

Zeal for the Church
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3rd Sunday of Lent
John 2:13-22
“Zeal for your house will consume me.”

Movement 1 – A Priest, A Minister, and a Rabbi...

There is something absurd about a Baptist preaching at an Episcopalian church. There is something very absurd about a Baptist teaching Catholicism at an Episcopalian church. There are too many crossovers, there are too many points of cognitive dissonance. It makes one's head spin to think about all of the places of denominational intersection. It is absurd to have a Baptist preach at an Episcopalian church.

A little more than a year ago a joke was printed in the *Christian Century* that exposed the absurdity of inter-denominational experiences. “A priest, a rabbi and a minister walk into a bar, and the bartender says, ‘what is this, a joke?’” The idea of a priest, a rabbi, and a minister working together, walking together and being together is absurd. It is not something we are used to seeing, and something we are not used to experiencing. It is a joke because that seems to be the only way to truly deal with the absurdity.

We have become so sectarian in our denominations, that we have written the joke, we have written the punch line, and we tend to do anything we can to avoid the absurdity. If a student fills out a religious preference card and lists Methodist, than I will do everything I can to never darken that student's door as a Baptist clergy. The idea of a clergy from one denomination working with someone from another denomination is absurd. We might as well ask if they have contributed to our coffers before we offer our prayers. It is like we were at one time one big church, and God struck down our tower of Babel sending us to our own corners, speaking our own liturgical languages, and never considering the possibility of cross liturgical integration.

At that seems to be how we are today, lined up on the street, Episcopalian next to Methodist next to Baptist, next to Presbyterian, next to the other Baptist, next to the Catholic, and the third Baptist (we fight a lot). But never would we consider swapping pulpits, sharing ideas, crossing over or even joining churches. The idea of a Baptist preaching at an Episcopalian church is absurd.

Movement 2 – Hocking our Religious Wares

The idea is absurd because we aren't used to working with each other. While things have relaxed since our little disagreements of the 1500s, we may have a feeling of competition with each other. After all, we are indeed lined up on the street, and trying to lure others in with baubles, with gimmicks, and with promises, and the game seems to be that the church with the biggest organ will attract the most people, and the church with the most people, wins. The sociologist, Roger Finke, suggests that the capitalist and competitive environment of America's sacred landscape has greatly shaped the religious experience today. We live with an attitude that we have to grow to survive and to grow we have to attract members. We compete with each other, and in the competition we begin to focus on parts of our worship, on parts of our building, and even the preaching of our pastor. We wouldn't dream of working with other churches, because then we might lose members. Instead, let's change our worship for the sake of growth. Instead, let's fine-tune our children's program for the sake of growth. Instead, let's celebrate our

denomination and our building for the sake of growth.

What worries me is that we are not that different from the first century Jews, who had the bad luck to go to work at the temple the day Christ got angry. Imagine walking into that outer courtyard in order to pay tribute to God. Imagine that when you go to change your money you then have to decide what animal to buy for the sacrifice. Maybe you purchase the cheapest sheep because it has been a rough year, but you don't want to be considered low class and buy a dove. Maybe you buy the cattle because that is what your family has always bought, and you want to maintain the tradition. Maybe you buy the dove even though you can't afford it, but you know it is something that you are supposed to do. You go through the motions; you hand over your animal and then go home until the next time. Maybe on your way out you notice that the people selling the animals are pointing out the superior qualities of the cows, the clean pens of the pigeons, or the fat on the sheep. Maybe you notice for the first time how these people seem to be selling their animals and nothing else, and you wonder, why do you do this in the first place.

Do you see the connection? Many go to churches out of obligation. Many stay with a denomination out of obligation. Many churches sell themselves out of obligation. And maybe sometimes we wonder why we do this in the first place. It is almost as if all the different denominations are in a square, and in the center is God. Yet we keep trying to call people into our churches to experience our worship, children's program or music. Churches have sold it, people have bought it, and we continue in our own little boxes. And forget the idea that we might work together.

Movement 3 – The Passion (Anger) of Christ

And I imagine that Christ finds it absurd that we don't work together. I imagine that Christ is ready to turn us over as well as he did in that temple. I bet Christ gets angry when we put up our walls and turn our backs to each other. It isn't right that we find it so absurd for a Baptist to preach in an Episcopalian church, yet we still balk to some level or degree. It isn't right that a Methodist is not allowed to sit at the Eucharistic table with a Catholic, yet we still find ourselves obliging to the traditions and the practices. It isn't right that a Baptist preach claims all other baptisms invalid unless each person is baptized in his church (and it will be a man in this case) by him. Yet we are judging each other's salvation and relationship with Christ. So you can imagine Jesus coming into our American religious marketplace, turning over pulpits, throwing out Books of Common Prayer, emptying baptismal pools and throwing out the offering plate (that is the action that would cause me to faint!). You can imagine Christ saying, "You have made my house, the church, into a market place!"

This is where Christ is as well with us and with the temple. He is angry, he has had enough, and things need to change. It is absurd that sacrifice has become such an institution. It is absurd that liturgy has become so highly worshipped. It is absurd that churches compete with children's programs. It is absurd that so many are so judgmental of other Christians. It is absurd that we don't work together.

