

Sermon by Rev. Bob Thaden  
First Presbyterian Church  
Miles City, Montana  
Stewardship Sunday

## What does it mean to Love?

Song of Songs 8:6-7

6 Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame.

7 Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If one offered for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly scorned.

Good morning!

Do you remember what it feels like to fall in love? The rush of emotion, the tumble of thoughts and feelings? I met my wife on the very first day of college. We were both only 17 and I was so shy I'd probably never have spoken with her, but I was wearing a SD Boy's State tee-shirt, and she was wearing a ND Girls State sweatshirt, so that gave us a starting point. From that moment on, every moment apart was almost painful. I DID pay attention in class, but I was eager to meet her for breakfast, for lunch, for supper and studying together (does that really work??) whenever I wasn't working part-time to pay my expenses.

Falling in love is filled with passion. It's both exciting and scary, for passion demands that you invest yourself, that you risk opening yourself to another person or a cause, and its always possible that you can get hurt. But passion is to life what snap, crackle and pop are to rice crispies. Without passion, life is like a bowl of soggy cereal.

We heard the text from Song of Songs from the New Revised version, but let's listen to it in a modern translation, from Eugene Peterson's "the Message."

This is the voice of a young woman philosophizing about love.

***Hang my locket around your neck; wear my ring upon your finger.***

***Love is invincible facing danger and death. Passion laughs at the terrors of hell.***

***The fire of love stops at nothing—it sweeps everything before it.***

***Flood waters can't drown love, torrents of rain can't put it out.***

***Love can't be bought, love can't be sold—***

***It's not found in the marketplace.***

Of course, you need to read the whole poetic book to enjoy the rich image of the Song of Songs. It's full of sex and seduction, poetry and passion. And it really helps remind us of what the feeling of passion is all about.

But passion isn't just about sexual lust and love. It isn't just about people falling in love. Passion comes from late Latin, *passio*, meaning to suffer or submit. It is often used to describe the suffering of Jesus on the cross. If you apply it to your relationship with the church, it raises the question, "what does it mean to commit yourself to the church and even be willing to suffer a little for the sake of the church?"

Passion almost always also implies an energy or excitement about someone or something. We hear people say of somebody, "He's really passionate about sports!" Or, "She's really passionate about Relay for Life and the American Cancer Society." Thoroughly committed. Willing to suffer a bit for it. Willing to give up supper or make some extra donations because it's a cause you believe in.

How many of you have read any of Jon Krakauer's books? He wrote a best seller called "Into Thin Air", describing the tragedy in 1996 when 8 climbers died on Mt. Everest. What I found so compelling is that they didn't die all on the same day. Some climbers made the attempt on Mt. Everest the day AFTER their friends had died, and walked right past their frozen bodies trying to make it to the peak themselves, only to freeze to death too. That might be stupid, but that's passion!

Curt Rosengren says of passion on his blog, In my [work](#) helping people create careers that energize and inspire them, I've come up with a simple definition for passion:

***Passion is the energy that comes from bringing more of YOU into what you do.***

*Simply put, it's being who you are and doing what comes naturally. When what you do is in alignment with who you are, you get energy from doing it.*

Think for a moment about the unnamed two disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24:32. You remember after Jesus had walked with them and taught them on the road before disappearing, they said to each other, "Didn't our hearts burn within us? Holy cow, man, didn't we just have some real passion going there for a while!?" And they couldn't wait to get to the rest of the disciples and tell them what they had experienced. They were passionate about it! They were excited!

The disciples experienced a lot of passionate moments with Jesus in the three years they

had together. Simon Peter, especially, was passionate about Jesus as his teacher. He was the one, you remember, who rushed out to try to walk on water. He was the one, when Jesus helped them have a good catch of fish, who jumped overboard to be the first one to shore to greet Jesus. His relationship with Jesus filled him with passion, with excitement, with energy. He loved Jesus.

So it should not surprise us that when Jesus asked him, In First John 21, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" Peter was quick to answer, "Yes, Lord; you KNOW I love you."

And here's where passion demands action. If you really love someone or something, you'll be ready to act and do whatever is necessary to show that love and commitment. If you love your spouse, it's not enough to simply say so; you're called to act on that love. I think this might open a can of worms here—I can almost hear my wife ask, "Bob, do you love me? More than your winery? More than your grapevines? More than that novel you're reading? Then get your butt in here and help me with these dishes!"

