith in human nature and remind us of humanity at its best.

But of course, not all commonly held passions are healthy. Hitler's Germany was united by a common passion for the Nazi Party, and we wouldn't want to repeat that experiment. ISIS unites its members with a common passion, and they're devoted to nihilism. Ask any family member of a loved one who has died in service to a cult—like the 900 followers of Jim Jones who committed mass suicide in 1978—and they will tell you that unity derived from a common passion can be deadly. How do we decide what to sell our souls to? What is worth sacrificing our individual lives and interests for? When we bear collective witness to our faith, and tell the world that Jesus makes us one body—first of all, do we really believe that? And then, what does it mean to us that Jesus makes us one, with all of our individual differences, interests, ages, and backgrounds? Aside from the fact that we may actually like being around one another, to be unified by a common passion for Christ is not a function of interpersonal compatibility. What, then, is it?

The context for the two short passages we have heard this morning from Mark Chapter 6 is one of extreme stress and hardship. Jesus' ministry is not being universally embraced. The memory of John the Baptist's execution still haunts Judaea's halls of power and hangs like a cloud of uncertainty over people's perception of the Messiah. Everywhere Jesus goes, he and his disciples are overwhelmed by need: hunger, illness, anxiety, strife. The disciples have gone out to various towns and villages and transformed many people's lives with miracles of healing, but the needs just won't quit. In his sublime wisdom, Jesus can see the impact that the pace of this ministry is having on his disciples, so he invites them away to a deserted place where they can re-gather themselves, restore their energies, and at least have a chance to eat.

The great idea of a break, however, is short-lived. As the crowds find out where Jesus has gone, they manage to head him and the disciples off at the pass and arrive at the so-called deserted place ahead of them. Through Mark's narrative we feel the intensity of the crowds, and we wonder what Jesus will do to handle them. As it turns out, so do the disciples. In one of the most memorable verses in the Gospels, Jesus is described as looking upon all these people with great compassion, for he sees them as sheep without a shepherd. The ministry goes on without that much-needed break.

Now, in between the continuous parade of urgent human need that follows Jesus wherever he goes, Mark sandwiches the feeding of the five thousand on the desolate hillside, and Jesus' walking on the water as the disciples cross the Sea of Galilee during a rough passage. The two sets of verses we heard earlier are the slices of bread, if you will, and in between are two extraordinary manifestations of Jesus' presence and power. But it is the two slices of bread—the persistent pursuit of the crowds, pulling on Jesus, pushing against him, insisting on his involvement in their lives—that surround and enclose the essence of Jesus, as demonstrated in the breaking of bread in the middle of nowhere, and the transcending of natural forces at sea. That image of the human and divine Jesus enclosed and surrounded by people is the enduring image of our common passion as the children of God. If we want to know and understand the source of our common passion and how it unifies us, this image tells us. What unifies us is clinging to Christ as though our lives depended on him—which they do. It is when we look to Christ alone in our need that we are unified. That commonly acknowledged need for Christ is what makes us one body.

It has been my observation over the years that one of the key vulnerabilities of church life is a tendency toward clubishness. As people form close relationships and friendships, especially over many years together, it is easy to drift into the mindset that what unites us is each other. After all, we pray for each another, we share each other's joys and sorrows, and we know each other's families and histories. Even when we fight or disagree, it is like any family: we tend to return to those with whom we share strong bonds forged over time, and they are what we think of when we think of the church. In the words of the time-honored hymn, "Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love; the fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above." Seeing our relationships with others as the foundation of our life together in the church may seem so obvious as to be hardly worth pointing out. And yet, our relationships with each other are secondary to our primary relationship with Christ. What we actually share in common is a passion for Christ as the ultimate source of our healing and transformation, not for each other. For as soon as we lose our common passion in Christ, we not only lose our spiritual unity, we also turn the church into something other than the Body of Christ. Instead of our life together being all about Christ's power and essence, it turns into all about us.

Many years ago I was asked to serve as Moderator of the Session of a small church that was struggling to remain afloat. Their building was old and had issues. The neighborhood around them had changed a lot, and most of the members were driving 30 minutes across town to attend this church that they loved. As a congregation, they were declining in numbers and increasing in age. But the primary cause of their difficulties

had started long before. Over time, one family had come to dominate the decision-making and hold the reins of power. As the membership decreased, this particular family reacted by closing the circle and consolidating power. By the time I came along to serve as Moderator, the church was effectively a family owned and operated franchise. And the church was dying, not so much for lack of numbers as lack of a commonly shared passion for Christ. The underlying unity of that church was grounded in family ties and relationships. As a church, their lives depended less on Christ than they did on each other.

The urge to consolidate power unto ourselves, or to view the church as primarily our undertaking, represents a failure to acknowledge the depth of our need to cling to Christ. This failure is endemic to our human nature. Our natural tendency is to claim control and power over our lives. But what the Gospel of Mark reminds us is that we cannot heal ourselves, nor can we heal each other. Only Christ can heal and transform us, and only our common passion for Christ to do that can unite us. The wonderful passage in 2 Samuel about King David wanting so badly to build a house for God is a cautionary tale about getting the roles reversed between God and ourselves. We love David's heart of compassion and energy to honor God, to pay tribute to God with the building of a house of cedar. But through the prophet Nathan, God reminds David that he doesn't need a building, because a physical structure can never contain God's dynamic presence and power. What is more, God says, "That's my job, to build a house for you, to establish the people of God as a kingdom that will never end."

Building the church is not up to us—it is not our job. It is Christ who heals and transforms, Christ who is our common passion, and Christ who unifies us in our need. In this vein, the Apostle Paul wrote to remind the Ephesians of who they used to be. "Remember," he says, "that you used to be enemies and aliens with respect to God, but are no longer." Why? Because of anything great that they did? No—it was only because of Christ's sacrifice that they now enjoyed peace and reconciliation with God. In our life together, especially in a rapidly changing culture that we struggle to engage and often feel at odds with, and in a suffering society whose wounds are severe and painful, we must always and continually return to the ground of our being. We must surround and cling to Christ the way the crowds in Mark's Gospel clung to him and would not let him go, heading him off at the pass if need be so that we not let him out of our sight. No other common passion can unite us as the church, for no other common passion can reverse our natural human tendency to want to live life our way on our terms. We are the holy temple God promised King David, the body Christ has promised to join together and build spiritually, the people whom God has made, whom Christ unites in a common passion, and whom the Holy Spirit sustains.



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