

Have you ever been so excited about something that it completely and utterly consumed you? No matter how hard you tried you couldn't stop thinking about it, dreaming about it, or even talking about it. If you have, then you are aware that whenever we become passionate about an event, a certain subject, or an activity; we can end up devoting a great deal of our time and energy to it, to the point where almost nothing else matters to us. Think about it, if you are obsessed with movies, like myself for example, then I would guess that not only do you watch movies once and a while, but you probably also read reviews about them, you might have a huge collection in your living room, and you may even hang out with other people that share your interest with them!

More often than not, the things we are passionate about are fairly trivial and aren't that crucial for our survival. Is it really going to kill us if we miss this week's episode of the Voice? Can we make it through the day if we are unable stop at Starbucks in the morning to get a Grande skinny vanilla latte? Will we continue to exist if the internet at work goes down and we are unable to check our Facebook feeds or watch our favorite Youtube channels? Would we keel over and die if we can't make it to our usual Poker, Bunko, or Bridge nights?

Then again, there are certain things that excite us in life, that we are passionate about, that can affect our very existence. Being concerned about our health and wellness, through diet and exercise, for example, can have a definite impact on our bodies. Spending quality time with friends and family, can influence our relationship with them and even our behavior. Reading and taking the time to learn new things, can help us manage our thoughts and can strengthen our minds. Of course, all of these are important and can make a huge difference in our lives, but I believe the thing that we should be the most passionate about is our faith! Today we are going to focus on the following question.... are we obsessed with, and do we have a religious zeal for God?

In our Gospel story this morning we observe a Jesus, who is quite different from the typical loving and merciful lord that we are used to. Normally when we think of Jesus, we picture him as happy, smiling, or even laughing as he picks up children or teaches a crowd of people. During the past few weeks, we have witnessed a very compassionate and sympathetic man who not only healed Peter's mother-in-law when she was sick, but he also spent the evening helping countless people who came to her house for healing. We have heard about Jesus' baptism at the river Jordan and have observed a special mountaintop experience where he

revealed his Godly nature to Peter, James, and John. Yet in our story for today, we encounter a very angry man, who acts like a wild and crazy possessed person, as he makes a whip of cords and disrupts temple worship during one of the most significant feast days of the year!

So what led to such a drastic change in Jesus' attitude, especially when we consider that he and his disciples had recently attended a wedding banquet, which is typically a very happy occasion? The answer to this question can be found in how the disciples react to the situation. As they witnessed their teacher overturning tables, pouring money on the ground, and driving out animals from the temple court they remember a passage from scripture, Psalm 69:9, "Zeal for your house has consumed me." Jesus is so upset that his father's place of residence has been transformed into a marketplace, that his religious zeal and love for God causes him to take action. The temple was where God was to be honored and glorified, feared and respected! It had now become a place of deception, where God's intentions had been manipulated for selfish human purposes.

During the many times that I have read this story I am reminded of Martin Luther and the reformation. It was Luther's passion for the word of God, his religious zeal, and love of God's grace, that led him to fight the religious leaders of his day and to challenge practices of the church that had become corrupt. This is what Jesus is doing in our story today. The condition of the temple was a vivid indication of the spiritual condition of the nation. By the actions that were taking place within its walls, it was clear that their religion had become a dull routine, presided over by worldly minded men; whose main desires were to exercise authority and get rich. It is even more tragic when we learn that this now distorted marketplace was carried out in the court of the Gentiles, the place where the Jews should have been meeting the Gentiles and teaching them about the one true God.

In our story we witness Jesus and his anger toward the money-changers, who have turned a holy obligation into a lucrative profession. His outrage at the Passover pilgrims, who saw the temple as a place to transact a business deal, instead of remembering God's holy works while seeking God's holy presence. His fury at the priests, who had let their love of law and ritual take precedence over their love for God. Which begs the question, which character can you relate to in the story?

