

Sermon March 7, 2021  
Redeemer, Ramsey  
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Grace, Mercy and Peace from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Zeal for your house will consume me”. Psalm 69

This is the verse from psalm 69 that John says the disciples thought of when Jesus suddenly made a whip of cords one day and drove out the animals and merchants and money changers from the temple in Jerusalem. He was in Jerusalem with his disciples because of the annual Passover festival, as were many other, mostly poor, pilgrims from the surrounding region. Those pilgrims could not carry the animals they intended to offer as a sacrifice in the temple, so there was a local market for them in the temple precincts. Coming from a long journey, one would make one’s way into the temple area, go to the money changers and exchange Roman coins for Jewish shekels, which was the only currency one could use to buy an animal for one’s sacrifice.

This market of convenience had developed over time, and it was tolerated by both the local Jewish leadership of the temple, as well as the Roman authorities who had total control over the nation of Israel. In its convenience and utility, the temple market had become a place that took advantage of the mostly poor pilgrims who traveled to Jerusalem to make their sacrifice. In order to acquire and maintain your spot in the market as a merchant, there were many hands you had to grease in the process, and so providing this service came with an extra cost that was simply passed on to the customer.

What offended Jesus about this set up? It must have been the corruption that was happening. In the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus called this area of the temple a “den of thieves.” Here, in the Gospel of John, he calls it a marketplace. And in John’s account, he specifically addresses the dove sellers. Doves, or pigeons, were the sacrificial animal of choice for the poor, and especially for women who came to sacrifice on their own, usually as widows. Historical research has also brought to light the practice of money lending, which created dependency and debt for the poor. Since all that money that had been

exchanged was kept at the temple, peasants arriving from outside Jerusalem could borrow money while in Jerusalem, in order to take it back home to pay off debts to landlords and others. In one of their first acts in the anti-Roman rebellion in 66 AD, which was called the first Jewish-Roman war, and which led ultimately to the destruction of the temple, the Jewish rebels broke into the temple to burn these debt records.

This incident in the ministry of Jesus is popular even today for different reasons. For some it can stand for Jesus' implicit support for violent protest. We usually remember the calm and peaceful Jesus, who although hounded by detractors and sabbateurs, never loses his composure, even as he is arrested, and then unjustly tried, tortured and killed. But here is an example of Jesus losing his cool for the sake of justice.

For others, particularly those who feel that the problem with modern society is that feminism has made male identity too soft, too fragile, this is a more virulent Jesus that suits their image of masculinity.

However, our cultural needs in our own time, especially for Christians, never do enough justice to the whole arch of Jesus' ministry. Yes, this is violent protest, and Jesus is acting so out of a sense of urgency that all people, but especially Christian fundamentalists are attracted to. But the real significance of Jesus' presence is not this isolated example of protest. Rather the real significance is Jesus' passion, as his ministry takes him from confronting individual actors into becoming the passive victim of the grinding teeth of empire and nationalism, and ultimately of our human alienation from God.

This is because ultimately, it is not what Jesus does that is saving for us, but what is done to Jesus that becomes saving for us. This is what we refer to as Jesus' Passion. Jesus' active ministry, his teaching and preaching, his healing and exorcisms, and yes, his protest, all confront the power of death in the human experience. But these acts are not what breaks death's hold over us. In order for that to happen, Jesus must first die, and then be raised. First, he must submit to the power we humans wield, and which we see measured out in various ways by the imperial systems and coercive systems we run or submit to in order to control ourselves and others.

Jesus does not kill himself. He is not reckless in his passion. It is not suicidal in the common sense. He never agrees with the verdict of his unjust assassins. He simply lives his human life in the fullest expression of God's will that he possibly can. And as messiah, that is a lot. Those who have encountered the story of Jesus' life in the Gospels, whether they are Christian or not, are always impressed by the extent to which Jesus' life can be called Holy. And that is a testament to how good Jesus was at fulfilling the intent of God's will at all moments along the way. The ten commandments are our first lesson today for good reason. When Jesus is at his most zealous, he is zealous not for changing out those who are currently in power. When he is most aggressive in his protest, he is not simply advocating for the change in a few bad laws. John's Gospel tells us that Jesus is living out this ardent zeal for the sake of God's name, God's law, God's justice, God's house.

The first commandment is the most important of them all, that you, O Israel, shall have no other gods but God, for the Lord is your God, and there is no other. And by extension, the temple is that place where God has agreed to meet the people in their rituals of reconciliation. By God's grace, God has accepted these constraints, not because he ordained it for all time, or because he wants it this way, but out of simple grace. Suddenly, we remember when centuries before Jesus, King David was arguing with God to let him build a temple. God did not see the necessity of it, he did not want to do it, but God agreed to it in a form of divine resignation.

And now, in the story of the Gospels, coming at a time when the rebellions of God's people against their earthly masters will soon result in the complete destruction of that temple, in 70 AD, now the messiah comes to embody that divine resignation in a decisive and final form. God wills it that the temple of God will no longer be a building made of stones, but a human body hallowed by unjust suffering and restored to incorruptible wholeness by resurrection from the dead. In Jesus, God allows God's self to become the victim of the human race's will to power. Yes, by doing so, God in Jesus identifies with every victim. But that is not the extent of it. And God does this not only to reveal to us our sinful victimization of others, although that is an important part of Jesus' mission. In Jesus' passion, God ceases to act in order to bear witness to our will to power in order to subvert it, by reversing the death which always results from our human will acting in our self-interest.

God is resigned to help us in our helplessness, not just to salvage what he created, but because God loves what he created. Yes, it is you and me that God comes into the world for. It is you and me that God obeys his own laws for. It is you and me that God suffers for. And it is you and me that God dies for, so that, for you and me, God might rise from death and destroy its power over us.

So go ahead, let zeal for God's house consume you, but face with humility the lack of zeal you have too, for God's house, for God's law, for God's justice, for God's love. We are empowered by our baptism to remember Jesus' zeal. We are tasked in our baptism to always ask ourselves how Jesus wants empower us by his presence, and to ask where that zeal might find a purchase in the needs of the world around us.

And then, finally, know that even despite your mixed up zeal and flagging faith, and despite the sins you commit in trying to wrestle control over your life or the lives of others, God loves you so much that not even sin and death could keep him from you.

God bless us all, in our life, in our death, and in the abundant life of our lord and savior, whose suffering and death reveal to us our sin, and also our eternal salvation.

And may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, Amen.