

Nicholas W. Gliha

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Scripture: Song of Songs 8: 2-13 // Revelation 2: 2-5

Usually I would start this off with a witty comment but its communion Sunday and we are time limited so let's just jump right into it.

**Hey:** I have recently been tasked with writing about my faith journey, how I was shaped, how my faith is shaped and that led me back to the beginning. My earliest church memory is that of a young boy at Lakewood UMC robing up for a very important task, a mission that only a child could perform and without drastic consequences to worship can occur. <<pull out acolyte stick>> ah yes, the illustrious task of lighting the candles.

You guys know how it goes, only spiritually elite children are qualified for this role. You don't even get to light your own wick, we're Methodists, we have a committee for that task. (haha) Acolyting is serious business though. There is so many small things you have get right.

The pacing of the prelude, staying step with your partner, making you sure you walk slow enough and be steady enough to keep the flame from going out and having the proper tilt technique when lighting the candle, making sure to light the wick before you put the fire out so you can carry out the flame when service is done. All of this to consider in the mind of a young child. Needless to say it takes practice to get it all right. Practice. Those all too familiar words culturally say "practice leads to perfection", but I argue that practice leads to <<light wick>> passion.

**You:** The more you practice something the more passionate about something you will become. Maybe it's something mundane such as running, cycling or learning the perfect timing to fold and cook an omelette, or maybe it's something a little more serious such as the small ways we practice love to our partners, to one another and to God.

The more you fall away from it, the lower the wick becomes until it's all but <<slowly lower wick until the flame goes out>> poof. This image, in my opinion, is represented in our texts from this morning. On a purely contextual level these two scriptures are discussing love. But I also see passion. Passionate love, and a love that is lost and even further is the consequences when love is lost.

**Look:** Let's begin with Song of Songs. This section of Song of Songs is part of a long poem between two lovers. You can practically see the passion that exists between the two of them as evidence of the 'pet names' they give one another, such as 'my lover', 'my rose', 'he whom my heart finds delight' and more.

If this were today you could imagine similar language such as ‘sweetheart’, ‘darling’, or something of the like. Just listen to any country song to get an idea of a modern day Song of Songs. I trust as much that you are seeing the possessive language that is inking throughout this pericope. My, my, my, my. My is used 9 times in this short section of the poem.

Clearly, there is a passion for one another and a pride in letting others know that “my lover is mine and I am his.” (v. 16) But what if this poem wasn’t just about two select people, but is representative of what our relationship with God should look like? Maybe it is a little uncomfortable to think of God in a way of a spouse or a lover like the Song of Songs, but it is not uncommon for God to address Godself as a spouse.

Jeremiah 31 speaks of a new covenant that God is making with the refugees of the captivity, and before detailing the new covenant God says “they broke my covenant even though I was a husband to them.” Please understand I am **not** saying we are to marry God or Jesus is my husband. That’s weird. But what God is saying is that God wants us to live in perfect and complete unity with God’s mission, motives and ideals.

In other words, we are to live into being made in the image of God. In other, other words (haha) we are to live into our purpose as Christians. And our purpose as Christians is simply, to love. But this leads into our second text for the day, the text I want to spend a bulk of our time addressing. Revelation.

Revelation is a weird book but it is rooted in some very real things. This chapter is one of many where letters are being written to 7 churches that had some very real and very serious problems they were facing. 7 churches that we are familiar with if we read the New Testament chronologically. Many of these are churches that Paul had started. The particular one in mention for today is Ephesus.

Persecution and martyrs were the common sight of the day for Christians. The early church did not have a lot of theological knowledge, or buildings, or committees, or screens, or musical instruments or anything. Yet, they had passion. Passion. Passion like the lovers of Song of Songs. Passion for nothing but one another. Passion for finding the glimpses of God in everyone they met.

But sometimes our passion is diminished, Timothy, who was a student of Paul’s was left behind in Ephesus to lead the church there because he was passionate. <light flame on acolyte stick> And in his time of pastoring the church, there started to rumors, false doctrines, political tensions, the world started changing around him. People were less religious or spiritual in Ephesus anymore and so Timothy wanted to run.

