



Sunday October 31, 2021

Pastor Tony Acompanado

Mark 12:28-34 (Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost/Reformation Sunday)

Passion is an intense desire or enthusiasm for something. In fact, passion is often the driving force behind most great works of art, music, writing, and architecture. And it's this passion for something that pushes and energizes us – at times even helping to make the impossible seem possible.

A few weeks ago, my son Zach reminded me that the NCAA March Madness basketball games would be returning to Fiserv Forum in Milwaukee in March, and we should try to get tickets. Now, if you know anything about me then you know one of the things I'm deeply passionate about is college basketball and especially March Madness.

So, knowing how much Zach and I share this love for basketball, this past Wednesday when the special ticket presale was to happen, I was in my office, on my laptop, prepped and ready waiting for the presale to begin at 11:00a central time. The email with the presale code was scheduled to come at 10:00a. It's 10:00...where's the email? It's 10:01...where's the email!? It's 10:02...WHERE IN HEAVEN'S NAME IS THE EMAIL?!?!?!?!?

Now, despite all my careful preparation and being caught up in the excitement I never bothered to share with Amy in the office that what was about to happen on this particular morning was in fact the most important moment in time and nothing else really mattered. Except, had I done that – she would have shared with me that Spectrum, our internet provider, didn't share my same passion for March Madness. Our internet at church lately and more specifically that morning was intermittently in and out...okay let's just call it what it was, it was mostly out. TODAY, of all days, really, are you kidding me?!?!?!?!?

So, in a panic I grabbed my laptop, jumped in my car and headed home where I know my internet prioritizes important things like March Madness ticket presales. On the way I called my wife but got her voicemail. So, I left her a message explaining that our internet at church was down, and that SHE would have to be the one to secure our March Madness tickets. Now, after 25 years together I would say that Lori appreciates my "passion" for March Madness, but I'm not exactly sure I'd characterize her feelings as being on the same level.

After what seemed like an eternity I walked in the door at home, opened my laptop and the email and clicked on the presale link and I was taken to a screen that informed me that I was #6847 in the queue. How could this be? Of all days not to have internet...are you kidding! C'mon God is this a joke? Have I not been a faithful servant!? I became a pastor for you! Just then Lori strolled into the room and said, what are so worried about...I got the presale code at 9:00 and I'm #437 in the queue. You'll get your tickets so just calm down.

Without passion life can become boring, monotonous, and even routine. Passion is what mobilizes groups into action. It motivates explorers to go where no one has gone before. It inspires scientists to spend countless hours trying to find cures to diseases. It drives good athletes to train and develop into great athletes who set new standards for what's achievable. And sometimes it even motivates us to do crazy things to secure tickets to spend time doing something we love with someone we love.

But here's something that confuses me about passion. In our world today it seems to be okay to be passionate about anything – except God. We can be passionate about sports, politics, fashion, and even coffee – but being passionate about God, well, that seems to be taking things too far.

The other day I googled, "What are people most passionate about" and what I found was that people's passions run deep for so many different things...books, chocolate, exercise, and flowers. Then there's flying and fishing, and even fly fishing. Gardening, golfing, hunting, and music. Nascar, puppies, social media, and video games. You name it and someone is going to have a passion for it.

We can go to concerts, political rallies, or sporting events and sing and shout and get so excited that we lose our voice from yelling so loud. We can jump up and dance around and wave our hands in the air to cheer on our favorite candidates or teams – but if we were to do that in church, people would glare and wonder what's wrong with us. Don't get too worked up about your faith, but it's okay for everything else.

But today, on this Reformation – Confirmation Sunday we are asking 13 of our young people to stand before God and this congregation of witnesses and claim their passion for God – to take responsibility for their own faith lives and prioritize a relationship with God; announcing that a commitment to God is important in their lives.

