

“Zeal for Your House Will Consume Me”

In the name of him who is power of God and the wisdom of God, dear friends in Christ: For most Americans, in terms of monetary investment anyway, the most valuable asset they will ever possess is the house in which they live. This is why we insure them against damage and loss; and also why we do our level best to maintain them, keeping the roof tight, the termites out, and the woodwork painted. We're protecting our investment. But we all know that a house is more than a financial investment: it's your home. It's the place where you live. It's where you take shelter from the winds and storms of life. It's where you eat and sleep and bathe. It's where you laugh and love and cry and share special moments with the people you love and care for the most – as well as the place you share with them all the other mundane rituals and routines of life. It's a building that houses your treasured memories and in which you keep the things that are important to you. So, however much your house is worth in terms of dollars, it's made even more valuable to you because of what goes on inside.

And for all these reasons, it's right that we show a certain amount of zeal in the protection and upkeep of our houses. We want them to be clean, up to date, and for them to present a nice appearance both inside and out. To this end we establish maintenance schedules and “rules of the house” that we expect family and guests to obey. And we're conscious of the fact that the way a house looks and what's seen going on there communicates to the world a lot of information about the people who live inside. Protecting and maintaining your home is part of preserving your reputation.

With all of this mind, let's say you're going out of town for an extended period, maybe six months or so. You don't want to leave the house empty for that long a period, so you decide to get yourself a house sitter to live there and maintain the place while you're away. You put an ad in the paper, and a nice young couple present themselves in response to it. You thoroughly check their references and credentials. They're all good. You carefully explain the rules of the house and what your expectations are for keeping the place up, and the couple promises to take care of everything. You hand over the keys and off you go, trusting that your home is in safe hands.

But now imagine coming home after your absence and discovering that your trust was terribly misplaced. The couple has not been faithful in carrying out their duties. No indeed, upon pulling into the driveway, you see at once that the lawn is overgrown and strewn with garbage and junk like old tires, worn out appliances, and unidentifiable auto parts. Many of the windows are broken, and you can see the filthy and tattered remains of the curtains flapping out like distress signals – as if the house itself were appealing to you for rescue. Inside things are even worse: you can't see the mud encrusted floor because it's covered in layers of empty beer cans and packaging from fast food joints. The furniture is torn, broken, and soiled with grease. There are countless burn marks from cigarettes being extinguished on just about every surface. The unmistakable odor of a rodent infestation hangs heavily in the air; and as you move about, you can hear them scurrying under the garbage to avoid your step. And from there it only gets worse. Some rooms look like they could be featured on that show called *Hoarders*. In one bedroom you find they're actually keeping live goats and chickens. The stench is unbearable. The kitchen looks like it's being used for the sole purpose of raising armies of cockroaches. Got the picture?

Think how you'd feel about all this and you'll have a pretty good idea about how Jesus felt when, as we heard in today's Gospel, he came to the Temple in Jerusalem – his Father's House – and saw that the outer court had been turned into a market place. This sacred space set aside for worship, for prayer, and for instruction in God's Holy Word had become a place of business; and corrupt business at that. You see, this is where they were selling the animals for sacrifice. That was the main activity at the Temple. Jews and other believers in the One True God came from all over the world to offer their sacrifices here. It was the only place it could be done. And through these sacrifices the Lord forgave the sins of his people. But only properly approved animals could be sacrificed. They had to be without mark or blemish of any kind. So if you happened to bring one of your own from home, guess what? Some priestly inspector would find a fault invisible to everyone but him and tell you it was no good. You'd have to buy one that was already approved from the Temple market, naturally at a grossly inflated price. It's called gouging the customer. And the excess profits were being skimmed by corrupt priests and Temple authorities who licensed certain less-than-honest businessmen to operate on the Temple grounds.

It was the same thing with the money changers. Every Jewish man had to pay an annual Temple tax for the upkeep of the building and its grounds. It cost one shekel of silver, which is about half an ounce. Ah, but you had to buy a specially minted temple coin for this. Other coins in circulation had images of false gods and pagan rulers on them. They couldn't be used in God's house. So to pay the tax you'd have to exchange your silver for theirs; but don't imagine for a moment that it was at a one to one rate or that their scales were accurate. No, it was another opportunity for them to gouge people; and they did it with vengeance.

But now place yourself in the sandals of a Jewish family making a once in a lifetime pilgrimage to Jerusalem from some foreign land. All your life you've dreamed of the day that you too could stand before the Holy Temple in which the Glory of God is present on earth, and there offer your sacrifices. You know it's going to be the spiritual highpoint in your life to have some saintly man of God tell you that by the shed blood of your sacrifice the Lord has forgiven all your sins. You're very serious and sincere about it. But then when you get there, your expectations are shattered. You were hoping for a profound religious experience. But you find that everything is costing you a lot more than you planned on paying, and you're resenting it. You find the Temple looks and smells more like a feed lot than a place of worship. And instead of earnestly helping you to be reconciled with the Lord and cement a closer relationship with him, you find that the priests are cold, calculating, and corrupt. All they want to do get through with you as quickly as possible so they can move on the next customer. You see the whole thing is one great big rip-off. You return home disillusioned not only with the way you've been treated; but with the Lord God who allows his House and his Name to be abused in these ways. Your faith, if not in ruins, has been seriously damaged.

