
FOLLOW THE PASSION
MATTHEW 16:21-28
A SERMON PREACHED AT DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
ON SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 3, 2023
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I mentioned last Sunday that at the start of another academic year, especially for new students, there are lots of questions being asked about Duke and one another. As you walk this journey of faith and learning and discovery—and this is true for all of us here, the GenZers and the Gen-Olders—at some point, someone may ask you or you’ve been asked, “What is your passion?” Meaning, what do you deeply care about in life or work? What do you love to do? What wakes you up in the morning and excites you or what keeps you up late at night? What’s that thing you cannot not do? Your answer to these questions is probably linked to your passion.

Some are passionate about closing the gap on health disparities and outcomes in hypertension. Others are passionate about assessing climate change risk of rural coastal plain communities. Some are passionate about hip hop pedagogies and education for citizenship in Brazil and the United States. This is how we normally talk about passion. Your passion or my passion. Or the “Take my breath away” kind of romantic passion.

But is this what passion really is? I raise this question because the word ‘passion’ is rooted in a Latin word that means ‘to suffer.’ Passion is more than emotions or about feeling good. When someone asks, ‘What is your passion?’ they are asking, ‘What are you willing to suffer for?’ To take it even a step further, when you’re passionate about something, you’re willing to die for it. So if someone asks you, “What are you passionate about?” they’re asking, ‘are you willing to die?’

This becomes even clearer when we listen to Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. “Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” Oh Lord, why is Dean Powery already talking about being killed and we haven’t even had our first exam yet? Hear me out. This is the first out of four of what have been called the ‘passion predictions’ of Jesus. They’re called that because Jesus talks about his suffering and death, his passion. Holy Week, the week beginning with Palm Sunday stretching to Easter, is often called Passion Week, the week of his suffering and death that leads to his resurrection. So if you want to know what real passion is, look at Jesus. He shows us that when you’re passionate about something, you’re willing to die for it.

Passion doesn’t make sense to everyone, and so some might stand in the way of your passion and *the* passion. They might think you’re nuts to pursue a certain direction or a particular task or what they deem to be a risk. There are people even with good intentions like the disciple Peter who get in the way of your purpose or passion or what Jesus is doing in the world or in your life. Of all people, the model disciple Peter gets in the way of Jesus. After Jesus gives his prediction, Peter rebukes him and says, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." Peter is trying to correct the Messiah? That’s worse than trying to correct a professor! Peter pulled Jesus aside and got bold and uppity with him because who Jesus was as the Messiah didn’t match with Peter’s conception of the Messiah, especially that dying part.

On one level, you can’t blame Peter for not wanting Jesus to suffer and die at the hands of an angry mob. He “hates what is evil.” And haven’t we seen enough violence in the world already like this past week’s shooting at UNC-Chapel Hill? We know that humans kill one another in Jacksonville and Jerusalem; they even killed Jesus. Unfortunately, violence is an ancient human practice. I can’t blame Peter for not wanting his Lord to suffer and die in this way or at all, as he sings a rendition of “Let There be Peace on Earth.”

But on another level, sometimes we, Christians, followers of Jesus, can get in Jesus’s way, and become a stumbling block to his passion and desires for us. It’s the irony that sometimes we can get in the way of the thing, of the people, of God—the ones who can help us the most, the ones who love us the most, like Jesus.

Jesus possesses the strength and courage to love no matter what, even in the face of disciples who try to get in the way of his passionate decision. He knows that to love means to suffer and yet has the courage to move forward

toward his violent end on a cross at the hands of religious and civic leaders, people like us. His is the real passion, so passionate he's willing to die for it. "What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul?/What wondrous love is this, O my soul!/What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss/to bear the dreadful curse for my soul, for my soul/to bear the dreadful curse for my soul." Genuine and wondrous love. To love is a call to die. This is true passion.

Notice that I don't call this sermon 'follow your passion' but 'follow the passion,' meaning follow the way of Jesus. We like to follow each other on Instagram or Twitter or LinkedIn. We like to have our own social media followers. But Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." There is surely suffering in the Christian life when you follow the passion of Christ. We're called to be "patient in suffering." There are crosses to bear. There are hard times. There's pain. There's agony. But, it's a suffering that includes an overcoming of it. We're also called to "rejoice in hope" so there is suffering or struggle *and* hope, sorrow and joy, lamentation and celebration, a crucifixion and a resurrection. Jesus will be killed as he predicts but he also says he'll be raised. As we hear in the letter to the Romans, "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us" (Rom. 8:18).

But even more than this, the passion is where we find life in a strange way. The passion is about suffering and death for sure but there is also life. "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?" Our ears should be ringing with life, life, life, life. Yet Peter is so distraught over the impending death of Jesus, he's only focused on strife, strife, strife, strife; he may not even hear everything else Jesus has to say.

And we may be so distraught over the cacophony of death all around us that we don't even hear the word 'life.' We only hear the bad news. We fixate on the problems and the controversies. We give high ratings to trauma and political drama. But if we follow the passion, we'll see that there's more than death. "Life" in this literary biblical setting is a word that means breath or soul. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their breath? Or what will they give in return for their breath?" We live in a society where we've heard in recent years human beings desperately say, "I can't breathe." Breath is so precious that without it, we can't live. And we typically think— no breath, then death. But when you follow the passion of Jesus through his death, that is where you find your breath. The passion is a death but also a breath, a breath of fresh air, a breath of new life. A breath of the Holy Spirit where you regain your wind. A breath of resurrection. Life. Breath.

The Common Experience book that the Duke community was invited to read over the summer is titled *The Measure*. Its plot involves all adults in the world receiving a string that shows how long their lives will be. As we follow the characters in the novel, we learn that some of them are "short-stringers" — that is, people who've learned in advance that their lives will be cut short. The drama of the book stems from this revelation and it raises the question, 'How do you live if you know your time is short?' It leans in on the idea that living long is not the same as living well. Even at the beginning of the book, a poetic line from Mary Oliver is highlighted: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

Tell me, what is it you plan to do this academic year with your one wild and precious life? Follow your passion or follow the passion? The latter says something not only about the purpose and meaning of your life, but it is the path to life. Follow the passion of Christ. It will be a death but it is also where you'll find your breath. So come to this table and breathe.