Last week in Pastor Chris' sermon he mentioned that a few weeks ago we asked our junior high students to answer the question...what gets in the way of your commitment to God? Their answers included: life, homework, sports, confusion, school, people, and not knowing where to begin. Then we asked them this follow-up question: what are the most important commitments in your life? They answered: baseball, soccer, basketball, tennis, running, football, school,



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family, social life, grades, and family. If we were to ask these same questions of the rest of us, I wonder if our answers would be all that different from theirs.

In today's Gospel reading from Mark, we find ourselves in the middle of a lively and tense exchange between Jesus and the religious leaders of his day. They've been peppering him with all kinds of questions about all sorts of things relating to faith. Confirmands, you should be relieved that this isn't the approach we're taking with you today.

But calmly and deliberately, Jesus answers each of their questions. And then, one of the scribes rises to ask Jesus a question, and his answer quickly ends the conversation and cuts to the heart of what it means to be a believer in God and a follower of Christ. In fact, what Jesus does when he quotes the ancient scripture from Deuteronomy is he tells the scribe and us that loving God and not letting anyone or anything have a higher priority in our life is most important. But Jesus goes a step further and offers a second commandment that hooks into the first saying that we are to love one another in a way that they will experience it as love.

The commandments to love God and our neighbors are a call to action – one that isn't always safe or even comfortable, but it is one that offers abundant life and immeasurable joy. Jesus says the best way to love God is to love each other. The best way to honor God is to honor each other. The best way to be in relationship with God is to be in relationship with each other.

Essentially what Jesus is saying in these commands is that we must share our love for God with all the people we encounter – after all, they are all made in the image of God just the same as we are. We can't say we love God and live for Jesus but then turn around and pick and choose who is worthy of acceptance and love.

Loving God and loving our neighbor might mean embracing new ideas that make us uncomfortable, that stretch us and push us to think of and look at one another and ourselves differently. It may even mean reforming what we hold as important or necessary.

So, if we're serious about doing what Jesus did and saying what he said, and living as he lived – then we, along with the rest of the church need to keep reforming, reshaping, and refining. As followers of Jesus, we are all in this work of learning to love God and our neighbors together. So, what in your life needs to be realigned so that you can re-center your life on God and God's desires for you? What passions in your life do you need to reprioritize?

My friends, what happens when we choose to be passionate about loving God and our neighbors is that we choose kindness, compassion, curiosity, forgiveness, patience, service, and always seeking the good of the other. And although it's not always an easy choice to make, because it almost always means giving something up – our self-image, pride, security, privilege, right, or our agenda – it's always worth it.

See, love, in the biblical sense is far more than an emotion – it's concrete, active, and embodied. In theory, anyone can love, but loving the flesh-and-blood person in front of you – loving in the messiness of our relationships and our communities is hard and humbling work. The call to love is sometimes a call to vulnerability, sacrifice, and even suffering. It's a call to bear a cross and lay down our lives.

Especially here in these days when so many are scared, angry, and divided, we are commanded to love. In this pandemic and for all the days of uncertainty we have to double down on love. We must choose love and do love. And may our love of our neighbor be grounded in and strengthened by our love of God, and may our love of God be embodied in our love for one another.

My friends, what we celebrate on this Reformation Sunday is that long ago Martin Luther confronted the church and all who believe in God to take a deeper look at themselves. To reform themselves from all the ways they separated themselves from God. In so many ways, the Lutheran Reformation was about someone so passionate for God and neighbor that they would sacrifice everything to push the church and the people of God to live out these commands spoken by Jesus.

Josie, Ryan, Carter, Tristan, Owen, Braedon, Taylor, Jacob, Danny, Aidan, Jack, Zackary, and Abby. As each of you makes your confirmation today, God also makes God's own confirmation over each of you and over all of us. "I love you, and I will never let you go." But if you're still uncertain about what to be passionate about, let me take a moment to remind you what God is most passionate about – God sent Jesus who would die on the cross so that you and I would know the depth of God's love for us. Thanks be to God. Amen.