

"Zeal"

a sermon by

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Our text today comes from John 2:13-22. Just before this Jesus is with his disciples at the wedding feast in Cana, turning water into wine as a sign of God's abundance. But now, we gain a very different kind of glimpse into the character of Christ. Here he is at the temple in Jerusalem and he is very angry.

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken."

Not the image of Jesus that we are accustomed to, is it?. When we think of Jesus the images that come to mind tend to be pretty well sanitized- maybe even a little airbrushed. There's the laughing Jesus- head thrown back, pearly white teeth exposed. Praying Jesus kneeling at a rock with a shaft of light cascading around him. Jesus the good shepherd carrying a lamb over his shoulders. Jesus sitting at the table flanked by disciples. Jesus walking across the waters perhaps- robe flapping in the wind. And, of course, Jesus with the little children. These are all good and well. But not exhaustive if we're thinking of what Jesus must have looked like as he walked through this world. Certainly the image of Jesus that is probably least likely to be one that we call upon when we are seeking solace or encouragement for our lives of faith is the one that we see today. Angry Jesus. Jesus with a bull whip, clenched teeth, and fire in his eyes as he goes after the people and clears out the main hall of this massive temple. Jesus screaming and flailing his arms and making a huge mess of things. Jesus surrounded by wary onlookers and shocked disciples wondering what in the world to do next. Jesus, looking like some sort of enraged, hurt, trapped animal with the cops- the temple priests- looking on with grave disapproval wondering, as they express here, just who in the world this guy thinks he is disrupting the business of the temple on one of its biggest holidays of the year, and murmuring that perhaps a way should be found to put him out of his misery.

This is one of the few stories recorded in all of the gospels. John places it right after the wedding feast, as we said- putting a story about the abundance and new life available in God through Christ right up next to a story about Christ turning tables- this new life is a big threat to the existing order- that much John wants to make perfectly clear right from the get go. And so we see this story in chapter 2 of the gospel. The other gospels place this toward the end of their story, though. And you can certainly see why. This story bumps right up next to the story of the triumphal entry, the passion, the crucifixion- it paves the way for Christ's suffering with the discontent it stirs up within the powers that be. But John wants us to know right up front that this is a part of Jesus that just isn't going to go away.

The scripture gives us a little insight into what at least a few people were thinking about the whole matter, "His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." What they were thinking must have been driving him was the same zeal written about in the songs and prayers of the Hebrews. Most specifically, in what is recorded for us as Psalm 69 that reads, in part, "Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I am worn out calling for help. My eyes fail, looking for my God. Those who hate me without reason outnumber the hairs of my head; may those who hope in you not be disgraced because of me. For I endure scorn for your sake, and shame covers my face. I am a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my own mother's sons; for the zeal of your house consumes me. Do not hide your face from your servant; answer me quickly, for I am in trouble."

What the disciples identified him with was the zeal. The enthusiasm. The fervor for the Lord and the way it was to be in his house. "The zeal of the Lord's house

consumes me.” The psalmist says. Essentially, saying that he is a nut for God- causing him to be shunned and worse. He’s zealous. A zealot. The connotation is not altogether positive and, as you can see, the rewards not always so great. Someone whose enthusiasm gets in the way of reason and clouds their judgement. Whose excitement does not lend itself to temperance or moderation. Someone who has simply had it with the status quo because they believe that what they are a part of is actually so much greater than could ever be contained in a mere institution. Such was the case, the disciples seemed to believe, with Jesus. They remembered reading somewhere that such zeal could be all consuming. And now their teacher was turning tables. It would appear they were right.

It’s not that what was taking place in the temple was so unusual. Buying and selling livestock was big business in the temple. Pilgrims came from all over to make sacrifices- particularly during such a holy feast as passover and so rather than travel with the animals they would buy animals there not only so that they could participate in the feast but in worship. They would also want to pay tithes as was required of them but the money they brought from all over the empire was not accepted in the temple- it bore the image of Ceasar with an inscription claiming that he was a god.

So not unlike in the way that you might change over your currency from US dollars to gourdes, say, if you traveled to Haiti, or the Euro abroad, so you also had to exchange your worldly money for special temple money that was supposed to be better suited to God. But, of course, abuses occurred.

Slip in a small exchange rate for the funds. Hike up the price of doves one year than possibly cattle the next. But what John seems to suggest made Christ so zealous was not his anger over the excesses but his authority. It’s not that the things that the people were doing were wrong, it’s that they didn’t need to be doing them at all. Here all of the trading, the money changing, the market had been set up to facilitate worship. But now that Christ was here, rather than drawing the people closer to God, they actually pulled them farther away by promoting and profiting from the idea that these things were essential in order to be near to the divine. When in fact they were not. What was once essential had become extraneous. And as proof, and in a little play on words Jesus said, this temple would be torn down and raised back up on the third day. Only the power of God would be revealed not in the temple of brick and mortar but in his body. Jesus’ body will, actually, become the temple because he himself will be the ultimate sacrifice. And when he is raised, the purpose of the temple will be accomplished- the sins of the people will be forgiven. So forget the other stuff, he says. Put your energy and investment toward the temple where God’s kingdom will really reign. Put it, he says, in me.

I met with our catechism class this past Sunday- a group of fourth graders who are learning all about our faith by studying the Child’s Catechism- a guide that basically goes through all the essentials like what is sin, what is grace, what is the trinity. They learn some sophisticated things, including what is justification and sanctification, and the decalogue (incidentally, it’s the 10 commandments- which they can name in order) and so forth. What amazes me every year is not only the kids’ capacity to memorize 148

questions and answers about our faith, but to really internalize what those answers mean and incorporate them into how they think about faith and life. Well, I asked one little boy what was something that he learned about that he felt was really interesting in catechism this year and he quickly piped up, “the tabernacle!” I was really taken aback. Needless to say, I would have guessed that a fourth grader would have found plenty of parts of our faith to be far more interesting than our distant relative the ancient Hebraic temple system.

What about it? I asked. “Well, I like how in the temple there was a curtain that separated the people from what they called the holiest of holies- where God was supposed to live. And when Jesus died the curtain tore in half, and that meant that when he died he destroyed all the things that stand between the people and God forever. So we don’t ever have to be afraid of being separated from him, even when we sin.”

I was floored. Not only because his answer was so incredibly complex for a fourth grader, but because what had stood out as most interesting to him was actually what is most essential about our faith. That Jesus lived and died to remove every obstacle that stands between us and our God forever. The story he recounted takes place, obviously, in the gospels too. It is another example of what was once so essential for the life of faith- a boundary for the many being negotiated by the few- being overthrown by Christ. A Christ that demands that we strip away the excesses. Cast out the distractions. Disregard the money that is falling to the floor, or the commodities being driven out of the outer courts of the market. It is the Christ who rips apart the veil of sin that obstructs our view of God and his embrace of us so that we no longer need special sacrifices to reach him, or special people to speak to him on our behalf, but in Christ have all access all the time. Because he is the temple, and he is the sacrifice. The sacrifice is made once and for all, and when we live in him we are always standing at the altar face to face with the almighty, and invited to worship. And all because of the immensity of God’s love for us. Love that Jesus embodied. Love that would have him scorned and shunned and beaten and killed. Because in his zeal he did not want any of the people to be left out of the gift of knowing the Lord.

There is something about Lent that challenges us to purge away everything but the essential. To get down to what really matters. To- not reject those sanitized images of Jesus that we carry with us, but to put them in the context of the whole so that we don’t evade and overlook the demanding parts of Jesus. The convicting ones. The ones we don’t like to face, that ask something of us, that embarrass us. Because Lent really is a bit of an embarrassment. When we are challenged to proclaim the authority of Christ when he looks like an ordinary guy. Or to stand beside him as followers when he seems to be on a rampage to overthrow all that we thought was fixed about life, our church, our society and salvation. To point to the sovereignty of God even when we are suffering with him. To say that, even though he might not look like much- riding in to town on a donkey, refusing to save even himself from betrayal and sorrow, we do proclaim him as Lord. And yes, this God sometimes draws attention to himself and to us in ways that we really wish he wouldn’t. But he does. And ultimately we need him to as does the world. A commitment to such a God can make us sound a little zealous too. It might have

people wondering. But who knows, perhaps we need more zeal. Perhaps we could use to live out of a little more enthusiasm for life and its possibilities over reason. And excitement about the potential of our spiritual lives rather than being so moderate with our devotion. I would venture to say there are inequities in our status quo that could use to be overturned by some zeal. And new pathways through the kingdom to be forged when we stop relying on institutions to always set the pace for our future, and instead try and keep up with the call of God. Lent is the call to remove the obstacles that we heap up between ourselves and the altar of God's love within us. And when we do so, we may be surprised by just how Christ like- and I do mean like all of Christ- we can be. And the world really does need it all. Amen.