



Date: Oct 25, 2015

Title: "The Best Parts of You, #3: Your Passion

Scripture: Mark 14

The muscles just under our taut skin twitched with anticipation. We were thoroughbred race horses, trembling with pent-up energy, seconds before the starting bell. "They're off!" would be the Handle's Messiah to our eager ears.

Our second grade class had behaved well that day—or possibly our teacher, Ms. Lemon, was just done with us. As a reward, she had led us down the hall to the front door of the school early to await dismissal. The "five 'til" bell had not even sounded. That was the bell that alerted other teachers to line up their ordinary classes for the end-of-day signal that rang promptly at three o'clock. Yet here, on this special occasion, our class was already in place before others had closed their books, strapped on backpacks, and straightened desks. Trembling with expectancy, we savored the moments before "school was out, school was out!"

At the front of the line—could one be any more blessed than to be chosen for the front of the line on this special day?—I gazed down the stairs at the school busses, their motors rumbling, pre-dawn tanks armed for battle. I watched with envy as the safety patrol—elite sixth-graders with yellow flags on sticks and silver badges on white belts—assembled in formation. "Someday," I resolved. My breathing grew more rapid.

Suddenly the bell rang. Freedom! Shrieking with unbridled joy, I hit the bar on the door and attained full speed within two steps. I did not descend the stairs, I flew, arms waving for balance, the soles of my Keds striving for traction as they landed on every fourth step.

It was my first experience of public humiliation. Within two seconds, I realized something was badly wrong. For some reason, I was alone. To my side, I could see the school principal, mouth pursed, striding towards me. Behind me, at the top of the stairs, I heard 28 classmates stifling their giggles. Everything decelerated to slow motion as I grasped the horrible reality.

I had responded to the “five ‘til” bell. School would not be dismissed for another five...eternities. “Oh.”

You compose the next paragraph of this sermon. You can do the next part of this sermon yourself, for you have been there—in the cafeteria, the fraternity party, the office staff meeting, church. Describe the tender and gentle response of every other student in school, now gathered at the front doors. Give words to the principal’s lips, starting with “What is going on here?” Portray the safety patrol, springing into action. Feel free to use the term, “humiliation”.

Thus was seared into my life the policy —“Put a lid on it.” This has served me well when considering how many accessories to include in my new car purchase, when choosing how much to drink at the Christmas party, when composing that angry email. “Put a lid on it.”

I have also spent every day trying to evoke its opposite imperative: “Let ‘er rip!” When I reach the peak of a mountain trail and try to absorb the beauty of what lies before me. When I rose to greet the first notes at the Led Zeppelin concert or the PHPC choir’s Christmas program. Whenever I come across an opportunity to do an act of kindness. Whenever I feel an impulse to be generous. When I worship or pray. Every single time I encounter God’s presence or employ my faith. “Let ‘er rip!”

Every single Children’s Sermon on every single Sunday is my personal attempt to repeat that moment of crazy-making that I experienced on the front steps of Park Lowry Elementary School. I am not merely teaching children Bible stories; I am trying to unlearn and relearn my own self this single mantra: when it comes to things of God, let ‘er rip!

“Why was this ointment wasted in this way?...And they scolded her.” (Mark 14:5) Oh, perfumed lady with no name, I admire you so. The scolding you received I have heard both from within my own self and from outside. “Doesn’t this woman have a lick of sense? Where is her decorum? Do not go off half-cocked, crazy. We’re over budget and have incurred unexpected expenses. Do you know what the experts are saying about the stock bubble and the weakness of the Euro and the future costs of college and retirement? What was she thinking? Decently and in order! Decently and in order!”

I hear you: that perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor. Yes, but it hasn’t been, has it? That money still sits in your pockets, waiting in case the flower fund falls short this quarter.

Annie Dillard, one of my favorites, says this about her craft of writing, which I apply to preparing a sermon: “One of the few things I know about writing is this: spend it all. Shoot it, play it, use it. Do not hoard what is good for a later place in the book or another book. Give it. Give it all, give it now. The impulse to save it for another place later is God’s signal to spend it now. Something more will arrive later, something better will arrive later. These things fill from behind, from beneath, like well-water. Similarly, the impulse to keep to yourself what you have...is self-destructive. Anything you do not give freely and abundantly is lost to you. You open your safe and find...ashes.”