Are you a seller, or money changer, concerned more about wealth and financial prosperity than about worshipping and loving God? Are you a buyer, or a worshipper, seeking

God's approval through sacrifice unaware that because of his grace and love all he truly wants from you is a relationship that causes you to live out your faith? Perhaps you are a disciple, and are still learning about Jesus, and are being prepared to be sent out to spread His Word? Maybe you are a whippee, and feel the need to whip at and reform the corruption and deceit that you see taking place around you.

It was Jesus' zeal for his father's house that led to him to become so angry! In case you don't know what zeal means, it can be defined as jealousy, or single-minded devotion to someone or something! Throughout the Gospels it is fairly obvious that Jesus was passionate and excited about doing his father's will. When he teaches his disciples how to pray, he instructs them to pray for God's will to be done, rather than their own. In the Garden of Gethsemane before heading to the cross he prays, "let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." It is Jesus' love and devotion for his Father that caused him to take action, and to stand up for what is right! I would like to share with you another story in which a person's religious zeal and passion for God resulted in taking action!

His name was Dieter and he grew up the son of privilege in a German Lutheran community in South Africa during the time of Apartheid. He had witnessed some of the horrors of white oppression and even as a young boy wondered why the pastor of their all-white church never acknowledged what seemed to him a horrible injustice. The summer before he was to start seminary, there was a major sea change with the fall of apartheid and the election of Nelson Mandella as the first Black African President.

Black and White Africans were suddenly thrown together. At the seminary, they were expected to live together in the same dorms, eat together, and take classes together. In spite of the hostility that had existed before between the two races, they were simply told to "figure it out." Dieter became close friends with several Black African seminary students, and was awestruck by their personal stories of overcoming difficulty and hardship. When he graduated from seminary, he felt the call to serve in the Black Church, but as the churches were still segregated at the time, and there was an ample number of Black African pastors, he was told this would not be possible. So... he and his wife chose to come to the United States with the hopes of serving in a Lutheran congregation with some ethnic diversity.

The ELCA did, however, request that Dieter spend a semester in an American seminary learning about the culture, as well as the fundamental principles of the Lutheran Church in

America. He was drawn to Wartburg Seminary in Dubuque, because of its strong emphasis on community. It was there that Dieter felt right at home among the foreign students and their families—several were Black Africans from Namibia and Tanzania. At first they viewed him with suspicion, and one African mother even claimed: *“Because you are white, surely you can not be one of us.”* After all, he was a member of the race that had ruled South Africa with oppressive power. Dieter chose not to be defensive, and instead was gracious in his speech and actions.

Something changed in the coming months...as their children played together, oblivious to any ethnic differences, as they studied theology and prayed together, as they shared their common hopes and dreams for justice and equality in their homelands. At the end of the academic year when it was time to say good-bye, the same Black African woman came up to Dieter and embraced him. She smiled as she confessed: *“Whatever the color of your skin, you are truly my South African brother.”* It was the highest compliment he could have received. And tears of joy streamed down his face. Today Dieter serves as a Pastor in North Carolina sharing God’s Gospel of grace within a racially diverse congregation and is making a difference in the lives of others.

Do we have such religious zeal? Are we willing to act on our faith demonstrating that we have an excitement for God that cannot be contained? Are we willing to take action? Are we willing to transform our temple here at First Lutheran into a place that is more focused on doing things God’s way, rather than doing them the way we want to do them, or the way it has always been done? What about clearing out the activities, events, and things in our lives that keep us from having the type of relationship with God that excites and revitalizes us? Wouldn’t it be great if we worshipped God, not because we feel some kind of obligation, but because we can’t live without him?

Jesus’ devotion for God led him to throw down the Gauntlet if you will, to avenge the shame that God was incurring through the evil things that were taking place in his earthly house. Jesus takes it upon himself the task of restoring the honor of God. Grace and truth have come to us through Jesus Christ. He becomes the new sacrifice and the new temple. Jesus makes God’s love and grace available to us free, without charge. And today he invites us to come to the table as his guests to receive again the gift of God’s forgiveness in bread and wine. And Thanks be to God for that! AMEN

