

Sermon for Passion & Purpose Sunday
The Rev. Philip Kasey
Holy Trinity Church, South River, NJ
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That sermon hymn really seemed to speak to what I'm talking about today:

"Father, we thank the who has planted thy holy name within our hearts"

I don't know about you – but - just like soil –
I was dumb as dirt about the seed that had been planted in me for years ...
but I DO remember when it was planted

I was on a Sunday morning when I was seven years old and telling my mom about the Sunday School class I'd just come out of at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Jeffersonville, Indiana. After I was done my mom said I wouldn't be going to Sunday School the following Sunday. But I LOVED Sunday School, and wondered why? She said she wanted me to stay in for the sermon, because a seminarian would be preaching next Sunday. Not even knowing what a seminarian was, I couldn't imagine how that could keep me away from Sunday School. "That's someone who's studying to be a priest, and you may want to be a priest some day."

I have no memory whatsoever of the following Sunday's sermon or the seminarian or anything, but I never forgot that conversation with my mother on the steps of the church. I mean, it was just such a strange thing to say to such a little kid, don't you think? I sure thought so at the time ... now, I recognize it as a seed.

Seeds have been planted today as well – the most basic of all faith formation seeds
Baptism. Tyler and Alec have been welcomed into God's great family – the Church.
Each has their own unique set of gifts,
Each has their own special gift.
God willing – they will each have the chance to recognize and live into that Gift

And that's what Passion and Purpose Sunday is all about – recognizing and living into the gifts that God has given us to serve the world in God's name.

So, I'm going to share some of my journey of faith today.
Other than that incident with my mom on the steps of St. Paul's, growing up in the church for me was pretty typical – typical of the 50's and early 60's anyway.
We simply went to Church every Sunday – I never questioned it, because I wasn't aware there were any other options. And, back then there really weren't too many. Most businesses were closed, and no one would think of scheduling any kind of game or practice for kids on a Sunday morning, because all the kids were in Sunday School!

I loved Sunday school, especially when I was little.

Then I wanted to be an acolyte ... get to wear those cool vestments and be up there where everything was happening! But, at Christ Church in Woodbury NJ, where we moved when I was 8, you had to be in the Junior Choir for two years before you could be an acolyte.

As I served my time in the choir I can remember my dad telling me after church most Sundays, "Philip, don't you think you could just move your lips so it would at least LOOK like you were singing?"

Then, after my two years were up, we moved again! And at St. Bart's I was trained to be an acolyte right away. They didn't even have a Jr. Choir! I was happy about that at first, but you know, acolyting in 1961 wasn't anything like it is now. No sitting up in a comfortable pew wearing sneakers and whatever else you felt like putting on this morning.

I'm talking about kneeling for everything but the sermon and the distribution of communion, while wearing shinned black shoes, black socks, dark slacks, and white shirt with tie. But that's what all the guys did, so, through high school, I did too.

At college there was a great Episcopal Church just off campus in Chapel Hill. But walking back to my dorm after my second Sunday there, where the pews were full and the hymns were great, I said to myself ... "Why are you doing this? ... my parents are in New Jersey, and I'm in North Carolina ... I can do anything I want on Sunday morning!"

And from that day on, Church was just something I did when I went home -

- because that's what my parents did -
- and they weren't arguing about paying my tuition -
- so why argue with them about going to church?

But, back at school, I had more important things to attend to:

Besides all those classes I had to go to ... there was music ...

I was ALL ABOUT the music -

and 1968-72 GREAT time for that.

Not to mention Carolina basketball - which it's ALWAYS a great time for!

But I had it bad. One night during my Sophomore or Junior year I was walking alone down Franklin Street when I was stopped by one of the Jesus Freaks.

Do you remember them? Hippies who gave up drugs in 1970, and turned to Jesus?

The guy stopped me and said, "Hey man, you got a minute?"

And before I could answer he asked me what it was I "BELIEVED in."

I told him I believed that every time the Carolina basketball team took the court they were going to win.

He was so flabbergasted by the shallowness of my response that he gave up on getting me to Jesus without any fight whatsoever.

And where did those passions get me, after graduation?

- selling stereos – where I could listen to music all day
- and waiting on tables – where I could talk Carolina basketball with my co-workers all night.

But one day, a year or 2 after graduating I “wandered in” ... it was an Easter Day – I wandered back in to Church – the same one I’d wandered out of 5 years before. And my eyes were opened.

Sure, away from church I’d learned all about rock & roll & Carolina basketball,

But – what about myself ?

What about how I was gifted to serve?

What was I passionate about doing?

What purpose was I here to serve? –

So I started “hanging around” – I got back into the habit of going to church, of accepting the gift of God’s love and giving for something greater than myself.

Until a 9 month trip to Europe I’d been saving up for ... back when it was cheaper to travel in Europe than it was to live in the US – even in a \$25/month shack with a well out back.

There – traveling in Europe, “wandering in” became a theme –

I began wandering into places with eyes wide open

Wandered into a country church my first afternoon of traveling alone on a bicycle through England. I was on my way to Salisbury from London, and I went in to seek shelter from a passing shower. There on the elevated eagle lectern was a Bible, so I climbed up, and, for some reason started to read out loud from where I opened it to with the red ribbon “Therefore I say unto you, take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink, nor yet for your body Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow ...”

