

“Passionately Moving Forward Together”

- I. Introduction: This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us be exceedingly glad in it! This is a day of joy at Church of the Ascension! As our Sr. Warden has just shared with you, this past Tuesday night the Vestry of the Church of the Ascension received a unanimous recommendation from the Search Committee to call me to be the next Rector of the Church of the Ascension. The Vestry unanimously voted to call me as Rector, and I unanimously accepted. The next morning, our bishop approved this call. Together, we are moving into the next phase of our relationship. This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us be exceedingly glad in it!
- II. What does this change mean? Well, for one thing, we can stop describing my role here with you as “The Priest-in-Charge under Special Circumstances.” It has been challenging to explain to others what a Priest in Charge under Special Circumstances really is. So it is a relief not to have to continue to do so. Of course this change also means that we will have an installation service after Easter to celebrate our continuing ministry together. But, most importantly, this change reflects and affirms our joint commitment to a shared ministry that is centered in Jesus Christ, open to the call of the Holy Spirit, and lived out in our willingness to be the Body of Christ here at Ascension. We have had a two-year courtship of one another . . . you know me well, and I have come to know and love you. So it will not come as a surprise when I say that I hope and believe that our ministry together will be intentional and energetic. It will have direction and purpose and, most of all, it will be filled with passion.
- III. Filled with passion. You see, I believe that our faith is alive and life-changing. I believe that a sign of that ongoing change or conversion is the passion we feel about Christ, about our ministries, and about our church. On special days such as today, I find myself reflecting on when my passion as an adult Christian began to fill my life. I rediscovered my passion through work I was doing at a place called The Damien Center in Indianapolis, an HIV/AIDS treatment and community center started by the Episcopal and Roman Catholic churches. The Damien Center was named after Father Damien. The work of Fr. Damien in a leper colony over 120 years earlier was instrumental in calling me back to my faith, to the church, to the priesthood, and ultimately here to Ascension. Fr. Damien was a man of persistent and powerful passion. His story was described in a book by John Taymon entitled *The Colony*. Published in 2006, this book chronicles the true story of the leper colony established on Molokai in Hawaii.

The colony was started in 1866, based on a law of forced segregation for lepers. The law was not repealed until 1969. At its largest in 1890, the Molokai colony included 1,174 persons who lived in filthy and unprotected conditions. They were preyed upon by the government, the Board of Health, the church, and by many unsavory petty criminals in shameful, horrific ways. Tayman has created an excellent accounting from historical records and personal interviews.

The person who stands as a light at the center of this horrid dark tale is Fr. Damien. He was a Sacred Heart priest who at a young age went to Molokai. Initially his stay was to be for just several months, but instead he remained there for the rest of his life. He visited and ministered to every person on that island – in part because he was enraged about what was happening to them physically, but also because he was moved even more deeply, enraged, by how the lepers were being abused and destroyed socially and spiritually. His days began at 5:00 a.m. and continued until 10 at night. Damien personally dug 1,300 graves at Molokai. What motivates some followers of Christ to have such passion? I have no question that it is the willingness to see the world as Christ sees it and to be moved by the Holy Spirit to do something about what we see.

- IV. We can see an example of Jesus' passion in this morning's gospel. In our translation of Mark it says that as the leper knelt before Jesus and begged to be healed, Jesus was "moved with pity." Now the original Greek word used here could mean either "moved by pity" or "moved by anger." Some Biblical scholars strongly believe that the original meaning of this text is more likely to be "moved by anger." These scholars also believe that some of the early transcribers of Mark elected to shift the meaning from anger to pity. It was perhaps too risky to depict Jesus as angry – it was less threatening to present him as compassionate.

I think this distinction between anger and pity in today's gospel passage could be very important. We know that Jesus Christ was fully human. He had strong emotions, and he provided us with an example of the kind of strong feelings and actions we as his followers are called to have. If Jesus was angry when this leper approached him, what was he angry about? Might he have been angry because the leper was pushing into his space and making a demand on him? No, that doesn't appear to be the case at all. That's not consistent with Jesus' actions – he reached out and touched this man. In doing so, he broke the law of Moses which commanded him to have no contact with an unclean leper. There is really only one way to understand why Jesus felt so strongly about what he saw. He was enraged by the suffering of the man in front of him. He saw past the man's illness and deformity and discerned a living human being made in God's image. He was distraught about the man's physical suffering and by the cruelty of his social ostracism.

According to the law of Moses, a leper was both physically and socially unclean and had to be banished from the community. Lepers had to live apart, and were separated from everyone, including their families. They could only associate with other lepers. As they moved about, they were required to scream out “unclean” so that others could move away from them quickly. That was why Jesus was angry and that was why Jesus violated the Mosaic law: He was enraged by the suffering he saw in front of him and by the probable callousness of those around him. His heart was moved and he felt and reacted with passion.

- V. Conclusion. My brothers and sisters, passion is sometimes hard to find and even harder to hang onto. But it is our passion that binds us together here at Church of the Ascension, and it is our passion that will draw others to know about the Jesus we follow. We must keep our passion about Jesus Christ, about our work together, and about our church alive in the months and years ahead. I’m reminded as I close an idea advanced by C. S. Lewis in his writing: namely, that one of the most effective ways that evil can accomplish its purpose within the church is to cultivate indifference. As the Lewis’ Screwtape teaches his young nephew, who was a demon-in-training, the church can be neutralized and individual Christians prevented from growing spiritually if we, you and I, can be sufficiently distracted from our mission as Christians by the mundane aspects of our lives. In our distraction, we lose our passion about our faith. Let’s take full advantage of the wonderful gift that God has given us to be together and live passionately into the future we will share with one another.

This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us be exceedingly glad in it. Amen.