

The Fifth Sunday of Lent

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Jn 11:1-41

Passion Aflame

There was a time in my life when I watched movies—I'm hoping that will someday again be true. Movies are important to me. I believe in the power of storytelling and that a picture can be worth a thousand words. There have been movies throughout my life that have captured for me deep truths—that express the depth and the richness of the truth with an ambiguity that allows us to follow it wherever our souls lead us. They don't explain or define the truth—they evoke it, they embody it. They engage our imaginations, and it's through our imaginations that we have access to the spiritual and the divine.

I mention this because this morning's gospel led me back to one of those truth-capturing movies as I read and pondered it. The reading from John today contains a bit of trivia—what's the shortest verse in the bible? It's John 11:34—Jesus wept---two words in the earlier King James and two words in the Greek. This verse is critical for this passage, though, not trivial. It focuses our attention on one of John's central themes in this story--- Jesus' passion---his deep feeling for the human condition. It speaks twice of Jesus being deeply moved by the sadness of Lazarus' family and friends at his death, and also by his own sadness at the death of this friend, even though he knew that he would bring life back to him. And then to sum this up, it speaks of Jesus weeping when he's invited to confront the death that overtakes Lazarus and everyone—when Mary invites him to come to the tomb.

This sense of Christ's passion for humanity—and this is the real “Passion of the Christ,” his intense love for us, not Mel Gibson's depiction of his physical torture---this sense of Christ's passion has been a theme in our Julian of Norwich class on Tuesday nights after the Lenten suppers. Early on in her experience of Jesus, Julian learned of Christ's passionate embrace of us. Julian's Jesus is a Jesus of compassion—a Jesus who stands

with us in all of our suffering—our passion in one sense of the word—out of his passion for us—he deep and unquenchable love. This sense of Christ’s passion for us guides all else that she has to say.

As I was reflecting on passion this week, I was taken back to one of my favorite movies—Like Water for Chocolate. Most of you may know this movie—if you haven’t seen it, then you need to rent it. The title of the movie refers to the Mexican practice of making hot chocolate—they boil water and then pour it over the chocolate to melt it into a rich and steamy drink. Mexican chocolate has cinnamon in it, and this concoction is a dream. But the saying, “like water for chocolate”—it refers to the belief that the water has a longing for the chocolate—that this is what brings it to a boil---it is passionate for the chocolate—which I can understand, having strong feelings for chocolate myself. There is nothing the water more deeply desires than to be poured out for its beloved—the chocolate.... If you’re water, that’s a far more profound experience than being made into a simple cup of tea.

In many Latin countries, this phrase, “Like Water for Chocolate” speaks of the desire of men and women for one another, and so in the mystical Christian tradition—the tradition that Julian works out of—it would also be apt to speak of Christ’s desire or passion for us, his beloved—that Christ desires nothing more than to be poured out and united to us.

The crux of the plot in the movie is the passion shared between the youngest daughter of a widow, Tita, and her beloved, Pedro. But Tita’s widowed mother, Mama Elena, will not allow their relationship to go forward. It is a tradition in their family that the youngest daughter never marries so that she can care for the mother into her old age, and Mama Elena, in her selfish pride, imposes this tortuous discipline on Tita. Indeed, in her cruelty, she instead offers to Pedro Tita’s incompetent older sister, Rosaura, as a partner in marriage. Pedro, for some reason, thinks this is a good idea precisely because he loves Tita so much. By marrying Rosaura, he figures, he can move in with her and Mama Elena, and so also with Tita. It’s clear that Tita doesn’t love Pedro for his brains,..., but it

does make for a wonderful plot with so much frustrated love, passion, and jealousy under one roof.

Tita is someone able of deep focus in the movie. At one point she works out her depression over her agonizing situation by taking up crocheting night after night as an expression of her longing for Pedro. As the narrator recounts her efforts, we see the blanket that she's working on stretching for miles outside of her house. Tita, in this capacity for persistent focus, is a person of Lent. That's what we do in this time of spiritual discipline—we work on bringing our passion to a focus—our passion for God, our passion for our neighbor, our passion for the care of our own souls. Lent is a time to focus passion, even as Jesus' passion was focused. The story of the gospel is the story of a focused life—a life that crochets its passion across the years, knitting the fabric of our salvation....

In time, Tita realizes that she needs another avenue for her passion, and so she becomes a master cook—working in the kitchen daily with the old family cook, learning all of her tricks. Tita becomes an excellent cook, but more importantly, this creative outlet allows her to pour herself into her cooking. It becomes not just her expression of herself, but her gift of herself, and no one who ate at her table could fail to be moved by her grace.

Perhaps the most memorable scene in the movie revolves around one particular meal that Tita prepares, Quail with Rose petals—a dish that was exceptional not simply for its taste, but because Tita poured herself fully into it. She poured her love into it, her passion—she filled the meal with an intensity of longing and desire, so that those who ate it---well, let's just say that all the couples at the meal rushed to their rooms by the end of that course, and weren't seen until morning.

Only Tita's middle sister, Gertrudis, was at the meal alone—she had no partner, no beloved. Tita's passion filled her and she was in such torment that she rushes out to the shower to lower the temperature within her. Only, “many waters cannot quench love,” we know, and so the outhouse containing the shower instead burst into flames, so powerful

was Gertrudis' ardor. It so happens at that time a handsome Mexican revolutionary was riding across the plains, saw the flames of the outhouse and the young woman running naked into the wilderness. He rides by and sweeps her up onto his horse, and she only returns later in the movie as a leader of the revolution with her beloved.

I can't recall this scene in a Christian context without my mind turning to the Eucharist—a meal of love prepared by Jesus—a meal into which he has poured himself fully—through which he pours himself fully into us. I don't know if any of you have ever fled the table, ablaze with love, only to be swept up by a revolutionary and carried off to war.... But that should happen. Again, this is what it means to be a Lenten people---it's to be a people who have truly been touched by Christ's passion—no, who have truly ingested Christ's passion, Christ's love for the world, so that it becomes our passion and our love. We are to burn with it.... This, for many folks in the Julian study, has been a stumbling block in appropriating her message. Julian is so clearly aflame with Christ's love, and we so seldom feel that flame.... But then that's one thing that we learn from the movie, isn't it. That flame of desire is poured into us as we are touched by Christ's passion. We don't manufacture it—we are overcome by it. But in Lent, we remind ourselves to bring ourselves to the meal, to open ourselves to its goodness, so that our hearts will at least have the opportunity to burst into flame.

That bursting of the lovers into flame is the last scene in the story. As the story runs its course, both Mama Elena and Rosaura die, leaving Tita and Pedro to themselves. They meet finally at the ranch, and they embrace, and, again, their ardor burns so hot that the house bursts into flames and they are consumed by the intensity of their love. They are consumed, but we are also left to believe that they are united eternally. They literally embody their passions so that the two of them, together, become the flames that dwell in their hearts—and they live on as the flame of love, each entwined with the other.

It's an image a long way from that shortest of verses—Jesus wept—that started me on this odyssey. But the leap isn't really as great as you might imagine. Jesus wept because, like Tita, he saw his beloved lost to him. Jesus weeps at a humanity in the thrall of

death—not only Lazarus but all of those who mourned him, who were caught in death’s web. Jesus wept at the loss of his beloved, pouring out his passion in his tears, and then in the bread and wine of this table. He weeps to that he might work our transformation, so that we might be entwined with him in a final embrace and consumed in love. That’s a scary thought, I know—to be consumed by our Beloved. But that also has been the task of our lent—to free ourselves for this embrace. I pray that your lent has been fruitful and holy. Amen.