

**SLD09.24.06 25th Ordinary**  
**Mark 9: 30-37**  
**EPC**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

### **“Passionate Spirituality - A Roller Coaster Ride”**

Today’s text opens with Jesus’ dire prediction to his disciples of his betrayal “into human hands,” his imminent death, and his resurrection three days later. As usual, his disciples don’t get it, only this time they’re too embarrassed to ask him to elaborate.

As if to underscore the disciples’ cluelessness about Jesus’ destiny, Mark describes them as fussing about goofy things on the way to Capernaum. When they get there, Jesus asks, “What were y’all arguing about?” knowing full well they’d been debating about which of them was the greatest disciple.

“Now listen, y’all, you’ve heard it before – the first will be last, the last will be first....”

Clearly, it’s not sinking in. So Jesus grabs Hayden Reeves and says “Look here. See Hayden? Y’all be like Hayden.”

And Glenna and Tim are over there shaking their heads at Jesus and saying, “No, listen, Jesus. Seriously. You don’t want your disciples always to be like Hayden.”

Because, after all, is Hayden always “good?” Always darling? Always trustworthy? Of course not! And what about a first century Palestinian Hayden? Kids back then ranked pretty low on the human totem pole – none of this child-centered family business back then. Kids were seen as weak, dependent and non-productive commodities, potentially useful if they lived long enough but they generally didn’t. So until they could start pitching in around age 13 or so (things were different back then), and unless you were somebody’s mother, why bother with them?

But here's the thing about little kids, first or twenty-first century: always they are vulnerable, always learning, always growing. Often they wonder, are often *full of* wonder. Much about life confuses them – they may not like to admit it but they *know* they don't know it all. Only their parents know all things. (We're talking little kids, here) And sometimes, if little kids are lucky enough to have parents who love them and guide them and discipline them, they learn to trust even what they don't fully understand.

“Yes,” says Jesus to his disciples [and to Glenna and Tim], “I *do* mean for you to be like this relatively useless, non-productive, totally dependant and achingly vulnerable child, Hayden. In fact, whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes God.”

Of course, Jesus was forever saying stuff like that. Follow me and things will have to change. Follow me and leave behind everything that's important to you. Follow me and you'll have no place to lay your head. Follow me and you'll lose your place in line. Follow me and become like the least of these. Follow me and die, like I'm fixing to do.

No wonder Jesus' disciples didn't understand. No wonder Jesus' disciples still don't understand. No wonder you and I have a hard time integrating our faith into our 21<sup>st</sup> century, competent, productive, and privileged lives. After all, Hayden's cute but she doesn't make any money. Lee Newsom's sharp but he doesn't have to keep a roof over anyone's head. Milkah's authoritative but she's not responsible for anybody's payroll.

Truth is, the stakes of maintaining the patterns and rhythms and privileges of our lives are very high. What today's text points out is so are the stakes of following Jesus. And when the two are not compatible, which may be a lot of the time for most of us,

well, like the early disciples, we're generally more interested in who gets to be the greatest than in who gets to die on the cross with Jesus.

It's an interesting text to explore for a sermon on Passionate Spirituality, which is actually our topic this morning. You recall that we're three Sundays into a series of sermons based on Christian Schwarz's vast and global research in which led to a body of knowledge known as Natural Church Development.<sup>1</sup> After studying the qualities of over 1000 churches, Schwarz discovered that there are eight qualities shared by all growing, flourishing churches regardless of their size or denomination or even culture. All eight of those characteristics are listed in your bulletin. So far we've talked about Empowering Leadership and Gift-Oriented Ministry. Today we will address Schwarz's third quality characteristic of a healthy and flourishing church – Passionate Spirituality. Because of its essential presence in each of the other qualities, Passionate Spirituality is often described as the most important of the eight. It is also the quality to which respondents to Schwarz's questionnaire in *this* church gave the very *lowest* mark.

Repeat, according to an analysis done by the NCD headquarters, the 30 active members and friends of this church who took the anonymous NCD questionnaire last spring gave Passionate Spirituality in this church the very lowest mark. The term Schwarz uses for the lowest mark for any church (and every church has one) is the "minimum factor." The "minimum factor" here at Emory Church is Passionate Spirituality. Perhaps our text today gives us some clues as to why.

