

The Fire of Commitment

A Sermon by the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon

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“I want something,” James said to me one evening with a questioning tone as we sat on the couch, watching one of our favorite sitcoms on TV. We had just finished eating dinner.

“Okay,” I said. “What do you want?”

He wrinkled his nose. “I’m not sure.”

“Are you still hungry?” I asked.

“I don’t think so,” he said.

“Are you thirsty?” I asked.

“No, that’s not it either.”

“Are you feeling restless?”

“Not exactly.”

We went on like this for a while, and there was nothing I could do to help. Eventually the moment passed, and we turned back to our TV show. But the thing is, I recognized his feeling.

That sudden intrusion of longing, even into a quiet moment - that was familiar to me.

That hunger that food cannot satisfy, though God knows sometimes we try. The thirst that drink cannot quench, though often we try that as well.

Have you felt it? I'm sure you have. That spiritual longing so overwhelming that it becomes a physical sensation of emptiness and desire. Desire for... something.

Something greater, something deeper. Something real. Something so vital that it makes you come alive.

“I want something.”

Probably some version of this statement is what has brought most of us through the door, into a church community. It is the ghost of longing – the hunger no one sees. It is this unnamed and un-nameable desire for... something – life more abundant, love more profound.

That must be what brings us here.

Certainly in today's culture, there's no longer a pervasive cultural assumption that would bring you here. By and large, church is no longer something people “just do” because it is expected. We have too many other demands for our time. Other communities. Other options for growth. And church has sort of lost its cachet. Of all religious identities, Pew Research polls tell us the group growing the fastest is the Nones. And I'm not talking about a bunch of sister Mary Margarets in their habits, here. Today, more and more people are identifying their religious tradition as none, as in nothing – zero, zip, nada. Diana Butler Bass argues that religion as we have known it is ending. It is no longer viable in today's multiple meaning-making market.

Yet, here we are. In CHURCH. And might I say, we are defying statistics – thriving, growing, full of energy!

Here, we have... something. Something I don't believe can be found anywhere else. Here we have passion and commitment to share – and that is a rare combination in our world today.

You are here, spending your precious time together, trying to live out the spirit of love.

I think you know this – but that means something. That you are here, to receive and to give. You are here when you could be in bed with the Sunday paper, or out to brunch, or in front of the television.

You are here by way of your own longing. But your being here also means that there is a place here for those who hunger. You are creating that place.

And that is important.

Because -- although it would seem that much of religion has lost touch with people's needs -- the longing didn't go anywhere. It is still with us. Today more than ever, people hunger for passion and commitment. In this time, which Bass identifies in this morning's reading as one of – “cultural anxiety, economic near-collapse, terrorist-fear, political violence, environmental crisis, and partisan anger.” In this time, as in every age, people need something life-giving, and loving in their lives.

I want us to meet that need, together.

I believe that our congregation can be one seat of the Awakening that Diana Butler Bass is so hoping for. This can be a place where we discern how to open up more possibilities for human flourishing throughout our community.

This can be a place where we imagine a new vision of connection and spiritual depth and hope for all people – for our entire community, far beyond these walls.

We can imagine it because we are hungry for it. In some way, it is our longing – it is the spiritual hunger I feel among us - that makes us a natural home for awakening and transformation. From our longing for deeper connection and more lasting wisdom, we can re-imagine what it means to be religious. And we've already begun. We are already working to create an authentic community of love and spiritual depth.

Bass asks “Might spiritual discontent be today’s prophetic edge, needling institutions to listen, to change, to be more response and relevant? Are the [spiritual] outbursts signs of some new form of faith?”

I wonder, from the soil of our longing, what new faith is blossoming here? And how will it change us?

Because we are both the longing, thirsty souls, *and* the institution in need of transformation.

As a church, we are right on the edge, ripe for awakening, but perhaps still blinking groggily, taking stock of this new world to which we've awoken.

In this new world – lack of dogma or creed will not be what distinguishes us. For our global culture has faded the power of creed in many traditional faiths and many already

claim no creed at all. In this new world – freedom to pursue your own path will not be the draw – in today’s consumer culture people are free to walk their paths nearly anywhere they like, with no lack of options along the way.

This new world is fragmented, and anxious, and in it we long for connection and wholeness, passion and courage.

This new world exists face to face and in the tight crowded space of the world wide web, and it is forcing us to encounter the inescapable reality of our interdependence.

This new world says reality is something that exists on the TV, and we are left aching for authenticity.

This new world is flooded with information, and we need help making meaning of it all.

It is no wonder James and I were left sitting on the couch wondering how to feed some un-nameable, soulful desire.

These are the things we must grapple with if we are to meet our own longing and the world’s deep need.

We stand at the edge – a new landscape stretches out before us. What are we going to build there?

These past two years, you have gone through an intensive process of self-study and imagining that has led to our joining. You have called me. And I am here. But the process is not yet over. Now, we must learn together how *we* are called forward.

What needs of our time can we meet? And how?

Or put another way – what is *our* life-saving message, and who right here, in our Columbia and Mid-Missouri *most needs to hear it?* That’s our new land. That’s where we’re called to go.

And I don’t yet know the answer to these questions. They represent the task that we will take on together.

As a matter of fact, I just spent the weekend with our board, at their annual planning retreat, and I can tell you two things.

First - you have elected an imaginative, inspired, wise, and deeply committed group of people to take on the task of governance and discernment.

Second - You can expect them to engage you later this year in the work of listening for our congregation’s calling. Through a process of meaningful questions and deep conversation – they will call all of us to imagine our future together and to pinpoint where our deep gladness and the world’s deep need meet to create the unique mission of this church.

And while I do not yet know what that mission will be, I suspect two things. First, its seeds are already planted among us, in everything that you love and value about this community. And Second that whatever we discern to be our calling, we will be prepared to meet it only so far as we are grounded in Spirit. Called together by our own individual passions and longings.

We can prepare to live our collective mission by each grounding ourselves in our own discernment. By finding what most makes *us* come alive.

So I ask you to give it some thought this month. What makes you come alive? (Seriously, I'm asking you – shout it out! When do you feel most alive?)

As we prepare to ask these questions of our community, so must we ask them of ourselves. What saves your life by transforming the un-named, discontented longing of your soul into passion, commitment, and joy?

The mission of this church – our live-saving message – can only be shared with the world by people who have come alive – awakened to the calling of life more abundant and love more profound.

So may we have the courage today and in every day to come, to live the life that we would love, to postpone our dreams no longer but do at last what we came here for.

May we wake up, discern, imagine, and do.

May our hunger and passion meet to call us on our way. And may our promise at last find fulfillment. Then our future will begin.