



**A Sermon preached in Christ Church, Grosse Pointe, Michigan
by The Reverend Maureen Martin, *Associate***

**The 4th Sunday in Lent (Year C)
27 March 2022**

In the Name of God, Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Last week our topic was presence. I had debated whether or not I should use my best story so soon out of the gate here, but it was so perfect an example of what it means to be present to others that I decided to just go for it and trust that more great stories will come my way. As I considered one of the world's most brilliant men pushing the neighbor girl on the swings I came to the conclusion that presence and passion are like two sides of the same coin. You don't get one without the other, and so it is fortuitous that we placed them here in the middle of our series. Here is a centerpiece of the Christian life. Presence and passion.

As I considered this image it came to me that the image isn't that of a coin, on which you can only see one face at a time. Passion and Presence are more like an orb in their perfect completeness, one does not obscure the other. Then the image I was seeking came into focus. It is that of Julian of Norwich's hazelnut.

She writes of God showing her this round little ball the size of a hazelnut in her hand. What may this be, she asks, and God tells her that he has shown her that all that is made was brought into being through the love and passion of God. Her response? "And I was answered in my understanding: "It, the hazelnut, lasteth and ever shall, because God loveth it. And so hath all things being by the love of God."

And so I spent some time meditating on the intensity of presence and passion together. You know it when you encounter it in others. Certain people have that single-minded focus, intensity of gaze. A life filled with overflowing passion testifying to the presence of God's unending love. However, as I



said last week, most of us are Alberts, not Einsteins, but God is no less present in our passions. Passions of any kind should be celebrated and nurtured.

One way we encourage human passion is through arts education. I have a funny story that I hope is relatable. When I was nine my mother finally gave in to my begging for piano lessons. Soon, I was crying at every lesson. Hot Cross Buns was my utter defeat, but I was not giving up. I just kept crying at lessons and struggling away at home. It wasn't exactly what we think of when we imagine passion, unless you consider that one time I got so angry that I passionately colored an entire page of my piano book jet black with my pencil.

I was on fire. I scribbled and scribbled until the paper shined with pencil lead. Once this fit of passion left me I realized, a little too late, that there was no hiding this masterpiece. My mother and teacher would see the evidence of my rage. Needless to say, I wasn't heading off to Interlochen anytime soon, but I persisted and eventually the things I understood in my head were finally coming out of my hands. I learned to love practicing. Within the practice of anything which requires a great deal of concentration there is a godly gift waiting to be discovered, a hint of God's passion and a direct experience of his never ending love for us.

If you aren't sure what you are passionate about, know that passion is the thing that makes you lose all sense of time. It keeps you up late at night. It makes you talk people's ears off. It is energy. It is love.

Most people who engage in any kind of passion experience this inner drive. They also experience the drive to share their passion: no matter how scared they feel when they offer themselves they do it anyway. Passion is risk. Whether the thing you are sharing with the world is your first poem, a lumpy vase, your awesome free throw, a blurry photograph of your cat, your fanciest cupcakes, or your first solo, you are sharing with the world a little corner of your true self. Through your passion you are becoming present to the world as the blessed child of God you were meant to be.

We all want this for our kids, that they develop a sense of passion for something in their lives, but I feel like we give up on it for ourselves somewhere along the way. Like, somehow becoming an adult takes all the fun out of taking risks and being vulnerable in front of others. And yet, God is wild and passionate about us. How can we learn to re-engage with God joyfully and with passion?



Today we heard the parable of the prodigal son which is a passionate lesson. So many feelings. The good boy who always colors within the lines and whose anger at the generosity of the Father prevents him from receiving his true inheritance; joyful intimacy with the father. The prodigal son who doubts his worth and also does not expect joy when he returns. It is the thing they share in common, this under appreciation of the Father's joy in them. Their lack of imagination. Their inability to understand what it means to already be forgiven. I think that is where we are sometimes with God, avoiding risks, and keeping him at a safe distance. Working ourselves to the bone for the treasure that we cannot take with us. In this way the brothers are the same. One toiling away in the pigpen eating pig food, the other toiling away, probably eating something healthy and prudent. In terms of distance he is closer, but in terms of allowing his father into his heart he might as well be on the moon.

And the father looking for the return of his child just as God looks for us to enter the banquet with joy, not just someday, but now. In our lives, we should pay attention for when enslavements to work and social status replace the passions of our younger selves. We should consider if these entanglements are no more life-giving for us than the locust pods in the pig pen. We should look at what we hold dear and see if it beautiful and God given, like the little hazelnut, and if it not, we should set it down and return to the Lord our maker. We should become as brave and as passionate as children and enter God's banquet with gladness in our hearts ready to be filled with the joy of our return.