

This past spring, when Joan and the boys were off from school, we decided to rent a cabin in the Smoky Mountains for spring break. The subject of vacation came up one day when we were visiting with the parents of Spencer's girlfriend and they said it sounded like fun, so we ended up going together. I can't remember now whether it was their idea to go and we tagged along, or whether it was our idea and they tagged along. But we all decided it would fun to go together. By then, Spencer and his girlfriend had been dating for a little over a year, which is like fifty years in teenage years.

So we rented a cabin and I immediately began to wonder, "What if Spencer and his girlfriend break up before we go on the trip?" That would ruin everything. So I began to pray, "Dear God, if they're going to break up, let it be after the vacation, not before."

But their relationship survived the vacation, we all had a wonderful time, and they're still together.

We've been talking about the passages of life, those moments when we move from one status to another, and what they teach us about ourselves, others, and God.

Today, I want to talk about our first passions, about the first time we love something or someone beyond ourselves or our own family. The novelist Graham Greene once wrote, “There is always a moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in.” And that’s really what I want to talk about, about that moment in our lives when the door opened and our future walked in. For some of us it was a person, our first love, for others of us, it was a field of study, hobby, or passion that grabbed our attention and held it.

Jane Goodall, who did groundbreaking work with apes and chimpanzees in Africa, remembers when her interest in working with primates began. She was two years-old, living in London, England, and her mother gave her a stuffed toy chimpanzee. And the light went on. She grew so fascinated with animals, that as a child she once spent five hours in a chicken coop so she could see how hens lay eggs. At the age of 11, her dream was to visit Africa. She skipped college, worked as a secretary, then a waitress, saving money to take a trip to Africa. She is one of only eight persons to get a doctorate from Cambridge without going to undergraduate school first. When asked what first got her excited about chimpanzees, she talked about that toy her mother had given her at the age of two. There is always a moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in.

Why are first loves or first passions so important? Because they teach us we have the capacity to love and care for something or someone beyond ourselves. They teach us that happiness in life lies in our ability to engage other people or embrace significant work.

One of the saddest things in life is meeting someone who has never had a great passion, never cared about anyone or anything beyond themselves.

First passions, first loves, are important because they teach us we have the capacity to love someone or something beyond ourselves and our family. That's the first point I want to share with you. Have a passion. Love someone or something beyond yourself.

My other point is this, and I'll paraphrase the musical *South Pacific*: Once you have found it, never let it go.

I've been doing quite a few weddings lately. I didn't used to like to do weddings. I knew people spent a lot of money on them, not to mention the emotional investment, and I always worried I would make a mistake and screw everything up. But a couple years ago I stopped feeling that way and now I really enjoy them.

So I was doing a wedding not long ago and the Bible reading was from Matthew's gospel, when Jesus was approached by some folks and asked whether it was permissible to divorce under certain circumstances. Jesus quoted from the book of Genesis, the part where the first woman was created from the first man's rib. At the conclusion of the story, the author of Genesis wrote, "A man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh." So Jesus recalls that story, then adds, "What God has joined together, let not man put asunder."

I always thought that verse was all about sexual intimacy, this becoming one flesh. Now I'm not so sure. It includes that, but I think it also means more than that. I think it's about becoming so deeply connected to someone or something you feel as if you've been given a gift, as if it's a part of you. It might be a relationship, it might be your vocation, it might be a friendship. But it's something or someone you love so deeply, something or someone that brings you so much joy, you can't imagine life without it or them. It feels as if God has given you this wonderful gift, and you're just so incredibly grateful for it. It brings you great joy. And what did Jesus say about such things? He said, "Those passions and loves are from God. Treasure them. Be grateful for them. Don't let other people diminish them or tear them down. And don't you go out and run roughshod over someone else's great joy or passion."

There's a lady down the road from us who has about a million dogs. I think the county allows you three, so she's 999,997 dogs over the limit. When we first moved there, 12 years ago, I was all charged up and was going to have the county do something about those dogs. I mentioned to another neighbor what I was going to do, and he said, "Ah, geez. It's all she has."

Then I felt like a jerk, so I thought about it some more. Those dogs had never hurt me. Never harmed my children. In fact, one of them would come over from time to time and we'd sit on the back porch and talk. This neighbor just loved those dogs. Everywhere she went on her property, they'd follow her around. They were well fed. Of course, every now and then they'd chase Lee Comer on his bicycle, but we all need a little excitement in our lives, so they were actually doing him a favor.

The joys and passions we have in life, the great loves, the meaningful work, the things that bring us joy, are gifts to us. The author of Genesis said they came from God, and Jesus agreed with that. Jesus also said, "Don't take them lightly. Don't diminish those gifts, yours or anyone else's. Don't let others steal your gifts away, and don't you steal anyone else's gift away. What God has joined together, don't let the world tear asunder."

You look back on your life, and you recall how wonderful it was when the door of your life opened and let in the future. Maybe it was a love for a person. Maybe it was a passion to care for animals. Maybe it was your first glimpse at your future vocation, or your first awareness of a great cause that would inspire and ignite your life. Don't let anyone take that from you. And don't you take it from anyone else.

This is what first loves teach us: That happiness lies in loving something or someone beyond ourselves. There is always a moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in. That's the first point. The second point is this: These joys are gifts from God. Don't let the world tear them down, and don't you tear down someone else's joy.