

## **Passion for God**

John 2:13-22

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Grace Episcopal Church  
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*His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."*

John 2:17

Last Sunday, Rev. Amanda began her sermon by talking about a picture which had gone viral on the internet, and as I listened to her tell the story, I was once again reminded of the net's power. One any given day, anyone, anywhere in the world, can upload a picture or a video, and within 24 hours, it can become a phenomenon, seen by millions and millions of people. It might be the picture of a dress, as Rev. Amanda discussed, or it could be videos of people participating in the ice bucket challenge, or a clip of a well-known person, caught off guard, saying something or doing something embarrassing and out of character.

Imagine if they had cell phones and the internet in Jesus' day, particularly on the day in which he cleansed the Temple. As Jesus was yelling and screaming at people, brandishing that whip, overturning the tables, you know all the bystanders would have been pulling out their phones and recording the whole episode. Within hours, the incident would have gone viral and been picked up by every major news organization. Imagine the headlines.

The cleansing of the Temple was that kind of story. It was a bit shocking, a little scandalous. The story seems to reveal another side of Jesus, one that we have not seen before, one that seems to contradict everything we know about him. Even the disciples, who knew Jesus better than anyone, seemed taken aback by his actions. You can almost see them looking at each other, wondering, "What is the heck is he doing?" Until they remembered the words from Psalm 69: zeal for your house will consume me.

Jesus was a zealous, passionate, human being, which means he was much like you and me. We all care fervently about certain things in life. Some of our passions are universal to the human condition: family, friends, the desire to be loved and accepted for who we are. Others are more singular, individual to each of us, and it is those aspects of life in which we take deep, personal interest that define us and make us one-of-a-kind. Many of you know that I love to run, and to play golf, and read (this is the stack of books sitting on my bedside table). My wife, on the other hand, has this incredible fascination with bridges; and, she could spend hours talking on the phone with her girlfriends; and, she loves, loves, lounging by pool or lying out on the beach, reading a book in the sun. We all feel that way about different things, and it is our passions that fill our hearts with energy and joy and make life worth living.

There is another side to our passions, though, a darker side. The line between passion and obsession or addiction is a thin one, and it is easily crossed. If we are not careful, before we know it, we head down a path that is hurtful and destructive. It can happen to any of us. Somehow, what was just a part of our life suddenly enslaves us, dominating our daily thoughts and behavior, and threatening our health and well-being and relationships. It might be alcohol or drugs or gambling, those are usually the first things that come to mind, but it could just as easily be work or technology, food or shopping. We become so committed to, so dependent upon, following a way of life that we do realize it is draining all the light and vitality and sparkle from our soul. We end up living in denial.

Jesus was passionate about God and the people of God – all of us, that is what he cared about. Jesus came to bring freedom and healing, to reconcile us to God, once and for all, and he did this, not by acting in accordance with Jewish Law, but by living as God’s son, embodying justice and mercy and forgiveness. Jesus was committed to obeying the will of his Father, no matter what, but that obedience often got him into trouble with the Jewish authorities, with the priests, the elders, the scribes. To them, Jesus’ obedience to God looked like disobedience to the traditions of the faith. He seemed to violate everything the Jewish authorities believed in and lived by, and we see a perfect example of this in the cleansing of the Temple.

At the time, the Temple system functioned on the premise that people sinned, turned their backs on the way of God, but they could atone for their mistakes by offering a sacrifice in the Temple. The people could walk in and purchase an animal, anything from a dove and a lamb to a goat and a cow, and the priests would then sacrifice that animal at the altar as an offering to God. Presumably, the more money you had, the larger animal you could buy, the better your chance of gaining forgiveness from God.

This infuriated Jesus. Not only was the whole system corrupt, but the message was: God is for sale. It led people to believe they could buy God’s grace and forgiveness. They thought they could gain God’s favor with money and animals and sacrifice. But Jesus knew God did not want any of those things. They are not what God cares about. God wants hearts and minds and souls. God wants us to live according to God’s will, to make God’s ways our ways.

So, Jesus cleared out the Temple. He yelled and screamed. He overturned tables. He scared everybody off. *Stop making my father’s house a marketplace.* His actions may have seemed surprising or out of character or disobedient, but they really weren’t at all. This was Jesus, this is who he was, with his singular focus on the will of God, with his love for God’s people, with his passion for justice and mercy, with his all-consuming zeal for the kingdom of God, here and now.

As followers of Jesus, we should feel that same passion. The things we should care so fervently about are the things that lift people up or inspire hope or bring grace into the world. All that other stuff we focus on and get consumed by, they really matter so much. It is our family and friends that count, strengthening those relationships and cherishing them with all of our hearts, and it is other people who matter, respecting the dignity of every human being, striving for justice and peace, loving our neighbors as ourselves. Those are the things we should be

passionate about because are the things Jesus was passionate about. We should have the heart of Jesus.

Pope Francis, who seems to have that heart, made the same point not too long ago. He said:

*Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others... God's voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades. This is a very real danger for believers, too. Many fall prey to it, and end up resentful, angry and listless. That is no way to live a dignified and fulfilled life; it is not God's will for us, nor is it the life in the Spirit which has its source in the heart of the risen Christ.<sup>1</sup>*

We should have a zeal for God and making God's ways our ways, and while any time of the year is the perfect time for doing that, Lent seems especially appropriate for reclaiming our heart of Christ because Lent is a time for re-evaluating our lives, for fresh decision-making and new orientations. Lent is a time for rekindling our passions, and particularly our passion for God.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Evangelii Gaudium, 2013.