

John 2:13-17

Third Sunday in Lent (Series B)

Lessons for the Day: Exodus 20:1-17; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; John 2:13-22

The Right Kind of Zeal

March 7, 2021

The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there. And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, "Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade." His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

What do you think of when you hear the word, "zeal"?

The word zeal is defined as an eagerness and ardent interest in pursuit of something. Someone may have a real zeal about unique foods and flavours which leads them to spend countless hours in the kitchen trying new recipes and new ingredients. Someone may have a zeal for travelling, and they find great joy in going to new and exotic locales, seeing the world and exploring its wonders. For some, zeal is tied to their favourite sports team, so that their whole home is decorated in team colours, with the team logo displayed in every room. Maybe you know people who have a zeal to keep up with the Kardashians. Hopefully, we have a zeal for the Lord and for His Word of truth.

In and of itself zeal can be a positive attribute. There is nothing wrong with having a deep interest or eagerness for music or art, for your favourite team or for your favourite food. But people can become overzealous. The Greek word has the idea of intensity and devotion. When we are zealous for something, we set our heart on it. It is often central to who we are and what we do. But that zeal can be out of control when it is for the wrong things, or when that for which we are zealous actually becomes the highest good in our life. In his Large Catechism, Luther reminds us: *Now, I say that whatever you set your heart on and put your trust in is truly your god.* (LC, 1st Commandment, 3) Misguided zeal can become our god and lead us away from God and from His gifts of life and forgiveness.

In our text today Jesus displays a love and zeal for the temple, the place where God's glory is made known to His people. That is something that we need, too. I would suggest that, in general, we need more zeal for God's house: a zeal that draws us to this place; a zeal that comes as we remember with joy and thanksgiving the privilege and honour we have as we come together in worship each week, as we gather here to join with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven in the praise of the greatest of the great—of Almighty God Himself. Our attitude towards worship is typically quite different than that of King David, who said: *I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord!"* (Psalm 122:1 - ESV) And in another psalm, David says: *O Lord, I love the habitation of your house and the place where your glory dwells.* (Psalm 26:8 - ESV)

In the Old Testament lesson today, we heard the commandments that God gave to His people. Did you notice that the two commandments that are the longest, because they included the most commentary, are the first and the third? The first says: *"You shall have no other gods before me.* (Exodus 20:3 - ESV) Our zeal for God will not allow anything else to take the place in our hearts and lives that should belong to God alone. The third commandment says: *"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.* (Exodus 20:8 - ESV), reminding us that only God is to be worshipped and praised. And how do we keep the Sabbath day? We keep the Sabbath day holy as we show the proper zeal for the house of the Lord, as we come to hear His word and offer Him our thanksgiving and praise. Or, as our Saviour says: *"Blessed... are those who hear the word of God and keep it!"* (Luke 11:28, ESV)

Even in these COVID days we can and do have zeal for God's house. Yes, we have restrictions that keep us from the regular routine of worship we have as God's people. There are limits to the number who can be in God's house at one time. We have all the protocols that we follow to show love and care for our neighbour by doing all we can to prevent the spread of the virus. Yet nothing that COVID has done—nor the rules our government has established—truly keeps us from the zeal we can have for God's house. We may be restricted to 15% of our capacity, but we could have

multiple services to bring more people together. We still have the blessing of our online service, and there is joy in knowing that God's people are still gathering in this way. Our new connections card for online worshippers brings me joy when I see the people who are still zealous to be with us together in God's Word. I urge you to fill out that card each week.

Yet there are those churches that maintain that true zeal is found in defying the authority of our civil authorities. Their watchword is, "the church must gather". Since we are commanded by God to gather, that is what they will do. Yet they will do it on their terms, even if breaks the law. They are claiming that it is loyalty to God that motivates them to break the law and set aside all the health care restrictions.

But is that the right kind of zeal? Is that the kind of zeal we see in Jesus in our text? There's no denying that we see Him acting in a way that is totally unexpected. Over and over, Jesus speaks of His Kingdom as so different from that of the world. He leaves the power of the sword to the secular government. His Kingdom is established, maintained, ruled and guided by the Word of God. It is preaching, teaching, admonition and consolation through the Word that reveals this Kingdom.

But now Christ has this whip of ropes, probably made from the ropes that were tethering the animals. He shows a righteous wrath and an opposition to the religious leaders. Martin Luther, in his sermon on this text asks: "*Why does He interfere with fist and sword and intervene in a matter that properly belongs into the sphere of the secular government? Isn't He acting as an insurrectionist?*" (LW, vol. 22, p. 223)

In His zeal for the Lord's house, Jesus was acting in accordance with the whole law of God. He opposes these secular and religious leaders not because they were making disagreeable rules, but because they thought themselves zealous for the Lord. It was required that the people come to the temple at various times. They were to come with a sacrifice. Bringing an animal with you was not always practical, so there were those more than willing to provide an animal or bird as required. The temple tax began in the days of restoration, but it had to be paid with temple coins, which did not bear a graven image of the emperor. In their actions, they told themselves that they were helping people fulfill the law of Moses. Of course, they were also getting rich through their sales of overpriced animals for sacrifice, and through the exchange rates they charged for the temple coins.

Jesus didn't drive out the money-changers and merchants simply because they were conducting business, but because they were doing it in the temple itself, in the outer courtyard, the only place where Gentiles were allowed to come and pray. What would our worship be like if we had a Tim Hortons or Starbucks in the overflow area or choir loft? Jesus drove them out because of their crass commercialism. Of course, the religious leaders didn't see it that way. They thought they were providing a service that enabled people to fulfill their obligations to God.

In our epistle lesson, Paul reminds us what the work of the Church is: "***but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.***" (1 Corinthians 1:23-24, ESV) We preach the good news of that Saviour, who died for us. To do that we must preach both law and Gospel. We have to show our need for the Saviour and the law shows we are sinners, who cannot save ourselves. Then we must preach how Jesus died to bring us forgiveness and life through His own death and resurrection. We preach Christ, the power of God who enables us to walk in the way of God's commandments. The commandments given to Israel are not optional rules. We can't pick and chose which of them we will obey. We are to love God and love our neighbour. We are to worship—and we do that in any way we can, whether the world permits it or not. We also obey the commandment to "***Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.***" (Exodus 20:12, ESV) In teaching this commandment, Luther said: *We should fear and love God so that we do not despise or anger our parents and other authorities, but honor them, serve and obey them, love and cherish them.* (SC, 4th Commandment) That means that our zeal for the Lord leads us to obey the government, as those God has given for our good. We are not free to disobey and claim that we are loyal to God unless they are asking us to deny, defy or turn from God Himself. Again, in his sermon on this text, Luther says: *There is a vast difference between the kingdom of Christ and the secular government, the domain of princes and lords. And let the preacher keep his hands off the secular government, lest he create disorder and confusion!* (LW Vol. 22, p. 225)

To be honest, the right kind of zeal is not about this place, but about the God who fills this place. The right kind of zeal bears with patience the trials and challenges of these days. The right kind of zeal looks in all things to the Saviour, who allowed the temple of His body to be destroyed through death on the cross, as He gives Himself as that perfect sacrifice for us, that our sin might be forgiven. True zeal rejoices in Him who rose from the dead, and who comes to His people in worship, in the bread and wine of Communion, in the water of Baptism. He lives—and that is a reason for joy and celebration for us. We are zealous for Him—and yes, pray that we may be together in His house, for we always remember how zealous He was for us and for our salvation.