

For a long time, religion has had the agenda of stifling human desire because we don't trust it. In an effort to focus people on their responsibilities, we in the churches, temples, and mosques have tried to regulate the desire and passion out of life. According to today's text, this agenda drives Jesus Christ crazy.

The Book of Revelation begins with seven letters written by the risen Christ to the historic churches. But as holy scripture, these letters are also the Word of God to the contemporary church. The first of these letters, written to the church in Ephesus, starts out well with Christ commending the church: "I know your works, your toil, your patient endurance." God knows that the people who come to church are hard workers who know how to toil, understand about enduring, and who can be counted on to get the job done. So, we get an A+ for being type A in its personality. But the risen Christ isn't done.

He then says, "But I have this against you..." We can see the congregation in Ephesus stiffening when these words were first read, as perhaps some of you are doing now. "This I have against you," Christ says, "You have abandoned the love you had at first."

Do you remember when you were first in love with someone? Maybe it was a long time ago, but there was a time when you were smitten, head over heels in love. Early in the relationship all you could do was think about this spectacular creature who made the earth turn. But tragically that love we had at first sometimes grows cold. Maybe it was because of a failure or a breach of trust. More often, though, the passion is lost not because of a crisis but because of a thousand small decisions that turned your heart cold and practical. Rather than finding joy in giving, you began to think in terms of negotiations and compromise. And rather than asking "What can I do?" you began to think about what do I have to do? What are my duties and responsibilities? Then it is only a matter of time before you start to wonder what am I getting out of this deal? When we start to think of the relationship as a deal, the answer is always, "I'm not getting enough."

This is what the risen Christ is worried about in the church's relationship to him.

The gospels present him as an incredibly compelling man in his days on earth. People tore off the roofs of houses to get to him. A woman let herself be trampled by a crowd for a chance to touch the hem of his robe. Fishermen dropped their nets in a moment to follow him. And when the church began, people like Peter, Stephen, and Paul couldn't stop talking about Jesus, like new lovers who can't keep themselves from describing their beloved. If these early apostles were thrown in jail they would just preach to the jailers, other prisoners, or anyone who would listen.

But before the New Testament was even done being written the church's wild desire for Christ had become domesticated and organized. Duties had to be assigned, arguments and conflicts had to be negotiated. The Christians were doing their work: the mission was going forward and the church was continuing to grow. But some could not remember why. So, like an old lover trying to get the spark back in the relationship the risen Christ writes a letter to the church to say, "Remember the love we had at first? "Remember desire and passion?"

Whenever the church is fulfilling its ministry within the congregation, or through its social witness in the city, or even as we each fulfill our daily callings in our workplaces, if you are doing that work without passion you are not doing the work of Christ.

Passion may frighten you because it has disappointed you in the past. Much like the church in Ephesus became disappointed in the delay of the return of Christ. But passion, desire, love are emotions created by God and cannot be ignored. These are indelible marks of our humanity. We are born crying out with desire for the breath of life, and we spend our days hungry of body and hungry of soul. Nothing of human greatness has ever been

achieved apart from desire. No wonderful piece of music was written, no beautiful painting created, no sonnet ever penned, no injustice ever fought, and certainly no couple ever fell in love apart from desire.

But the challenge of desire is that it's a hard thing to satisfy. In this book, *The Awakened Heart* the psychiatrist Gerald May has written, "There is a desire within each of us, in the deep center of ourselves that we call the heart. We are born with it, it is never completely satisfied, and it never dies. We are often unaware of it, but it is always awake." Even when we sleep the desire turns into dreams. Dr. May goes on to claim that we can run from this desire for years or decades, but it is never domesticated by our ordinary busy routines through life.

The cost of paying attention to the deep desires of our hearts is that we are always living with some level of discontent. That's not a bad thing. G.K. Chesterton even called it a divine discontent, which reminds us, "At the end of every achievement we have come to the wrong star. That is what makes life so splendid and strange. The true happiness is that we don't fit because we come from someplace else." Thus, at the bottom of all desire is a longing for your true home—someplace else. So, don't be surprised by the discontent that always accompanies desire. The discontent was placed there to draw your attention to the God whose desire is for you.

This is why we come to worship—to get clear, again and again, that our desire is for God. That is what we do here. We bring into the sanctuary our lives that have known both great success and devastating disappointment, and we confess that both achievement and loss have made us long for God.

If you have ever been to the symphony, you know that before the performance begins all the instrumentalists are doing their own thing, tuning up and practicing measures. To those in the audience the sound is a strange cacophony of chaos. This must be what our disharmonious desires sound like in heaven. But then the concertmaster stands up and signals the oboe to play an "A" note. The note is played long and slowly until all the other sections are tuned together. Now they are focused, and ready to make music.

That is what we are doing in worship. We're playing the long slow note that reminds you of your chief end to glorify and enjoy God forever. Because you don't want to spend all of life tuning up—you know? You want the notes of life to contribute to something beautiful, even artistic. But you have got to get the desire focused.

And when your restless heart is turned to its deepest desire for God, as Jesus made clear you will then become more passionate about loving your neighbor: the neighbor in your pew this morning, the neighbor at home, the neighbor in the city and the world in search of justice.

Doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly together isn't something else we've got to do. It's what we get to do. It's how we find more of Jesus Christ, our first love. Amen.