

Do you have a favorite romantic movie, a chick flick or a rom com or a tear-jerker, perhaps? When you think of passion in film, who comes to mind? Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet, perhaps, in “Titanic”? Patrick Swayze and Demi Moore in “Ghost”? Ryan O’Neal and Ally McGraw in “Love Story”? Or maybe you’d vote for one of the classics—Audrey Hepburn and Gregory Peck in “Roman Holiday” or Cary Grant and Deborah Kerr (CAR) in “An Affair to Remember” or Ingmar Bergman and Humphrey Bogart in “Casablanca.” In each of these movies, we catch a glimpse of passion: lovers locked in passionate embrace, exchanging a fervent kiss, or casting sparks between them even when they’re at opposite sides of the dance floor.

What comes to mind when you hear the word “passion”? A favorite piece of music, like Ravel’s “Bolero” or Wagner’s “Liebestod”? A work of art, perhaps one of many titled “The Kiss”: the gold-flecked painting by Gustav Klimt, a square stone carving by Carl Brancusi in which the lovers are inseparable, a sculpture by Pierre Rodin, or that iconic comic book style smooch in primary colors by Roy Lichtenstein? Or a moment in a ballet, such as Prokofiev’s Balcony Scene in “Romeo and Juliet”?

When I think of passion, I think of art and music and dance and food and wine, but I also think of people. People who have a passion for a particular college team, for example, or a passion for pistachio, or pasta, or pinot noir. Or people whose passion has made a difference in the world by focusing time and energy and heart on a particular cause—peace, for example, or justice, or combatting domestic violence. I think, for example, of Ruth Youngdahl Nelson and Medgar Evers and Oskar Schindler.

Ruth Youngdahl Nelson was a homemaker who had a passion for peace. Married to a Lutheran pastor, she raised five children in the 1930’s, two of whom became pastors, one a missionary, and one the director of a social service agency. Her Lutheran faith informed her passion for peace; all her life she spoke about peace, demonstrated for peace, and lived in ways that taught others about peace. In her late 70’s, she left her home in Minnesota and traveled to the West Coast to demonstrate against the manufacture of the Trident submarine. She explained her participation in the blockade of the submarine, which she and other activists attempted to surround by several small boats: “Whether I was thrown into those cold waters, I had to put my life on the line.” A couple of years later, in Minnesota, not long before her death, she participated in a demonstration against the defense contractor, Honeywell, from her wheelchair. Nelson worked for peace her whole life; she had a passion for peace.

Medgar Evers was an African American civil rights leader who had a passion for freedom. Rejected by the University of Mississippi Law School because of the color of his skin, he became the NAACP’S first field secretary in that state. He received frequent death threats, but he continued to push on for the cause of freedom. At a benefit concert by Lena Horne to raise bail money for those arrested for protesting segregation, Evers said, “Freedom has never been free. I love my children. I love my wife with all my heart. And I would die and die gladly, if that would make a better life for them.” Four days later Evers was assassinated in his driveway. Knowing the risks inherent in his work, he bore them willingly, because he had a passion for freedom.

Oskar Schindler’s original passions were for women and profit, but gradually another passion overtook all his resources, all his energy, all his time. A business owner in Krakow, Poland during the Third Reich, he opened a factory to employ Jews at low wages to manufacture goods for Germany’s war

machine. From their efforts he realized huge profits, but when his workers were threatened with deportation to Auschwitz and certain death, he was overtaken by a passion to save their lives. The Jewish factory workers had been nothing more than laborers to him, nothing more than his access to wealth and comfort. But as Hitler's "Final Solution" was implemented, he began to risk his wealth, his comfort, his belongings, his business, his property, his freedom, and even his life, for their lives. In constant danger of discovery and therefore execution, Schindler nonetheless deceived and bribed Nazi officials, following his passion for saving the lives of his Jewish workers.

Ruth Youngdahl Nelson, Medgar Evers, Oskar Schindler. Each had a passion; each discovered something in life which grasped and held them, something that directed their energies and to which they devoted their life. And each took risks to achieve that purpose, propelled by their passion. For them, their passion was, as the dictionary says, "a compelling, intense feeling or emotion; love; ardent affection; amorous desire; violent anger; zeal; ardor; avid desire; a display of deep feeling; a pursuit to which one is devoted." But the dictionary also offers a second definition of "passion": the last suffering and death of Jesus Christ, beginning with the Last Supper and ending with Jesus' death and burial. Jesus' "Passion" is recorded in each of the gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

The root of the word "passion" certainly suggests the second meaning for us in our reflection today. "Passion" comes from the Greek noun *pathos*, which means "suffering." As we have heard the Passion account from the gospel of John on this Good Friday, as we are remembering the last suffering of our Lord and his death for us, we are focusing on his Passion, his suffering and death, beginning with his entry into the garden and ending with his burial.

But what about that first meaning? While the phrase "The Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ" certainly refers to Jesus' suffering and death, could we also define "the Passion of Christ" as "the ardent affection of Christ, the zeal of Christ, the intense desire of Christ"? Like Youngdahl Nelson and Evers and Schindler, Jesus had a passion. He, too, found something in life which grasped and held him. He, too, followed a purpose to which he devoted his whole life. And he took dangerous risks in order to fulfil that purpose.

What was that purpose? What was Jesus' "Passion"? What was that "something" which grasped Jesus and held him fast throughout his earthly life and death? What was the purpose to which he devoted his whole life, because of which he gave up being God in order to "be born in human likeness," as today's second lesson reminds us? What was the purpose because of which Jesus took mortal risk—the risk of being born as a helpless baby, the risk of being misunderstood and mistreated, the risk of losing his life?

What was that purpose? What was the Passion of Jesus? YOU, my friend. Jesus was grasped by love for you. Jesus devoted his whole life to sharing God's love with you! Jesus took dangerous risks so that you might know and feel the love that God has for you!

The Passion of Christ. A compelling, intense emotion. A powerful love, an ardent affection. An avid desire, a deeply felt zeal, a relentless pursuit, for you. The Passion of Christ, for you. AMEN