This is why Jesus becomes so furious at what he sees. He knows that what's going on in the Temple is hurting people and undermining their faith in the Lord. So he goes on a rampage. Twisting together a whip of cords, in righteous indignation he drives out the merchants and their animals. There's a veritable stampede of men and livestock fleeing from him in every direction. He throws down the tables of the money-changers – along with their dishonest scales. Coins scatter everywhere. Now he's angrily shouting orders for all these crooks and conmen to get out and stay out.

Meanwhile his disciples are astonished at this display of fury. They've never seen Jesus so upset. They've never seen him become violent like this. They remember the Scripture that says of the Christ, "Zeal for your house will consume me." They see it in action first hand. They

find it somewhat frightening. And I suspect that they make a mental note to avoid ever having to face such an outburst of zealous anger directed at them.

And that, my friends, was how Jesus reacted over a misused marble building in Jerusalem that he himself said was destined to be leveled to the ground never to rise again. How much more zealous do you think he is concerning what is his Father's House today – the infinitely greater Temple that the old one of stone merely foreshadowed? I'm speaking of the Temple that is your body: your body individually because the Spirit of God now dwells within you, and the Temple that consists of all of us collectively – as we sang in the hymn: "We are God's House of living stones"?

Think about it: for the stone Temple, Jesus displayed the Lord's own righteous wrath by making and swinging a whip to cleanse it and drive out all that did not belong. But to cleanse the Temple of your body Jesus endured the whip tearing into his flesh as the righteous wrath of God was poured out upon him. Such was his zeal to cleanse you of all that does not belong that he sacrificed the Temple of his own body on the cross. From this it should be clear that you represent his greatest single investment. For you he gave everything. For you he was totally consumed by the death you deserved. So again I ask: how zealous do you think he is for you? How protective and concerned do you think he is about what you are doing and allowing to go on in God's House he paid for with his precious blood?

This is an important question for all of us especially now in the penitential season of Lent. Think of it in terms of the example I used earlier: Jesus bought the house that is your body, cleansed it of all sin, made you a child of God and placed the Lord's name on you. And now he's handed over the keys entrusting you to take care of the place for him. If he were to stop by for a visit, how do you think you'd stand up under his inspection?

Let me be more specific: we heard, as today's Old Testament reading, the giving of the Law from Mount Sinai. Those are the rules of the house. And we know too from studying our Catechisms that every negative command has its positive side. What the Law requires is Christian love. So, when the Law says, "You shall not murder", what's forbidden is anything that might hurt or harm your neighbor physically, mentally, or spiritually. What's required in a positive sense is that you do what is in your power to help and befriend him in every need. So also when the Law says, "You shall not steal", what's forbidden is anything you might do to unfairly or dishonestly come into the possession of property or wealth that belongs to someone else. What's required positively is that you do what you can to help your neighbor keep, improve, and protect what belongs to him. And so it is with all the commandments: you break them whenever you do what they forbid or fail to do what they require.

And when you break a commandment, you are most definitely misusing the Lord's House and filling it with garbage that doesn't belong in there. You're also giving the Lord a bad name in the eyes of the world by misrepresenting him. You cause others to be offended and say to themselves, "Well, if that's what it means to be a Christian, then I don't want any part of it". What kind of reputation are you giving the Lord by your behavior? What do people see and know of him by looking at your house that belongs to him? Do they see the Lord's characteristics: love, honor for those in authority, patience, forgiveness, kindness, gentleness, thoughtfulness, selflessness? Do they see absolute sexual purity and, if you're married, you always faithfully keeping your promise to love and cherish your spouse? Is that what they see? More importantly, is that what the Lord who knows even your thoughts sees?

What *does* Jesus find in your house of the Lord? What are you trying to keep hidden in the closets, or have stored away in the attic and basement? What would he find in there that he would want to drive out? Knowing how zealous he is for you, his House, does he find you to be a faithful caretaker of his property or not?

Of course, we can and should ask these same questions of our congregation as a whole. How are we doing together as stewards of God's House and each other? What sort of image of God do we collectively present to the world around us? What would Jesus find in the group of us that he would zealously want to drive out?

The beginning of spring is less than two weeks away. And a lot of people hold fast the tradition of giving their homes a thorough spring cleaning. Let's begin ours today. How? Well, at home you have to do the dirty work yourself. But this is God's House, and here he does all the work. He gives us his Law so that we have its light to see clearly by. By his Spirit he shows us what's dirty and out of place. If you've identified some problems in your Temple this morning, that was God's work on you enabling you to see it. And now you have only to confess it. See that it doesn't belong – that you don't want it fouling God's House – and Christ drives it away. Like he washed his disciples' feet, so now he washes you again in his blood and lays over you his sinless perfection. He restores. He maintains. He builds you up by his Word of forgiveness and his Holy Supper. And in you he comes to dwell – to share with you love and joy and fellowship. He does this because zeal for his house consumes him. And you are more than his house; you're his home. So let's allow him to do his cleansing work on us from now until he raises us a House of God forever clean and incorruptible. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria