

There are lots of zealots running around our world today. Some are zealous for one political candidate over another. Was following a car the other day with three bumper stickers for political candidates: all were losers! Others are zealous for their favorite sports team. Others are zealous for their religious ideals, they are zealous about their theological bent or god and want to force the rest of the world to accept their ideals, etc. Most zealots have a way of turning us off, so I am wondering if, or can, we be a positive zealot for our faith? How can zealots be likeable?

Now you may be wondering what a zealot is? The American College Dictionary defines a zealot as: one who displays zeal or one carried away by an excess of zeal. And it defines zeal as: ardor for a person, cause or object; eager desire or enthusiastic diligence.

The Psalmist's zeal is wearing him out. It is consuming him. Now, as I reflect on this it could be seen as either good or bad. The more I look at this section I come to my conclusion that the Psalmist's zeal is not the best kind. The Psalmist feels he alone is on the Lord's side. Everyone else has deserted God's words, laws and precepts. It is he and he alone who is upholding the traditions of the faith. He sees himself as the only one loyal to God among his people. I wonder if he is trying to make up in his zeal the lack of zeal he perceives in those around him. He wants others to have the same zeal for the faith that he does. Maybe he has forgotten that each of us experience God in our own way. We are not made as clones but as free spirits. Why do zealots always want us to view the world through their eyes and experiences?

This could be said of Paul. The "old" Paul was zealous for the traditions of his fathers. His goal was to keep the laws/traditions of the past and to have others keep the same. He was so zealous for these traditions that he was out to eliminate those Jewish Christians who he deemed as a threat to these traditions. Acts 9:1 reads: "*Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples.*" Paul goes further in his letter to the Galatians: "*...I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it.*" He was not content to breathe his fire against the church only in Jerusalem but has a letter from the Jewish Council to bring any believers he finds in Damascus back to Jerusalem and have them jailed there. His zeal is consuming him. He is not giving zealots a good name.

Both Paul and the Psalmist are consumed by a zeal for the Lord. Now this zeal may not be seen in a good light. They have become righteous in word and deed. They are pointing to themselves and saying how good they are. The Psalmist writes: *My zeal wears me out, for my enemies ignore your words* (119:139). Paul writes: *I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers* (1:14). We might consider that a slight understatement from Paul. The Psalmist's zeal consumes him. They both seem to have a "my way or the highway" view of faith and faith traditions.

But then Paul meets the living Christ. His zeal is transformed into love. He still has his intense zeal for God but as I reflect on Paul and how his life has been transformed I see him as a good zealot. I mean, talk about a turn around. Not only does he stop persecuting the Jewish Christians but he begins to take the good news of the Gospel to the Gentiles! Now it would be enough for many if he had just stopped the persecuting of the Church but his zeal pushes him to move out into the world of the Gentiles. His zeal

for them would get him in trouble with those he was persecuting—some of the Christian religious leaders. His zeal turned into forgiveness and grace and love.

Was Paul a likeable zealot? I believe so. Here is the one who wrote I Corinthians 13. He was one whose zeal defended the rights of the Gentiles to become a part of the faithful (you and me). He was one whose zeal opened up an acceptance of women in leadership roles and as co-workers in the faith community. (We seem to zero in on a couple of negative verses of Paul about women and neglect the vast amount of evidence of Paul's acceptance and elevation of women in ministry roles.) His zeal allowed him to accept different traditions and customs. Meat offered to idols, use your own conscience. Special days and holidays, use your own conscience. But in all things let love be your guiding principle. His zeal led him to accept the variety of gifts in the lives of the people. Some are called to preach, others to teach, etc... celebrate what God has given you and use it for God's glory.

It was in the Philippines that we first encountered the "Day of the Dead" celebrations, Halloween and All Saint's Day. It was the tradition of some of to spend the night in the cemetery with candles and feasts. Should Christians participate in such traditions was a question we were often asked. Some saw it as a way to honor their ancestors and to remember them (much as we do on Memorial Day in this country). Others, though, viewed it as a pagan celebration and one that should be shunned by Christians. Each brought his own feelings and meaning to the discussion. In the end, neither was right or wrong—it was in how they approached the holiday and the celebration.

Paul has become an understanding, caring and loving zealot, like Jesus. Now if we made a list of zealots would we add Jesus to the list? Yet, who was more zealous for their faith? Did he not give his life for the very faith he professed? He was so sure of his faith and who he was that he went to the cross that we might be free. He lived a life that others are called to follow. Paul asks that we imitate him as he imitates Christ (I Cor. 4:16).

What are you zealous about? Are you living out your faith so that others may see Christ through us? Living out a faith not only in words but also in actions. We need to become more and more like Jesus. Deepak Chopra, who I quoted on Easter, would probably not consider himself a Christian, but in his book, The Third Jesus, he argues that Jesus is one person in history who should be imitated and followed. Do they say that about us?

Keith Miller tells the story of a businessman who was having "one of those days." You know the day, he overslept and everything was going wrong. He had an urgent meeting across town and was, of course, running late. As he was rushing through Grand Central Station to catch his train, his briefcase hit the arm of a young boy. The boy was carrying a puzzle and as the box flew up into the air the cover came off and puzzle pieces went flying. As the businessman looked up he saw his train starting to leave the station and tears in the eyes of the young boy...as he put the top back on the box with all the pieces found he handed it to the young boy. The boy looked back and asked, "Mister, are you Jesus?"

What are we zealous about?