

What Will We Face With Zeal?

Let's begin this time of reflection with prayer. God of all, help us to be zealous for your word of love. Be with us as we wonder about our own zealous responses in our day-to-day living. We invite your Holy Spirit's presence to be with us. Amen.

Beloved friends, what will we face with zeal? This question formed in response to the narrative we've just hear of Jesus demonstrating a zealous spirit as he responded with fury to those who had set up a marketplace in the Temple. We heard this description of how the disciples may have processed the experience: *"The disciples remembered the words of scripture: 'Zeal for your house consumes me.'"*

I invite us to wonder together today about zeal. Zeal means passion, enthusiasm, eagerness, vehemence, intensity. What is Zeal? Perhaps that word passion. How does zeal look or sound when engaged? Enthusiastic, eager, vehement, intense. We will welcome into our conscious awareness today situations in which we recognize that we ourself or another needs us to show up with zeal. We will also consider both healthy and unhealthy ways of channeling our zeal and some of the healing and destructive ramifications of our healthy and unhealthy zealous behaviors.

Let's enter into this conversation by considering what may have motivated Jesus' expression of zeal in the Temple that Passover. I mentioned a moment ago that Jesus' response to the scene was one of fury. He was enraged. The basic emotion in play was anger. And his feeling of anger motivated his behavior – his action. We will return to the way in which he met his anger with zeal. Let's take a moment to define anger. Across expanses of time and geography, the emotion of anger has often been stigmatized.

Within dominant White cultural patterns in the US, women have been particularly expected to repress anger and shamed for expressing it. Even appropriate, respectful expression of anger by men has often been treated as some sort of deal-breaker.

This Lent, some in our congregation are reading Brené Brown's book, *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience*. Anger is one of the eighty-seven emotions about which Brown is inviting us into deeper understanding. She writes this: *"If you look across research, you will find that anger is an emotion that we feel when something gets in the way of a desired outcome or when we believe there's a violation of the way things should be."* And she adds this: *"[A]ccording to Charles Spielberger, an influential anger researcher, angry feelings can vary in intensity, 'from mild irritation or annoyance to fury and rage.'"*

Let's remain with the emotion of anger for a moment. Brown also shares in her writing that the decades old concept of anger being a secondary emotion has been squarely debunked by approximately 90% of emotions experts. When I have led small groups of youth or adults through Confirmation programs, I have drawn on appreciative inquiry as they develop their own faith and purpose statements. In one exercise, I ask them and now ask you: **What is one human behavior (one thing people do, one way people act) that provokes or causes you to feel angry?** There is a follow-up question to that one.

I invite you to be in these questions for an extended moment and then I'll ask if anyone would like to simply state their response to one or both questions. I welcome you to close your eyes if it helps you to be more present to these questions and your experiences of them.

The first question again is, **What is one human behavior (one thing people do, one way people act) that provokes or causes you to feel angry?** (*pause*)

Keeping your eyes closed if you wish, now the second question is, **what deeply held value is violated by that behavior that tends to cause you feel angry?** (*pause*) **What deeply held value is violated by that behavior that tends to provoke you to feel angry?** (*pause*) I invite you to open your eyes. And I wonder if anyone would feel open to sharing aloud that behavior that provokes your anger and what deeply held value is violated by that behavior? It's a very personal question. I'll share the example that came to mind for me. Aggressive speech provokes my anger. And when I witness someone speaking at me or at another aggressively (and I really mean "at" because, in aggressive speech, there is no room for conversation with another person), it violates my deeply held value of dignity. I believe that the image of God is present in each of us. And when I experience verbal aggression, it's violent because it's dismissive of the full dignity and image of God in the person next to me or in my own person.

Would anyone like to name aloud a particular human behavior that violates one of your core values? Some behavior – and again anger goes from irritation, annoyance, all the way to rage and fury.

- Name calling, especially between known, beloved persons violates a value of dignity.
- Crisis, apocalyptic, catastrophizing thinking and speech (not allowing space for seeing opportunities and possibilities) violates a value of hope.
- When people mess with my family, it violates a value of love.

Returning to the narrative of Jesus in the Temple, what deeply held value was being violated by those who had turned the Temple into a marketplace? Well, there are a couple of possibilities. In the reading from Exodus, we heard this:

“Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.”

I was caught off guard. This comes from *The Inclusive Bible*. And we have many translations. Surely, for the dignity of people, it should not have read *“your male and female slaves.”* It should have read *“the enslaved people among you.”* Jesus seemed so frustrated. I don’t know if part of his rage and fury were coming from this, but he was frustrated and annoyed by his neighbors failing to regard the Sabbath as holy – to be in that space, in their place of worship and to hold that aside.

Now, I think there is another violation of his deeply held values. We also heard that in Exodus. *“Do not steal.”* Do not take advantage of those with less economic means than ourselves. And he saw his neighbors taking advantage of those who simply needed to come into a space of worship. They needed a space of respite, a space to glorify God with their time and their energy and their neighbors were trying to take economic advantage of them. *“Do not steal.”*

Let’s consider for a moment healthy and unhealthy ways of channeling our zeal. So zeal is not only about anger.

Zeal is passion – yes, but also enthusiasm and eagerness. I will share my example of healthy and unhealthy because they relate to my sharing of how what violates my deeply held value of dignity is aggressive language. I can give examples of how I showed up with zeal in terms of enthusiasm to be in community and of how I failed to do that.

One example was a time some years back when I was sitting in a group around a table at a meeting of some sort. And someone came at me (again, not with me but at me) across a table and was telling me what I was thinking and what I was feeling. And I felt my dignity so attacked by that behavior. Somehow (this is my healthy example) I was able to say ‘I’m not sure why you’re telling me what I’m thinking and feeling. I don’t feel those things.’ I was able to simply speak truth in the moment. I was able to find a way to be healthy and to meet the verbally aggressive, violent speech as a whole me. Somehow, I could be there in that space and help to diffuse the tension in that moment. Not all tension is bad, but it helped to stop the harm I was feeling.

Another example was not all that different, though I was more indirectly related to the aggressive speech. I was again in a group in a meeting, but I was not the person in the midst of the tense confrontation. There were so many of us who could have paused the moment but didn’t. And it felt as though this person, coming from some passion of their own and some zeal, kept talking at several people across the table from them. And it was without pause. It left no space for breath, no space for response. And no one seemed to stop the moment. It felt like a collective failure to uphold dignity in that space.

So I think we can respond in healthy and unhealthy ways to moments when our anger (our irritation, annoyance, rage or fury) are being felt in our bodies.

But I'd like to take this to many other moments in Jesus' ministry when his zeal came through not as anger but in other forms of enthusiasm, other forms of eagerness and passion when he just didn't hold back but shared that with others. **And I wonder, what are some of your deeply held values that come to life in positive ways through zeal (through eagerness, through enthusiasm, through passion)?** Those may come up in your own private life. They may come up in this congregation. We are coming into a time of strategic visioning of all that we are and, more importantly, all that we can be and all that we can grow into becoming.

Would anyone feel more comfortable sharing an area of passion for you – that you are eager to share in this space as we grow as a congregation? What makes you zealous, not because you're having an anger response to a violation but because you're feeling eager, enthusiastic, passionate, even convicted of something important? Is there anything that you're passionate about that you'd like to name aloud?

- Affirmation – acknowledging the good deeds that others do in our midst.

Thank you. I think that's the perfect segue. Let's be on the lookout for how our passions show up as we build this community. We are all different and we need each of our areas of passion to come forward in positive zeal. Love is counting on us. Amen.

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Exodus 20:1-17, John 2:13-22