As Rosengren reminds us, passion is the energy that comes when you bring more of you into what you do. In regard to the church, passion is the energy you feel and the energy that empowers you when you bring more of you into what it means to belong, to participate in a church and its mission.

Here it would be helpful to remember the opposite of passion: apathy. Not feeling a thing. Being bored. Apathy happens when we refuse to invest ourselves in another person or a cause, or an organization or the church. And when we get involved, when we feel some of that fire in our hearts, then we're ready to do what Jesus commanded Peter to do, not once but three times, "Feed My Sheep."

Time to skip a beat here and remind you all that this is Stewardship Sunday. But I'm not going to talk to you about money and supporting the church and pledges and so forth.

Because if you have passion for the church, then that stewardship stuff will all take care of itself. And passion, Rosengren implies, comes into your heart when you invest yourself into the church.

Let me take just a moment to put some dollar figures out there for you to think about. Your secretary/treasurer shared with me that First Presbyterian has 65 giving units this year. I'm going to make the most conservative estimate possible, and assume that these

are all single income giving units and none of them husband and wife. The latest income figures for Miles City residents are from 2009, and indicate that the per capita income then was just at \$20,000.

So, if 65 participants at First Presbyterian are average residents of Miles City and offered a tithe of their income to the church, your regular giving income would reach \$130,000. Investment income is about \$11,000 for a total of \$140,000 if you are all tithing 10%. Your budgeted expenses are about \$120,000.

Some of you make less than \$20,000 a year, but some of you probably make considerably more. And if you all think through what a tithe could do for this church, chances are you might get excited. Even passionate! An extra \$20,000 a year for youth ministry, or for scholarships in the community, or to support really low income people through the food bank and soup kitchen. Or to support small grants to important non-profit public service groups in town. Think of what an extra \$25,000 or even \$50,000 could mean every year!

But...if you just sit back and come to church on Sunday mornings and nod through the sermon and hum along with the hymns but you never allow yourself to be fired up about anything, never invest yourself emotionally and spiritually in what the church is about, then you might just as well throw in the towel and quit coming, and admit to yourself that you're not willing to put into church participation the necessary effort to develop that passion that will get you involved and excited.

And if your relationship with the church is apathy rather than passion, then no amount of preaching about stewardship and financial support of the church will excite you to make a serious commitment to the mission and ministry of the church.

Jesus had passion about his ministry. He had enough passion to put in long days and hard days, and even to die for what he believed. That's a lot of passion. And he successfully imbued the hearts of his disciples to bring the same passion to their Christian faith. Many of them died for their beliefs, or spent their lives teaching others about how Christ had changed their lives.

So today I want you to think about falling in love, and how much you are willing to pay to care for and support those whom you love. Would you spend \$30,000 to save the life of your wife or husband? How about your child?

Now think about what it means to love the church, and help your church, this one right here, First Presbyterian in Miles City, to be all that she can be, to borrow the phrase from the army recruiters.

Getting involved leads to passion, excitement, joy. In turn, passion gives you greater energy; energy leads to better, greater and more ministry, more feeding of the sheep. And feeding the sheep well, leads to a greater sense of satisfaction and joy.

In just a few minutes you will each be asked to indicate what kind of financial commitment you hope to make to First Presbyterian Church this coming year. But what I really want you to think about is how much passion you feel for your church. And remember that the key to building that passion is to get involved, to invest more of yourself, your time, your wisdom, your energy and that will build passion, and that will help you to be a faithful and responsible supporter of the church financially as well.

To sum up then, I want to remind you of two little phrases from today's scripture texts and then restate them metaphorically: The woman in Song of Songs says to her lover, "Hang My locket around your neck." Jesus says to Peter, "If you love me, then Feed my sheep."

Today we might hear Jesus say to our hearts, "Hang my cross around your neck, and if you love me, then invest yourself, get excited, get passionate, and grow my church and support my mission."

Now it's up to you— will your heart burn within you? Will you bring passion to the church? Or apathy? It's your choice.

First John 21:15-17

15 When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs."

16 A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep."

17 He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep."