

3rd Sunday of Lent
March 15, 2009

I'm Passionate About...

Pastor Michael Ewart
John 2:13-22

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

What are you passionate about in our life? Some are passionate about their job. Some about their family. Some about exercise and health. Some about their friends. Some about their hobbies, their house. A person can be passionate about almost anything.

What happens when you are passionate about something. It changes you, doesn't it? When you have a passion about something, in that area your will power is greater, you have much greater energy, you think about it when you're not doing it, you tend to excel at that thing. A average isn't good enough, you want to be the very best. Finally, passion is something that can be contagious. When you're really excited and passionate about something, when you talk about it with others, they tend to get excited too.

Let's take some time right now to evaluate our interests and passions. Let's then compare them with what God wants us to be passionate about. And let's specifically do this by taking a look at what today Gospel text tells us concern what Jesus was passionate about.

John 2:13-22 "When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple courts he found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!" His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me." Then the Jews demanded of him, "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." The Jews replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken."

Jesus and his disciples had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. This was one of three festivals all Jewish males 20 years and older were to attend every year. They were to present the appropriate animal sacrifice and pay the temple tax. So what two things did pilgrims traveling from faraway places need? 1) Animals 2) foreign currency exchange. Local merchants were happy to meet the need. Doing so wasn't in and of itself wrong. But the practices that developed certainly were.

People saw the opportunity for profit. Competition was stiff between the merchants so the temple area became a noisy place. In addition, many were cheating the pilgrims. Even the priests, who were supposed to be God's servants, were in on the actions. They frequently declared animals which the pilgrims brought with them as unfit for sacrifice. They would then have no choice but to buy an approved animal at the inflated price. And as if all this weren't bad enough, this all took place inside the temple courts. From here the sights, sounds and smells of worship should have been prominent. Priests chanting the psalms. Worshipers lifting up their prayers to

God. The smell of incense. The smell of sacrifice accompanied by solemn repentance. The blood of the sacrificed animals reminding that death and blood was the payment for sin. But instead the only sights were rows of merchants and crowds of people. The only sounds were the clinking of coins and the loud commotion of an open market. The only smells were the stench of animals held in a cage for too long. An air of greed, not repentance, filled the courtyard.

When Jesus saw the temple courts filled with merchants and money changers, his passion caused him to react openly with emotion and immediate action. In his absolute respect for the sanctity of the temple, he *“made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables.”* And he shouted, *“Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father’s house into a market!”* (John 2:16b).

This isn’t the image that usually comes to mind when we think of Jesus, is it? Perhaps we think of the gentle Good Shepherd. Or Jesus in Gethsemane. Or Jesus on the cross. Or his resurrection. Or Jesus floating up into the air at his ascension. But we don’t often see a picture hanging in a person’s living room of Jesus with an angry scowl on his face, whip in hand, turning over tables. I wonder what the disciples thought of this. Were they standing back a little embarrassed? ...like you feel when someone in your group complains too loudly and persistently about the lousy food and service at a restaurant. You’d just as soon not be associated with that person? We do know that at least one of the disciples recalled Psalm 69: *“Zeal for your house will consume me”* (John 2:17b).

And here’s the heart of the matter. Zeal, or as we usually say today, passion for God’s house is what motivated Jesus to do what he did. Jesus was absolutely passionate about something... and it was God’s house. At the temple people could enter into God’s presence. They could pray to God. Repent of sin. And hear God’s promises and love, as they were assured of his forgiveness. That’s what was supposed to be going on God’s house. But instead there was a worldly marketplace. The divine and eternal was completely drowned out by what was human and material. Open sin and greed was tolerated and propagated in God’s house. And that could not stand. Jesus would not hear of it.

Dear friends, does the same zeal... the same passion... for God’s house fill you? When you enter church, are you filled with awe and quieted because of respect? Does the thought of approaching the Lord’s Table and receiving Christ’s very body and blood for forgiveness... does that thought make you tremble? Do you eagerly anticipate hearing God’s Word and responding with praise and prayer? Do you leave church with a new spring in your step, a song in your heart and peace in your life? ... Or is there a different picture? Do you sometimes catch yourself chatting away casually with your neighbor as the opening bells begin to ring? Do you sometimes find yourself standing in line for the Lord’s Supper and your mind is pondering a different meal... what you’ll be having for lunch later? Does it ever happen that sometime on Saturday... or maybe on Sunday morning... a wave of reluctance crashes over you when you remember you’ll be going to church? Have you ever left church grumbling about the hymn selection, or the long sermon, or the noise in church.

Friends, can we be called passionate about God’s house? Or do we more often enter church with a “what’s in it for me” attitude seated firmly in our hearts? What’s important in God’s house is that we glorify God in our worship and that we gain a stronger hold on God’s grace. Could it be that Jesus needs march into our hearts with a whip, and overturn the tables of selfishness and distraction?

There is a part of us that doesn't like to hear these things. Neither did the Jewish leaders. What right did Jesus have overturn those tables? What right does Jesus have to convict us of our sin this fine Sunday morning? Instead of thanking Jesus for cleaning up the temple's mess, they challenged him: "*What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?*" (John 2:18b) If you are speeding and pulled over, it matters who is pulling you over, doesn't it? Is this a fellow motorist or a police officer? Only someone with authority has a right to call us out on this!

So Jesus' authority was called into question. Jesus should have thrown up his hands and said: "A sign. You want a sign? Alright then, here's a sign you'll never forget!" Jesus then should have called down fire from God for questioning his authority and not appreciating what he had done for them. Instead Jesus gave them a sign of grace. Jesus answered: "*Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days*" (John 2:19). The leaders didn't understand what Jesus was talking about. They thought he was speaking about the temple King Herod had just spent 46 years rebuilding. But Jesus was not talking about the temple building. He was talking about his body. In a sign of grace Jesus was promising to offer his own body on the cross to pay for their sins and rise from the dead to give them eternal life!

Jesus still gives us a sign of his grace when all we deserve is a sign of his judgment. For the times we've had a lack of passion about God's house, God could give us a sign of judgment. Maybe a fender bender on the way home. Maybe a good strong cold or stomach flu. Maybe our wallet gets stolen. But, no, he doesn't give such signs. Instead he gives us a sign of grace. He shows us his Son's perfect passion for his house, and says, "I consider it yours." He shows us his suffering and death on the cross, smiles at us and says, "That was for you. Your guilt is removed. I love you." In Holy Communion Jesus gives us his body and blood with the bread and wine for forgiveness and to assure us that we are his dearly loved children.

What is our response when we see Jesus' passion for God's house...and his passion to save us? A simple thank you doesn't seem enough, does it? Instead our response will be passionate. We will be passionate about the same things Jesus was passionate about! We will be passionate about God's house, passionate about the people who gather here, and especially passionate about the people who don't yet gather here but who would be so blessed if they would!

So what are you passionate about, brothers and sisters? Desire for money? The need to be more important than others? That's what the religious leaders of Jesus' day were passionate about. Don't follow their horrible example. Don't be passionate about the things of this world that are passing away. Instead, be passionate about God's house, God's people, and especially God's love, forgiveness and salvation. Let that passion shape your will and focus in life. Let it fill you with energy for service to God. Don't settle for average. Excel for God and for his glory and honor! Let's let a passion for God's house and for the grace of Christ fill us and become contagious among us! Amen.