Movement 4 – Our Sheepish (Passive Aggressive) Response

But our walls are too big and too solid for us to tear them down. Or at least we would think so. Our traditions are so ingrained that we can't change. Or at least we would believe that about ourselves. This is the tradition, and there is nothing we can do to change it. We know it is not the best, but what else can we do? What hope do we have to change?

We even look to our past and find hopelessness. Individuals have tried to voice this rage and have tried to change. After the second Great Awakening, a time of great preaching and rousing revivals, a restoration movement began. Leaders such as Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell tried to reconnect with the primitive or early (original) Christian church. They were going to move beyond the denominations, and bring back the church that Christ started. Yet with time, we found ourselves with just another denomination, and Christ's rage continues. Isaac

Hecker and Orestes Brownson also felt the desire for unity, but believed that the unity they sought would be found within the Roman Catholic Church. The walls continued to stay and Christ's rage continued. But what else can we do? We have become so imbedded in our customs and denominational cultures that it seems impossible to change, move and unify.

While studying at the University of Dayton, some of the other students would ask me what would have to happen for me to become Catholic. Easy, all that would have to happen would be a cessation of infant baptism, no more real presence at Eucharist, married and female priests, and do away with the Pope and Bishops. Those are the big things, and those are the things that seem impossible to happen.

And I can imagine the same response from the Jews in the first century. "What else do you want us to do? People need to sacrifice something to God in order to fulfill their Jewish obligations, and we can't just give away the animals." Our churches, our denominations are broken, corrupt, flawed, and selfish, but it is the best thing we have; it is the only realistic that that we have, and all we know.

And as we turn back over our pews, as we pick up our books of Common Prayer, as we gather the money from the offering plate, we look to Christ, and ask for a sign of hope. Give us a sign, Christ, give us some hope, and give us some direction so that we can be the church you have called us to be. Give us a sign so that your rage will continue no more, because our denominational walls have become too big and too heavy for us to see around, get around and tear down.

Movement 5 – Looking for the New Temple

Christ gives us the sign of the new temple, the Holy universal Church, the body of Christ. The biblical scholar, Raymond Brown suggests that what Jesus is doing in this passage is offering a messianic rebuilding of the temple. Jesus is offering a way out of trading animals, a way out of obligatory rituals, and a way out of the capitalist liturgy, which was being practiced. There is a new temple and it is one that will resist any wrecking ball, any despair, and any doubt – it is the temple of Christ.

Christ says the same to us when we whimper our excuses of denominational sectarianism. Jesus calls us to the new temple, to the body of Christ. After all, what is it that brings the individual churches together? After all, what is it that compels us to gather and worship? After all, what is it that Paul exhorts us to remember, but that we are all a part of the body of Christ? In Baptist circles, we have a saying that holds us together (which is a remarkable feat for Baptist). We remind each other that we indeed have "One Lord, One Faith, and One Baptism." Isn't it true for us all? Episcopalians, Baptist, Methodists, Presbyterians, Moravians, and Catholics, we are all a part of the temple, the body of Christ. And we gather to experience being in that temple with Christ. Yet we all experience Christ differently. We are a diverse tapestry as the human race, and I would never ask everyone to worship the Living Lord in a monolithic way. Maybe you feel connected to Jesus through the Word read and proclaimed. Maybe you experience the presence of Christ through the affective sermon. Then go and be Baptist, and have zeal for your church. But not for the sake of your church, but because in your church you are connected, you experience Jesus.

Maybe you experience the presence of Christ through the mystery, the liturgy, and through the Eucharistic. Then go and be Episcopalian and have zeal for your church because you are connected to Christ. My brothers and sisters, each denomination, each church on the market square has a unique characteristic; style; or attribute which connects the members of the congregation with Christ. That is important, and to be celebrated. So we want to be good Episcopalians, Methodists, Presbyterians, or Baptists, we want to have zeal for our church, and at the same time celebrate the zeal in other churches, recognize that we all are focusing on the new temple, the body of Christ. Can you imagine a row of churches offering referrals? Can you imagine what it would be like if I suggest those who preferred the higher liturgical worship to go

here? Gone is the competition and instead we have dedication to Christ.

Let's tear down our walls of denominational competition. Let's put up permeable, walls, cloth tapestries where the Spirit moves freely. Let's have zeal for our church, and allow our worships to effect others. Let's continually ask ourselves if we are worshipping our church or if we are worshipping Christ. And let's be absurd and work together for the sake of Christ. That is the ultimate in acceptable worship – when we serve together. Imagine that Sunday worship takes all day. You do your thing here, we do our thing at the Baptist meeting house, and then we meet for lunch and fellowship. Imagine all Christians in Bryn Mawr gathering together after worshipping in their respective places for lunch and fellowship. And then imagine we all go out together to bring the hope and the life of the Gospel to the world. Can you see us all getting on the SEPTA trains to go downtown? Can you see us all driving on the expressway to go to those who our society has forgotten? That is the zeal for the church, holy, mystical, and universal, lived out. That is the absurd zeal, when we get together for the sake of the Lord to serve the poor, to house the homeless, to speak up for the oppressed, to speak truth to the powers and the principalities of the world. Then the church transcends denominations, and it won't seem so absurd, it won't seem so bizarre but natural and easy for we will all be in the new temple, in the presence of Christ our Lord.

AMEN