

A Passionate Church

18th Weekend in Kingdomtide – September 17/18, 2005

Sermon Background Study

1 Peter 2:4-5, 9-10 (NRSV)

⁴Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and ⁵like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

⁹But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

¹⁰Once you were not a people,
but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.

Romans 12:9-18 (NRSV)

⁹Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

In recent weeks, we've sought to become more passionate disciples of Jesus Christ. Today, we consider what it means to become a more passionate church.

Something big

Read through any company's annual reports over the years and you'll find a common theme. Every year is "momentous" and "without precedent." Every year, according to the reports, management is faced with difficulties and challenges that have never been seen before. Listen to politicians and pundits. Even theologians and teachers. It seems that we always want to believe that we live in momentous times, perhaps the most important period in our nation's, or company's, or church's history. Why? Why is it so important for us to believe we face challenges greater than anyone has faced before us?

I think it is because we all want to be part of something big. We want to be part of something

God's Colonies

The Roman Empire was like none that had come before. Controlling an empire that stretched from the British isles to the Euphrates river was difficult for the Roman governors, even with the Roman legions available. One strategy Rome used to extend its influence, particularly in the border regions, was to establish Roman colonies, often populated with retired veterans from the legions. For example, Corinth in Greece was destroyed by the Romans in one century but then rebuilt as a colony in the next.

The administration of these colonies was modeled on Rome's government. The laws were Roman laws. The citizens of these colonies were considered to be Roman citizens with all the attendant privileges. The colonists did not expect to return to Rome when their work was done. They were there to consolidate and extend Rome's empire. They were there to stay.

For Paul and the early Christians, every new Christian community, every house church that they formed, was a colony of God's kingdom. It was to be governed by God's law. The members of the community were citizens of heaven. They were there to consolidate and extend God's kingdom. They were there to be the light to the world and a witness to God's love and ongoing work in the world.

The Christians who made up these communities were not merely people who had come together to do good work for others or to enjoy each other's fellowship, though there was plenty of both. The Christians had been born of water and the Spirit (see John 3). They were the ones upon whom the ends of the ages had come (1 Corinthians 10:11). They stood at the very point in time at which God had broken into history in the person of Jesus. In Paul's letters to these churches, he very often grabs them by the metaphorical collar, hoping to make them realize who they really are and who had brought them together.

We, at St. Andrew, are no less one of God's colonies. We too are citizens of heaven called by God for a purpose. And, frankly, that purpose is not about making ourselves into happier people. We are God's colonists so that we might, in Peter's words, "proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

that transcends the ordinariness of our daily lives. We need to believe that our lives and our work *really* matter. Thus, it is all the more odd that many Christians so easily marginalize “church.” Church becomes a place to see friends for a little while on Sunday morning, or a place where we come to learn a little more about how to be nice or how to be happy – but certainly nothing BIG.

In the first of today’s Scripture passages, Peter blows out of the water all attempts to marginalize church and faith. Christians, he writes, are a community chosen and formed by God so that we might proclaim God to the world, so that all those who are blind to God’s “mighty acts” might see the truth. Re-read the passage from 1 Peter. If Peter’s words don’t make your heart race at least a bit, then perhaps you’ve yet to find much of the passion we’ve been talking about in recent weeks. God desires for us to be passionate disciples *so that* we might be a passionate church *so that* we may effectively proclaim God to the world what we say and in what we do – in who we are. Peter wrote to encourage Christians who were being persecuted and shunned. He sought to strengthen their resolve by reminding them of their true identities. They were the people of God, God’s colonists as it were, who would never be abandoned by God and whose purpose could never be diminished. We are no less the people of God, chosen for a purpose larger than ourselves.

What’s a passionate church look like?

Like Peter, Paul wanted to help the newly-formed Christian communities grasp their true identity. Also like Peter, Paul would go on to teach these communities what it meant to live as God’s people. This was not about showing the Christians how to be happy or even nice. All of Paul’s teachings about Christian

“A living stone . . . like living stones”

In 1 Peter 2, from which today’s passage was drawn, Peter piles image upon image, metaphor upon metaphor. Peter begins by comparing the Christians to newborn infants who need “pure, spiritual milk” to grow up. What is that milk? Jesus, of course.

Then, Peter urges the Christians to come to Jesus, a “living stone.” This stone has been evaluated by the world and found wanting, rejected and tossed aside. But, in truth, this living stone is precious beyond measure, chosen by God for God’s purposes. Too much of the world is simply wrong about Jesus.

And as Jesus is the living stone, so are Christians “like living stones.” We participate in the life of Christ. We are called to the imitation of Christ. Earlier in the letter, Peter quotes from Leviticus: “You shall be holy, as I am holy.” We, like living stones, are being built into a house, a “spiritual house,” of which Jesus is the cornerstone (v. 6). Those who reject the cornerstone stumble and fall, but those who respond in obedient faith are “a chosen people, a royal priesthood.”

In his commentary on 1 Peter, David Bartlett writes, “the difference between Christians and non-Christians is not that we see different things, but that we see the same things differently. Those who believe and those who do not both see Jesus Christ, the rock. For believers, that rock is the cornerstone or the capstone of their lives as individuals and in community. For unbelievers, that rock is simply to be rejected. What makes the difference between the two ways of seeing is faith.”

behavior can be summed up in this way: do what builds up the community, do what is a good witness to those on the outside, avoid what tears down the community, and avoid what is a bad witness. For Paul, contributing to the needs of others and showing hospitality (v. 13) are good acts in themselves, but they are part of the larger purpose. Generosity and kindness proclaim to others God’s goodness and power.

I want to be clear here. Living in harmony with one another (v. 16), rejoicing with those who rejoice, weeping with those who weep (v. 15)– these are all good in and of themselves. But they are part of a larger purpose. Loving one another with mutual affection (v. 10) is part of how we carry out God’s charge to us to be the light to the world. God calls us to love God and one another *with passion*, to build up St. Andrew *with passion*, to protect the community that God has entrusted to us with *passion*, to serve others *with passion*, to give *with passion*, to learn *with passion*. Always and everything, *with passion*. Notice what Paul writes in v. 11: “Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.” Paul is talking here about what we’ve been calling passion. Are we passionate about Jesus? Are we passionate about St. Andrew? Are we a passionate church? Here is how Eugene Peterson has rendered v. 10 in *The Message*: “Don’t burn out: keep yourselves fueled and aflame.” Do our hearts burn?

In this series, we’ve been introduced to several tools that can help us to grow in our passion. How’s our UP? Our IN? our OUT? Will we strive to be transformed by *kairos* moments? Will we find other Christians with whom we will learn to be better and more passionate disciples? Will we find Christians to whom we will be accountable?

We might think that passion is something that just happens. But Paul knows better. Burning hearts can be cultivated. We can strive for and work toward passion. Will we?

Daily Bible Readings

(more on the passionate church)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 2 Corinthians 9:6-15 A passionate church is generous.</p>	<p>Day 2 Galatians 5:13-26 A passionate church lives by the Spirit.</p>
<p>Day 3 Ephesians 4:1-16 A passionate church is unified and mature.</p>	<p>Day 4 Colossians 1:3-14 A passionate church is faithful and thankful.</p>
<p>Day 5 1 Thessalonians 4:1-10 A passionate church lives to please God.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

September Book Recommendation

If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat, by John Ortberg

A passionate disciple of Jesus Christ lives a life built upon trusting God and acting on that trust. That means being willing to take risks, to leave our spiritual comfort zone. In this book, John Ortberg invites us to consider the incredible potential that awaits us outside our comfort zone. Peter stepped out of the boat when his Lord said "Come." Will we?

Available at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew Bookstore

Getting Out of the Boat

A new four week sermon and teaching series begins next week.

We hope you'll join us in Wesley Hall at 9:30 as Scott Engle takes a closer look at what it means to be a risk-taking Christian. Also, Debbie Lyons will be leading a discussion oriented class at 11:00. This series will be based on John Ortberg's book and will challenge our all-too-comfortable Christianity. Discover the incredible potential that awaits us if we are only willing to risk it all.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Here's the place to begin. Are we a passionate church? In what ways are we passionate? When are we passionate? In what ministries are we passionate? Walt Kallestad, co-author *A Passionate Life* came to realize that his church, very successful by nearly any numerical measure, was a church whose faith was a mile wide and an inch deep. They simply were not passionate disciples. I guess Walt had his *kairos* moment. To his credit, Rev. Kallestad did something about it. He brought in Mike Breen and launched his church head-on into the learning circle. Walt Kallestad led his congregation out of their spiritual comfort zone and toward their potential - but more on that in the next series!

A truly passionate church will be strong on all three dimensions - UP, IN, and OUT. Otherwise, the passion becomes little more than zeal without wisdom or action. How is St. Andrew's UP? How is our collective IN? How about our OUT? Are all the legs of our three-legged stool strong or are we unbalanced? If you think that we are unbalanced, why do you think that is so?

How can we become more passionate disciples? What will you commit to doing in the next six months that you haven't done before? How can St. Andrew become a passionate church? What ought we to do in the next six months that we haven't done before? One change that Rev. Hasley has asked of us is the new small-group initiative - getting more and more people involved in groups of six to ten that meet regularly. Are you part of such a group now? If not, will you join one . . . at least give it a try?