

# **PASSION**

## Romans 12:9-21

Kelly Boyte Brill  
Avon Lake UCC  
22 May 2016  
(Graduate Recognition)

Tis the season for commencement speeches. I heard one at Ohio University the last Saturday in April. I heard one on May 13 at Vanderbilt Law School. Our high school graduates will be hearing theirs soon. The best commencement addresses are ones that are interesting, not trite, and ones that engage not just the graduates but everyone in the room.

What would Jesus say if he were your commencement speaker? It may seem like a presumptuous question to even ask, but then again, we have many snippets in the gospels of speeches and messages Jesus delivered. And we know quite a bit about the way Jesus lived his life, we know something about his relationships and the decisions he made. Based on all of that evidence, I imagine that, were Jesus giving your commencement speech, he might say something like this, advice for all of us, regardless of our age or stage in life:

Be yourself. God has created each of us with a unique set of gifts and talents. Every person in this room has something to contribute to the world, something no one else can do. No one else has the exact same set of experiences and attributes. Don't try to imitate other people. It's a particular hazard in the era of social media. It's never been easier to compare ourselves to others. Most people broadcast their best selves. Few people show the world what they look like when they first wake up in the morning. Few people tell others how disappointed they are in a family member or in themselves. So other people's lives look perfect and glamorous, and we feel inadequate.

Before Jesus began his public ministry, he faced three temptations. The temptations were for him to become someone else. “Become a magician”, one temptation said to him. “Perform magic tricks and impress people!” He said, “No.” Another temptation said to him, “Be a powerful ruler, so that you can influence more people.” But he said, “No, that’s not who God is calling me to be.” He refused all three temptations because he knew himself.

When we are truly ourselves, we can live with authenticity and passion. Don’t you love the way LeBron plays basketball? He’s not trying to be Michael Jordan, he’s not trying to be anyone else. He knows himself, he maximizes his strengths, and he’s all in.

I don’t think we should ever stop looking for mentors, role models, people who have something to teach us. Find someone you admire for a certain quality or attribute and soak up all you can from that person. But don’t try to become them. Don’t try to become anyone other than who God has created you to be. The world doesn’t need two Picassos. The world doesn’t need another Einstein. Believe it or not, we don’t even need another LeBron. We need the best YOU that you can be.

Last fall we used this quote as part of our worship series. It’s one of my favorites: “Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire.”

If Jesus were giving your commencement speech, he would tell you that life is a gift to be enjoyed, not a prison sentence to be endured. Find your joy, discover what you love, and live with passion. Far too many of us spend far too many hours just getting by. Now no one’s life is 100% joy. But most of us could do far better at practicing the habits that bring more joy into our lives.

Did you hear about Jane Little last week? Jane made history as the longest-serving member of any orchestra in the world. She played bass for the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra for 71 years. She died last weekend, doing what she loved. She was onstage. She had just finished playing the song, “There’s No Business Like Show Business” when she collapsed. She was 87 years old. She joined the symphony when she was 16. In a recent interview, she said, “It’s a hard life, but I absolutely love what I do. I always have.” Her life wasn’t always easy. She survived multiple myeloma, a broken shoulder, pelvis, and elbow – those breaks might have had something to do with the fact that she was 4’11” and her instrument was 6’5”. The size of her double bass was one reason she decided to marry her husband, she told reporters. He was a flute player, so she recruited him to carry her instrument for her.

She lived with enthusiasm, a wonderful word which literally means, “to be filled with God.” Passionate people are people who tap into the gifts of the Holy Spirit which bring joy into the world.

But Jesus would remind us that thinking only about ourselves is never the path to joy or fulfillment. Know yourself, yes. Be yourself, love yourself, accept yourself. But too much focus on what makes us happy will NOT make us happy. Going beyond ourselves, reaching out to others, is the key to a life worth living. When we pour ourselves out for the sake of a cause greater than ourselves we find life’s deepest and richest meaning.

About 100 years after Jesus a man named Tarfon became a rabbi in Jerusalem. This is one of his enduring quotes: **"It is not your responsibility to finish the work of perfecting the world, but you are not free to desist from it either."** We are each called to leave the world better than we found it. That can happen in all kinds of ways.

You might want to go on a mission trip to the Dominican Republic, or to India, or you might want to stay at your kitchen table and write letters to our legislators. You might want to teach new refugees English language skills or you might want to make dinner for new and harried parents. How are you called to perfect the world? Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: “To leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch, or a redeemed social condition; to know that even one life has breathed easier because you have lived - that is to have succeeded.”

What if each of us pledged to try to bring more kindness into the world? Because life is hard. It’s hard in different ways for each of us, but there’s no question about it – it’s hard. And kindness helps. Kindness softens the edges of life. Kindness says, “I don’t know exactly what you’re going through, but I want the best for you. I’m going to give you the benefit of the doubt, instead of looking for your faults. I’m not expecting you to be perfect, because I am so aware of my own flaws and failings.” Jesus lived with both passion and kindness. He spoke his mind, he wasn’t afraid of conflict, but he was never mean-spirited. He spoke up for everything that was important to him, but he never put others down. He treated everyone he met with respect and dignity, because each person is a beloved child of God.

What would Jesus say if he were your commencement speaker? Be yourself, the best version of yourself that you can be. Discover your passion, find your joy, be of service to others, leave the world a better place.