Pretty powerful stuff for a 25 year old on a bicycle with basically no idea where he was going to stay or what he was going to eat that night. Those words stood well the test of the next 3 months on that bike through England and France.

A month later I wandered into Evensong at Canterbury Cathedral. I was there, admiring the grandeur and soaking in the history when I heard bells. Few people followed them, but I did ... into Evensong where I thought I’d hear some good music. Which I imagine I did, but what I left remembering was the sermon. Unbeknownst to me in was the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels, and the ancient preacher (probably a year or two younger than I am now!) preached such a compelling sermon on angels that I recognized many from my past and have had my eyes out for them ever since.

I ran into one on a Saturday - many months later in Florence. It was Easter Eve and I have no idea where or how we met, but this other guy about my age and I really hit it off, and decided to have dinner together. We had a great time eating and talking, and as we were about to go our separate ways he asked if I had any plans for the evening.

He said he’d been to a local Passion Play the night before, and that if I had the chance I really should go and check it out myself, because tonight was the last night.

I never saw that guy again ... WAY before cell phones ... but I did walk across the river and wander into that Passion Play. It was all in Italian of course, but I knew the story; all those years of Sunday School and church had penetrated at least that far.

And it was probably more powerful not hearing the words because the emotion and passion in their voices got me listening to what was happening, not with my head, but with my heart. And by the end of that performance My heart was broken. I wandered out with a broken heart back across the bridge, back towards the rooming house where I was staying.

Then, suddenly every bell in every church in Florence began to chime torches blazed from every tower in the city. And I'm standing there in the middle of this bridge over the Arno River with NO IDEA why this was happening – but it was midnight – it was Easter.

And this Jesus, who's death had just broken my heart – was RISEN
Christ had Risen INDEED

And my heart was not only healed – but opened – opened in a whole new way
- as one of those many seeds that had been planted finally burst through the soil

That summer – after my return - I wandered into rector's office of my home parish. 2 months later I wandered into seminary – you can't really do THAT anymore!
...I did "stop by" bishop Van's office first (interestingly enough it was the same month - July of 1976 – that a certain Polly McWilliams had a similar appointment with her bishop in New Orleans!), the Bishop of New Jersey said he couldn't stop me, but that people usually were SENT to seminary, after sharing their "call" to the priesthood.

But for me, seminary's where MY call really started to take shape.
usually it comes from people around you in your parish church, where you are participating in and leading various ministries.
For me though – it was my professors and fellow students who confirmed my call.

And the longer I was there, the more the Spirit of God –
which I'd been catching these glimpses of – became undeniable.
The love of Jesus, which I sort of vaguely understood, came alive to me in the sacraments; and I began to see and feel and know that love in all my relationships

As my call clarified, it wasn't to any specific thing –
- but a call to know and love the Lord and lead others there with me.
And the deeper I got into it, the more I discovered that Yes - this is who I am
THIS is what God knit ME together to be – a priest in God's church

So, why IS that?

What is it I'm so passionate about?

First and foremost – I wrote it on my seminary application,
and it's been a passion of mine ever since – -

the privilege of being a part of people's lives at every stage of their journey through life.
And in this inter-generational environment - I guess it's God's transforming grace.
God's ability to get under our skin and use us to accomplish creation's purposes.
And the fact that it happens like that in community – in the community of faith.
Because it's within the community of faith that I or you or anyone
Can walk into a situation,
Not exactly knowing what you WANT to happen
And figure out – not by the force of your own will –
or relying strictly on your OWN imagination –
but in relationship with others in the church– just what it is that needs to happen.
Through this process of “discernment” –
Whether in vestry or coffee hour or Bible Study – wherever 2 or 3 are gathered together -
we, as a church, seek God's will.

And it's in putting those ideas, and the people gifted to put them into action – together
That God's grace is experienced and expanded – that's what does it for me.
Then there's the inevitable struggle with change -
– where Jesus is there, standing by to remind us –
That doing the Right thing isn't always the path of least resistance.

So you take up your cross and follow Jesus – all the way to resurrection!
Because this is our purpose – transformation
And I guess that is what I'm passionate about –
---- leading God's people into and through the transformation God has in heart and mind
for all of us.

But it's interesting – because without that seed my Mom planted back at age 7 –
On the steps of St Paul's in Jeffersonville, I just might've missed it.
When I told her I thought I wanted to do this she broke down in tears saying -
“that's what I always wanted!”
“I know”
“How did you ever know that – I never said it, because then I KNEW you wouldn't do it,
just like everything else I ever suggested you might want to try!”
Well, when I was 7 ... you said to me (and I repeated the story that ended with my might
wanting to be a priest some day)...

And I never forgot it
Because it always seemed So Strange
– at the time I didn't know what she was talking about –
I thought – how could I do THAT?
But now?
How could I have done anything else?

And I think that's all God wants from any of us – to be able to look back over the big
choices we've made for ourselves – the calls we've actually answered – and say:

“How could I have done anything else?”