I think Annie Dillard was actually telling us about faith, and the practice of generosity. Spend it all. Shoot it, play it, lose it, give it all and give it now. If church is one of your ways to connect with God, you cannot do church extravagantly when you’re living off your own mortgaged spiritual IRA, playing it close to the vest, on the cheap. Let’s face it, the very heart of faith is—sheer unbridled extravagance. People out there are reeling; not knowing which way is up. Sometimes you have to break it open and pour it all over their heads—the unbridled love of God.

The cloud of the Great Depression hung over East Tennessee Appalachia in my formative years, penetrating my spirit like coal dust into miners’ lungs. “Shun extravagance” both emotionally and financially. Remain cautious.

For the health of my spirit and to allow joy to bloom in my heart, I resist that programming. You cannot act frugally in all things, especially the things of God. You have to act like you’re on a yacht in the Mediterranean, at the high stakes table in Vegas, or at Disney World with a child holding your hand. Or the Kingdom of God, that would work.

There needs to be one place in our life when we don’t live within our means—that place is when we come before God. Let ‘er rip! Nothing measured out, nothing calculated, nothing offered cautiously, just a glorious expanse of praise and thanksgiving. Show the world, show yourself what it means to live like a precious child of God. Go and live! This is the time to break open your faith and pour it all out over Christ’s head. Don’t hold it back.

Generosity is going to look and feel extravagant. It’s going to look like waste. The appropriate amount of giving to God is always going to feel extravagant. That’s the purpose! Not to raise the budget so that the church can meet expenses, but to set you free from your fear and caution and anxious carefulness. Tell those voices inside you to hush.

The woman took all of it she had and smashed it to pieces, which was pretty amazing. She broke it. She didn’t crack it like an egg; she pulverized it. Same word as used in the Greek Old Testament for what Moses did with the stone tablets when he came down from Mt. Sinai and saw the golden calf. The same word for what the lunatic in the graveyard did to his chains. Breaking open the alabaster jar is like

breaking the chains that bind you, like crushing the bones that haunt you. Like smashing stone tablets over the backs of idols. That kind of breaking isn't an accident, it isn't something you can accomplish cautiously. You gotta mean it. You have to sweat for it. You gotta go a little crazy, a little overboard. Jesus called it "beautiful".¹

For those of you who have not yet signed on to our generosity program this month, I need to be very focused: I am talking expressly about money. Our economy is geared to keep us unaware and blind to how money strangles us. Vegas and Disney, two of the only places where we are encouraged to consciously and deliberately go extravagantly overboard. Other places we are implored to spend unwisely, but never to recognize it, never to be aware of what we are doing. Church is the only place that urges you to practice deliberate, conscious, extravagant generosity. That kind of extravagance will set you free.

A pledge will help you do what you know is right, what will set you free, what God invites you to do in this moment, then carry through with in in action. An alternative to making a pledge might be to follow the woman's example: simply give everything, 100% right now in the moment. That'll set you free!

If that's more freedom than you feel would be healthy for you, try a third way. Reach a financial decision that feels faithful and appropriate and put it in writing on a pledge card. Practice it as you feel your spirit growing strong the way your body does when you increase the weight on the barbell. Then keep alert for opportunities ahead to be impulsively generous in a good way. Tithe your end of year bonus, your income tax refund, any unexpected windfall. You can be disciplined and go crazy both! Then watch God meet you like a personal trainer re-molding you and like a singing birthday card, bursting you with laughter at unlikely places.

Our symbol of generosity this year is a tree, a tree blossoming with leaves. The beginning of our story, when we had God's creative fingerprints fresh on us, took place in a garden filled with trees. Our culmination, the final city of God, like our own city of Atlanta, has a river flowing through it. And at the river grows the tree of life. Be part of the tree this year. Put a pledge card in the box. Then write your name on a leaf and attach the leaf to the tree which is in our Gathering Area.

This is a perfect time to look around and find out what's bleeding you dry. A perfect time to smash a jar open. It's the toughest thing you'll ever do. The bravest thing we do is face what we've been carrying around and bottling up that we know is death for us and the most amazing love we ever know flows through us like a mountain stream and like. When we let it go and clear out the mess and live in the joy that God creates.

It does not come automatically when you've been at the budget meeting.

Go smash a jar. Just pulverize it. And go pour that thing all over Jesus' head. This is the perfect time. And whenever the gospel is told, what that woman did, not

what she believed or what she prayed or what she preached — what she *did* is told in honor of her.

1. Much of this sermon, and this paragraph in particular, was inspired by and taken from a sermon preached by Anna Carter Florence at the Festival for Homiletics in 2004.