

What distinguishes a passion from an emotion? A story from long ago but not that far away will clarify what we mean by “passion.”

An old woman, who was a little sarcastic about her husband, told a new acquaintance, “He wasn’t much to brag about—he was no good in the house and no help with the children. But one thing is sure, he made something of those stamps.”

This man went to the stamp store every week, rain or shine; he looked them over carefully and made informed purchases. When he got home, he placed them carefully in books. He looked at them often; he compared his stamps with other collectors. He clearly liked the stamps, investing time and money on them.

Furthermore, he gave up other things, like bowling and motorcycles, the local tavern and even the care of the kids, so that he could care for those stamps. Perhaps his wife would have liked him to do something else, but, at least, she knew where he was and what he was doing, which is more than could be said for some husbands.

This man was in the grip of a passion. Persistence through time is what distinguishes passion from emotion. The old widow knew of her husband’s love of stamps before she married him.

Any initial enthusiasm—be it for collecting coins, sneakers, or vintage handbags; be it for soccer, golf, or fishing; be it for music, art, or history—becomes a passion when it lasts long, when it cuts rather deep, when it commands and explains a lot else in one’s life.

Our emotions are frequent and short lived. When we are young and still not well grounded, our enthusiasms come and go. We swear lifelong allegiance to people whose names we can hardly remember. We love with vehemence and dislike with a vengeance the same things or people within the day or even the hour. Gradually, we learn to love more deeply and care more firmly.

We don’t know if power was a passion for James and John, or a momentary enthusiasm evoked by their proximity to Jesus. Maybe James and John followed Jesus for access to power, power they would never know as Galilean fishermen. What we do know is that the pursuit of power is the defining passion of many lives.

The anger aroused in the other disciples is triggered by fear that James and John got the jump on them. Jesus’ favorites are first in line for all the goodies. They were privileged witnesses to the display of divine power in the transfiguration, now they want privileged access to earthly power as well.

Jesus, again, tells the boys that the pursuit of power for the purpose of lording it over others is the way of Gentiles (Rome). Lord it over others long enough and you become a tyrant (Caesar). Jesus knows the boys can't help wishing, wanting. It is human nature to desire, but he instructs them to cultivate desires, wants, that are worthy of their lives.

Knowing what we ought to wish for, to want, is a good part of the wisdom of life. If we never know what to want that is worthy and long-standing, that endures and outlasts momentary enthusiasms, then we are at the mercy of whimsy. To be fickle at 14 is one thing, but quite another at 44.

What we do creates our character, for good or ill. Virtues and vices become dispositions through repeated actions. If we act unjustly long enough, then our character becomes formed and we can no longer become just by merely wanting to be just. If we practice love, justice, and other virtues, we acquire another kind of character and weave sense and decency into the very texture of our daily life.

We become selves by willing, wanting, wishing, steadily over a long period of time. The willing of goodness, of godliness, of making something of ourselves, is the very means of being able to understand and know ourselves. Such willing is also the means of approaching God. Part of the meaning of being far from God is not geographical or physical distance, says Paul Holmer, but a matter of not willing as God wills.

By choosing to live according to God's will—by doing justice, by showing constant love, by walking humbly with God—by choosing to serve the least of these rather than pursue power over them, we begin to know God. In short, how we live affects, radically, what we can know.

Choosing to do God's will rather than my own can feel like a drag. God does not coerce us to do his bidding; God does not act like Caesar. But God's bidding is still his bidding. What about what I want? If doing what you want makes you happy, gives you a sustained sense of well-being and not a momentary high or temporary fix, have at it. But don't settle for anything short of happiness, because happiness is what God wills for you.

We *believe* what we want will make us happy, otherwise we wouldn't want. We find it hard to *believe* that what God wants for us will make us happy. Living with the consciousness that God is truly our friend, that God's will is powerful and strong and never frustrated by guilt or despair, that we can know happiness by doing God's will, requires *faith*.

We are not talking about faith as a mountain top high that recedes as we descend into the valley of everyday life. We are talking about faith as a passion that holds us in its grip through the ups and downs of life, that cuts rather deep, that commands and explains much else in our lives.

"I don't know what your destiny will be," said Albert Schweitzer, "but one thing I know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve."