

Zeal for Your House Will Consume Me

John 2:13-22

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Zeal. Zealous. Zealot. The words that derive from that word *zeal*, have fallen out of favor. They have become synonyms for words like “fanatic” or stand next to unsavory adjectives, as in “crazed zealot.” The primary word – zeal – generally receives mixed reactions, and while the second term – zealous – doesn’t fare quite as well, the noun, zealot, now that has come to have an almost entirely negative modern connotation. A zealot has come to be used to identify a mindless, fanatical commitment to something . . . anything.

My desktop dictionary goes about defining the term zeal and terms related to zeal in this way:

☞ “zeal: eagerness and ardent interest in pursuit of something.”

Fairly tame, that definition. But how about the related terms also listed there in my dictionary? They do not fare as well in popular understanding, I’m afraid:

☞ “zealot: A zealous person, especially a fanatical partisan.”

☞ “zealotry: Excess of zeal; fanatical devotion.”

☞ “zealous: filled with or characterized by zeal: missionaries.”

Missionaries? The overworked doctor in the missionary compound dispensing medicine for the suffering villagers gathered outside his door? The committed missionary teacher in the thatched hut, instructing rooms full of children how to read and write? Zealots related to those consumed by fanatical devotion? That little addition in the definition surprised me. It hardly seems fair, I have to say. Missionaries I have known are committed, faithful, self-sacrificing, yes, but if they are to be called zealous, then we may need to review any word association we make that connects zealotry with fanaticism.

Have you ever met a zealot? Who was it? How did you know he or she was a zealot? How was that experience for you? Annoying? Frightening? Disturbing? I suspect that usually we think of a zealot as someone who will not be deterred from his or her cause, no matter what, I think we may probably agree on that. And we tend to carry among us the notion that this is almost uniformly a bad thing. Yet, on the other hand, is an equivocating or constantly rationalizing faith always a good thing? Aren’t there aspects of our faith, times in our lives of faith, which call for a complete commitment? Even a measure of – I don’t know, dare we say it? – *zeal*?

Here is a difficult thing for most of us: If you ever were confronted by an uncompromising zealot who would not back down and who made you uncomfortable and perhaps even a little frightened, then you know how many of those felt who encountered Jesus. This is what makes our passage for today difficult for me. Jesus as zealot. That's not the Jesus I want. I want sweet Jesus meek and mild, I am attracted to Jesus the lover of my soul, Jesus the wise and wonderful, Jesus the pure expression of the loving and forgiving grace of God, all these characteristics attract me to Jesus. But Jesus as *zealot*? These days we are likely to think of a zealot as someone in black beheading a dazed journalist dressed in orange, as marauding Taliban shooting school girls, as wild-eyed fanatics who cannot see beyond their own blind loyalties to their tribe or faction. Yet it is not fair to leave it at that. Not if we read in scripture that Jesus is associated with a term like "zeal."

The disciples, seeing Jesus in action in the temple, thought of a psalm, which makes use of the word "zeal." "His disciples remembered," John said, "that it was written, '*Zeal for your house will consume me.*'" Verses from the Old Testament, when quoted in the New Testament, are meant to call to mind an entire passage, not just a random line: as when Jesus uttered from the cross the chilling opening words of Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" We are meant to think of that entire psalm, which speaks of the suffering of a righteous one, and a prayer that righteous one makes that God will come near, that God will save, the sort of prayer any of us would, and likely have made, at some time.

Here, seeing the teacher, whom they have only just begun to follow, chasing the animals from the temple precincts and turning over the money tables, the disciples recall a half-verse from Psalm 69. But they surely recalled the entire psalm, and we are meant to recall it too. It goes like this:

Save me, O God,
for the waters have come up to my neck.
I sink in deep mire,
where there is no foothold;
I have come into deep waters,
and the flood sweeps over me.
I am weary with my crying;
my throat is parched.
My eyes grow dim
with waiting for my God.

More in number than the hairs of my head
are those who hate me without cause;
many are those who would destroy me,
my enemies who accuse me falsely.

What I did not steal
must I now restore?

O God, you know my folly;
the wrongs I have done are not hidden from you.

Do not let those who hope in you be put to shame because of me,
O Lord GOD of hosts;
do not let those who seek you be dishonored because of me,
O God of Israel.

It is for your sake that I have borne reproach,
that shame has covered my face.

I have become a stranger to my kindred,
an alien to my mother's children.

It is zeal for your house that has consumed me;

the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.

When I humbled my soul with fasting,
they insulted me for doing so.

When I made sackcloth my clothing,
I became a byword to them.

I am the subject of gossip for those who sit in the gate,
and the drunkards make songs about me.

But as for me, my prayer is to you, O LORD.

At an acceptable time, O God,

in the abundance of your steadfast love, answer me.

With your faithful help

rescue me from sinking in the mire;

let me be delivered from my enemies

and from the deep waters.

Do not let the flood sweep over me,

or the deep swallow me up,

or the Pit close its mouth over me.

I hope you hear in this fuller quotation from Psalm 69 echoes of the cross and Jesus' suffering on it. Part of what these words foreshadow in our minds, and the minds of the disciples, is the cross to come. It is Jesus' uncompromising zeal that has done it. His zeal for the truth brings condemnation on him in the end. John quotes the phrase about zeal for the house of the Lord, as Paul quotes the second half of that verse in Romans 15:3, "For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, 'The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.'" Jesus stands in for God himself, to receive the insults that humanity daily heaps upon him.

A new and perfect sacrifice for the sake of the sins of all people had arrived at the temple. There would be no further need for sacrificial animals. The foreshadowing of Psalm 69 shows that in the self-giving sacrifice of Jesus, the need for other ritual sacrifices came to an end.

We get nervous when zeal is mentioned in connection with our faith – even if the zeal is the zeal of Christ. Someone may say that it is the zealots that have caused all the trouble in the world.

About this I have two thoughts. *One* is that there is little danger among the Presbyterians I have had the pleasure of knowing that our zeal for our faith will carry us off very far from our good sense. Born, as our denomination was, from a tradition of Scots common sense theology, we just don't seem much in danger of wandering off with some fanatic. *Second*, though, is this. As frightening as the prospect of a real and significant zeal for our faith might strike us, it is this very sort of commitment which changes limp, dilapidated faith into faith that lives. Most young people do not despise the idea of giving their lives for something, it is giving their lives for something *insignificant* that they despise. If our faith is the most significant thing about us, then why can we not follow the Messiah, give our lives to it, body and soul, and hear the call to do something heroic, even zealous for our faith? And here's the

thing, Jesus' zeal results in self-sacrificing love. There's the measure. The zealotry of those who demand the lives of others is suspect – not the passion that calls on us to yield our own. And the goal is healing, not hurting. Food for the hungry not arms for the militants. It is a passion for schools and hospitals not boot camps and prisons. If our gospel is love then we need not fear being zealous. We should fear being apathetic.

So, odd as it may sound, I pray that zeal for God's house would consume our common thoughts and actions, so that together we may carry forward not the dusty ashes, but the zealous fire of our faith into our future together.