

“Passion, Potential and Power”

We’re going to do two things today: give thanks and talk about faith in the gospel.

The apostle Paul spends much of his time thanking God and thanking people.

In today’s reading he says, *“I thank my God ... for all of you....*

For God ... is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers....” [Romans 1.8-9]

I am thankful for all of you – first, that you are here this morning to worship God,
and second, for all that you do to serve God in this place and beyond.

Most of us don’t say thank you enough.

So today I’d like you all to look around the room here and find at least three people that you would like to thank --
either when we share the peace or after worship.

Take some time now to look around now and find your 3 people. Got them? Good! Now don’t forget!

And now I want to look at the rest of our reading.

Paul identifies himself as an apostle set apart for the gospel of God.

He goes on to say he is not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.

He then declares that the gospel is not a set of doctrines,

nor a static list of propositions, nor simply a story of what God has done in Jesus Christ.

Rather, the gospel is a living entity – a power – God’s power, which is alive and active, as evidenced by signs & wonders.

It has the power to save us, not just so that we can live eternally with God,

but so we can live the most abundant life imaginable here and now.

There is power to do that and we access that power through faith.

But what does that mean if it’s not ascribing to a set of doctrines nor assenting to a list of intellectual beliefs?

It’s hard to explain but I think three words will get us there. And those three words are passion, potential, and power.

The first thing I want you to know is that God is passionately in love with you! God couldn’t love you more if God tried.
God loves you totally and completely and unconditionally, but sometimes that’s hard to comprehend.

One of the times in my life where I remember understanding and feeling the power of God’s love
was when I gave birth to our first child.

When the midwife put that 6 lb. 2 oz. baby into my arms I thought my heart had grown a thousand percent.

I was smitten – utterly and totally smitten. Up to that point I didn’t know such love was possible.

As I laid there overcome by love for this new creature, my first thought was,

“Oh, my God! This is how much my parents love me! I had no idea!”

And my next thought was, “And if my parents love me this much, how much more must God love me!”

So I want you to remember a time when you were most in love. Do you remember how you felt?

How completely safe and at home you felt with that person? How you couldn’t think about anybody or anything else?

How the entire world receded into the background as you focused on your love? Well that’s how much God loves you!

God is madly in love with you, God thinks about you all the time,

and God thinks you are the most amazing person in the world.

And what God desires most is for you to return that love.

Now you may say, “How can God love me more than anybody else in the world?” But love isn’t a finite resource.

I learned that when I had our second child.

One of my greatest fears when I was pregnant with Conner

was that I would never be able to love this new child as much as I loved our first. But of course I did.

As soon as he was born I loved him just as much.

God loves you with a passion and deeply desires your passionate love in return.

That’s where faith starts – not with an intellectual belief system, but with love.

Loving God with all of our heart and mind and soul and strength means loving God with a passion.

So faith begins with passion.

The second part of faith is the realization that because God loves us God wants the best for us.
In other words God wants us to reach our full potential.
When we love someone we want them to reach their full potential.
We see gifts in them. We see talents. We see desires.
We see the things that they're good at. We see the things at which they excel.
We see them finding joy in using their gifts.

But we will never reach our full potential if are not pushed or pulled or stretched.
To reach one's potential means giving up comfort.

I love thinking about God and theology and spirituality.
And so I loved going to church and Sunday school and confirmation class.
I loved the religious studies courses I took at college at Wittenberg University.
But when it came time to go to seminary I knew I had to get out of my little Lutheran world.
Going to a Lutheran seminary wouldn't stretch me, but going to a nondenominational one would.
Stepping out of Lutheranism into a wider world of mainline Protestants forced me to grow.
This past year I've stepped out of my midsize mainline Protestant world
into a larger Christian world that includes Pentecostals. And that has stretched me more.
And the more God pushes me and pulls me and stretches me, the more I can grow into my potential.

What is stretching you? What is causing you to learn and grow?
When we stop growing we start dying, so if you aren't being stretched
by new ideas or new situations or new patterns of behavior,
let me encourage you to find people who are different from you –
different in race, culture, religion, age, sexual orientation, ability – and get to know them.
As you enter into these relationships it's important to begin
with an attitude of humility, with curiosity, with a sincere desire to be stretched by the other.
You'll end up stretching them, too, but that will never happen unless you're willing to be stretched first.

Faith begins with passion for God.
Faith continues as we allow God to push us and pull us and stretch us in our relationships with one another
so that we can reach our full potential.
But the most exciting part of faith is the power that comes
when we are passionately in love with God and when we nurture relationships which push us towards our potential.
Paul and Peter and all of the early disciples were passionately in love with God
and God was constantly putting them in relationships and in situations
where they were stretched in their beliefs and in their capacity to serve,
and as they grew more fully into their potential God filled them
with a power that could heal and save and raise people from the dead,
a power that cause them to prophesy and speak in tongues,
a power that caused earthquakes in prison breaks,
a power that converted hundreds and thousands of ordinary people into fierce followers of Jesus.
It was a power that caused the gospel to be spread from a group of 13 ordinary men throughout the world
and a power that has sustained the church for over 2000 years.
That same power is available to us today. We just need to believe that it is.
If we have passion for God,
and if we build relationships with people whose differences from us will push us towards our potential,
and if we believe that we have the power to change the world, or even Bridgeport, then we can.

God loves you with a passion. Love God back.
God wants you to reach your full potential. So build relationships with people whose differences will stretch you.
God will empower you to change the world. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise.

Passion, potential, and power.
May you experience all three this day and always. **Amen**