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Sermon Title: Giannicchi, Ficalora, and God
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My father was always trying to supplement my education. So whenever there was something he thought I should see or do, he would show up at P.S. 90 and take me out of school. It could be the Yankees' Opening Day or the Museum of Natural History or meeting soldiers at Fort Hamilton. And often it was a movie he thought I should see, like "A Tale of Two Cities" or "Old Yeller."

One day he pulled me out of school mid-day and dropped me off outside an art-house movie theater showing "The Gospel According to St. Matthew." In Italian. I loved it! It really *was* the Gospel according to St. Matthew, a brilliant movie by the great director Franco Zeffirelli. And it made me proud to be a Christian. Jesus and his disciples were very determined, very ... very earnest. They were in a rush. What they were doing was obviously important, urgent, vital. They were passionate about it.

Suddenly, all those years of Sunday School lessons and Vacation Bible School and all my father's sermons made sense. This was big stuff! I could see it, right up there on the screen: Jesus and the disciples rushing about at a frantic pace, trying to save the world. Suddenly, when Jesus said, "Pick up your cross and follow me" ... "Go the extra mile" ... "Love" ... "Go ye into all the world" ... "Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the lonely," suddenly it all made sense.

I got to thinking about this last Saturday. Alida and I went to the Blues, Views & BBQ Festival in Westport at the Levitt Pavilion. Right there, passion was front and center; determination and commitment were on display. Our own John Giannicchi, "Johnny Boots," as he's known, his blues band kicked off the festival, and they were kickin' it! I've never heard John sound better, running through old Blues classics and highlights of his own music. He was on fire! And never more so than when he picked up his slide guitar, bending those notes, wailing, shaping the music to match the emotion. John was a master craftsman doing what he loves to do.

In the audience were the Ficalora and Grandchamp families from our church, who were there for the barbecue competition. As crazy and passionate as Johnny Boots is about his music, Rick Ficalora and Matt Grandchamp are just as crazy, just as passionate about barbecue.

Now, as crazy as they are about their food, and I'll tell you about that in a minute, what really inspired me was listening to them talk about their food. Their eyes lit up, smiles a mile wide, passion in their voices. So there I was, John Giannicchi up on the stage, going crazy on this slide guitar, and 20 feet in front of the stage Rick and Matt are describing their Holy Grail of barbecue. It was an amazing collision in time and space of these church families living their passion, doing what they love for the sheer love of it.

That's church. That's what it takes to be a real church, a good church, a church worth its name. People not afraid to go a little nuts, to be a little passionate, for what they believe in.

On another stage, Sarah Kaden, a high school girl from our church, was with her band playing guitar and singing, smiling with joy and self-assurance, then bounding off the stage into the arms of friends and family, hugs and high fives, a young woman loving what she's doing.

That's church. That's the spirit and the attitude it takes to be a truly good church. Passion. Joy. Delight. Doing what you love.

Jesus told a lot of stories, "parables," we call them, and he did a lot of things designed to get your attention. We can pretty easily summarize them. They usually contrasted somebody who was willing to go all out with somebody who settles for just sliding by. Whether it's your faith life, your work life, your athletic life, or your just plain *life* life, you'll always find yourself with two choices: be that person who goes all out, or be that person who slides by. This church refuses to slide by.

Now that we have no children at home, Alida and I, like many of you, are looking for new routines. One such routine is that one day a week, we get up early, drive to a favorite coffeehouse in New Haven, and work for a few hours, while the world of Yale University wakes up all around us.

We sit at a table next to a big window, and there is a beggar who stands right outside the window. Sometimes his nose right up to the windowpane, staring, begging, intimidating. I don't like him. He obviously never went to beggar school. He never smiles, he's not friendly. Indeed, he's quite rude and obnoxious. Right in front of the coffeehouse are three round wooden planters. All summer they've been full of beautiful flowers. And this beggar

always sits in one of the planters, right on the flowers, for hours, killing them all. While staring at me. So last Saturday I go up to the counter and order another coffee. When I returned to the table, Alida is gone! Yep, she's outside the window, talking to the beggar ... and taking his order for breakfast. She's taking his order! He has a favorite food, cheesesteak, from a favorite restaurant. And off she goes to get the obnoxious beggar his cheesesteak for breakfast. And when Alida delivered his cheesesteak to him, he's still staring at me and I swear he winked at me! It was as if he was saying, "Boy, Mister, you got a crazy one."

Which actually is my point. Like Rick Ficalora and Matt Grandchamp, the barbecue men, and John Giannicchi, guitar hero, and Sarah Kaden, Alida has a passion for trying to be a Christian as if it's important to her. For me, I'm sitting in a coffeehouse writing my sermon with my Bible open on the table. That's enough Christianity for me for one morning. I wouldn't give myself an A for the day as a Christian, but maybe a B-. That's O.K. Not much passion to it.

Thankfully, some people won't settle for that, some people actually live all that Jesus stuff. All that "go the extra mile ... turn the other cheek ... love your enemy ... forgive 70 times seven ... feed the hungry..." even if he's a hungry, flower-killing, obnoxious, hoodwinking beggar.

Did I forget to describe the Ficalora barbecue extravaganza? He calls it the "Bacon Explosion." First, they make a latticework fence out of bacon. Literally. A bacon latticework fence — bacon strips woven into a latticework — that goes on the top and bottom. In between goes a huge old pork round with sausage stuffing. Pork, filled with pork, wrapped in pork, and cooked to a fare-thee-well. It reminded me of an old church joke. A bunch of farm animals had a church. The church budget was a little tight, so the animals decided to host a fundraiser. The chicken says, "Let's have a ham and egg breakfast!" "Wait a minute," says the pig, "a ham and egg breakfast? For you, that's just a small donation. For me that's total commitment!"

Well actually, other than turning yourself into a bacon latticework fence, other than that, that's the passion that makes this a great church. We're glad this is your church, we're glad this is your church family. You make this a good church, a really good church. And we've got a great year ahead of us.

But I warn you. It's going to be crazy in here. And that's a good thing.