His passion for the church, for the city was running out. These issues and these encounters with a culture that is so opposite to the vision of the kingdom of God on earth is draining! You can stop seeing the image of God in other people

during conflicts, and the more conflict, the lower the flame, the lower, and lower, and lower, and lower..until poof. <extinguish light again>> We have evidence of this in scripture because Paul has to write to Timothy to urge him to **remain** in Ephesus in 1 Timothy 1:3.

But why? I mean Timothy was progressing. The Church was growing, persecutions were down, money was good and flowing. Passion transcends progress my friends. Timothy was looking for signs of progress as fuel for his passion. More people in the pews, bigger capital campaigns, Timothy was measuring data whereas God is measuring love. Here is a very real example. I have talked with many of you in my short time here, and I have asked many of you this question: Why Chagrin Falls? Why this church? 99.9% of you have said this: “the people. The people are loving. The community. Etc.” Not a single one of you said “It's a big church, its got a lot of money, it's got good data, etc.” You have remained at this church because of no other reason than love, than why do you measure data?

Sure, we all want more bodies in the pews and larger youth programs and the such, but why not seek to measure the immeasurable. Love. We want more love, the strongest of love and God will handle the rest. We are possessed by a passion of capitalism, of growth, of the American dreams, of bigger and better, whereas God wants us to be possessed by God's image of **love**.

So that is what is happening in Ephesus my friends. John is on a small island called Patmos when he is writing Revelation. Not that John, another John is writing to Ephesus and saying you're growing, your progressing, you aren't facing as many persecutions, but do you still have the same passion, the same love from before?

You've got a building, you've got programs, you've got a Healthy Church Initiative going on, you're reducing the fiscal deficit, you've got good things going on but do you still have **passion**?

Here is my concluding challenge for you. You didn't lose your passion, you left it. I mean look at it, Rev 2:4 – But I have this against you, you have abandoned the love you had at first. Repent it says, and....feel the feelings I had at first. Well isn't that how we treat passion? Like it's a sensation? But when God challenges their passion, God calls them to *action*. Do. The things. You did at first.

It is a decision, not a sensation. Do the things, you did at first. I don't feel grateful anymore – be grateful. I don't feel loved anymore – be loving. Do it. Practice leads to passion, passion leads to a beautiful thing, and people have a tendency to share stories of beautiful things.

I think about the future generations who will be bringing their kids to the church they grew up in and I think to myself. Will this be a place where God *used* to do things? A place where people *used* to give of themselves sacrificially? A

place that *used* to have passion? Or will it be a place that is alive and well because of a people that had a passion for a God and the mission of God. The mission of love.

It is good to have passion, it is natural, but to simply possess passion and follow it is a treacherous path to follow. We don't follow our passion because we can get our passion mixed up with our feelings and the first time a good wind blows it takes our passion with it. No, we find and follow our purpose and we bring our passion with it. In other words, we make our purpose have possession over our passion. Every candle needs a lampstand. Every passion needs a purpose. What is our purpose?

To love our God with all our hearts, all our minds, and all our souls. To love our neighbor as ourselves. To feed the orphan and the widow and fight ceaselessly for the liberation of the poor. To, as our communion liturgy tells us, to be one with god, one with one another and one in ministry with all the world until Christ comes in final victory and we feast at his heavenly banquet.

This, our purpose, to make disciples for the transformation of the world. And of these, sounds a little possessive like the lovers in Song of Songs. To think of God and ourselves as "I am his and he is mine" brings us into perfect unity. We have our purpose, but do we have our passion? Do we still follow and love God in such an intimate and powerful way as expressed in the Songs of Songs? Do we still believe that God is alive in this very place and in this building? Do you feel the calming presence of Christ with us as we prepare to come to the table and receive the elements?

Don't let this communion be a motion you go through on the first Sunday of the month. Don't let it just be church snack time. Come forth to the altar with your anxiousness, your worries, your doubts, your prayers and give whatever it is to our beloved God. Be healed. Be empowered. Be passionate. And always, be open to the movement of the holy spirit. Let it be so now and forever more.  
AMEN.