It takes a lot of energy to be successful in today's world; heck, it takes a lot of energy just to be *alive* in today's world – to be a student, to earn a living, to be a parent,

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<sup>1</sup> Schwarz, Christian, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches*, Church Smart Resources, 1996 and 2006; and *Implementation Guide to Natural Church Development*, Schwarz and Christopher Schalk, Church Smart Resources, 1998).

a sibling, a friend. To be active in a secular community, to be active in a faith community, never mind to have a hobby or deal with medical problems or tend to a household. And in the midst of all that we're meant to become as vulnerable and wonder-filled and trusting as a child so we can follow Jesus to his death and ours? Hard sell. Anyway, who's got time to mow the lawn, never mind to cultivate a relationship with God?!

Because that's what spirituality is essentially about – developing a genuine, intimate, lively relationship with God. And developing a genuine, intimate, lively relationship with God (or anybody else, for that matter) takes time. And effort. And according to a statistically significant number of respondents in this church, you and I are flat not all that great at taking that time or making that effort.

Now it may be of some comfort to you to know that neither are most mainline Protestants: "passionate spirituality" routinely ranks as the lowest of the eight quality characteristics in mainline Protestant churches in this country. In Korean churches, too, which surprised me. The Charismatic, Pentecostal and Gospel churches are all over passionate spirituality; their minimum factor tends to be need-oriented evangelism. The Evangelicals have evangelism under "control" (obviously); it's empowering leadership that's their growing edge. Passionate Spirituality, well, that's where we mainstream Protestants routinely have *our* work cut out for us, a fact confirmed by the majority of your questionnaires. The good news is, when it comes to spirituality, the important thing is not so much our current state as our intention to grow and develop in a living relationship with a loving God.

The bad news, though, is that I'm not sure whether we have that intention or not. After all, your questionnaire results only noted "passionate spirituality's" rank in this church; they don't say anything about whether you wanted to change it. Do you?

Schwarz says to be a healthy, flourishing church we need to address the issue of our passionate spirituality. Do you want to be a healthy, flourishing church? Even if it means making the time and effort to explore and develop your own relationship with God? Time will tell, I guess. But according to Schwarz, nothing is likely to change until you and I do.

But, suppose a critical mass of folks here at Emory Church are willing to start paying more attention to their relationship with God. How do we go about doing that? How do we even *define* Passionate Spirituality, never mind pursue it?

Schwarz defines passionate spirituality as "*faith lived out with commitment, fire and enthusiasm.*" Someone else describes it as "a real hunger for the things of God."<sup>2</sup> Still another definition is "a living relationship with a loving God."<sup>3</sup> Personally, I'm more interested in how you define passionate spirituality for yourself. It's a pretty abstract term.

A few months ago I had the Session over for supper at my house to explore how each of us defines spirituality, and how we experience it. It was an interesting, and deepening, discussion. Deepening of our relationship with one another, I mean. And perhaps each of us with our God, I don't know. That's such a personal thing. And such a lifetime enterprise, deepening one's relationship with God. But it seemed helpful that night to turn our attention to matters spiritual, to the faith issues of our own hearts, but

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<sup>2</sup> Background Data for Ministry, October 2003, Vol. 15, No. 10, Published by the Office Research, General Board of Global Ministries, NY, NY. Ed. John H. Southwick. P. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Michael King, "Hunger for the Food in God's Pockets," <http://www.netreach.net/~pandoraus/smmc/sermon/hungerfo.htm>. P. 3.

without “church words,” without even church; just candlelight, and community, and good food, and pretty good wine. What I noticed was the conversation shifted somehow away from whatever language people imagine we were *supposed* to use to talk about God to...just whatever came. Whatever was true.

I enjoyed that night. Others seemed to, too.

So I did it again – had another evening of Emory folks at my house, this time all women – more candles, more food, more wine, more truth-telling, more community. Just a little more. I mean, it’s not like the kingdom’s coming in my dining room. But there’s something about these gatherings that feels just a little more vulnerable to me, a little more wonder-filled, maybe even a little more trusting, than, say, your average Wednesday Night supper conversation in the Fellowship Hall. Although that could have been more the spirits we drank than the Spirit we worship.

But I felt them both so I’m going to keep having these gatherings when I can. Just so we keep on asking ourselves what “spirituality” is to us; what “passionate spirituality” is; if and how and where we experience it; and how Emory Church might provide conditions for the development in each of us of a living relationship with a loving God.

The point is not so much to come up with answers, especially answers that presume to apply to everyone. The point is simply to pay attention to the questions, and to whatever answers come up for a given body at any given time. It’s interesting how varied the answers are; as varied, really, as we are.

It’s tempting for professional Christians to give prescriptions for the spiritual path. One author suggests that the key to developing a passionate spirituality is an intentional prayer life. And no question but that the classical spiritual disciplines like prayer,

fasting, solitude, silence, simplicity, scripture study, service, observing Sabbath, worship and tithing are all means of cooperating with the machinations of the Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup>

But Schwarz, God bless him, warns that when we “encounter simplistic suggestions such as, ‘Pray more!’ or Read the Bible more often!’” we should be skeptical. “While those suggestions might be helpful for some believers, he says, “they can be counterproductive for others.

“While analyzing the data of thousands of churches,” Schwarz reports, “we made an interesting discovery: The time that people spend in prayer has only a minor correlation to the quality of the church and its growth. Whether or not prayer is viewed as an ‘inspiring experience,’ now *that* has a significant relationship to the health of the church. But not the quantity of time spent in prayer. We found similar results,” he says, “with respect to the personal use of the Bible and other factors affecting personal spirituality. The quantity is not the decisive fact; the *quality* is!”<sup>5</sup>

For those yearning for spiritual deepening, Schwarz suggests a less prescriptive approach. First he divides the spiritual life into three dimensions: the Word (that is Scripture)-based dimension; the Spirit-directed dimension; and the World-focused dimension. Word-based, Spirit-directed, and World-focused. Schwarz then suggests that every believer figure out for him- or herself in which dimension he or she needs more development.

“If it’s in the Word-based dimension of the spiritual life, then it may, indeed, be a good suggestion to spend more time with the Bible,” says Schwarz. “But if your greater concern is that you don’t feel that your life is really being directed by the Holy Spirit,

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<sup>4</sup> Background Data, p. 2

<sup>5</sup> *Color Your World with Natural Church Development*, Christian A. Schwarz, ChurchSmart Resources, St. Charles, Il. 2005., p. 110

then look for the help of Christians who are more experienced in this area than you are. If your spirituality lacks a focus in the world, most likely you won't be helped by simply praying more. Instead, network with believers who are known for a truly 'earthly' kind of spirituality.

"The secret of passionate spirituality", says Schwarz, "is to develop a threefold orientation based on the Word, directed by the Spirit, and focused on the world, and to bring these three dimensions into balance."<sup>6</sup>

Develop a spirituality based on the Word of God, directed by the Holy Spirit, and focused on the needs of the world. Sounds pretty healthy to me, if a little dry. Still, as I see it, there are two lively wild cards in Schwarz's equation: the Holy Spirit who, as we should all know by now, blows where she bloody well pleases. The Holy Spirit, and Free Will. That is, *our* free will. Our choice. Your choice and my choice as to the importance of developing a living relationship with a loving God. Your choice and my choice as to whether spiritual growth is a priority in our lives. Your choice and my choice as to how much risk we're willing to take to follow Jesus. How like Hayden we're willing to become. How open, how vulnerable, how curious, how trusting, how wonder-filled. How "unimportant" and "non-productive," how humble, and powerless, and even how clueless before God we're willing to be.

Passionate Spirituality – it's the minimum factor here at Emory Church, which means it's the "minimum factor" in our lives. What's it worth to change that? Only time will tell how high those stakes are to you and me. Could mean the future of this church. Meanwhile, until time tells, remember this: You draw near to God and God will draw near to you. (James 4:8). To the glory of God. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 111.