

Consuming zeal: John 2:13-22

In the synoptic accounts of the cleansing of the temple, Jesus is being provocative. In John, he is provoked.

by [John K. Stendahl](#) in the [March 10, 2009](#) issue

His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for thy house will consume me."

First, to be clear: I am in favor of mental health. There is so much suffering in the obsessions and disturbances of the human psyche, so much misery for troubled spirits. Charged with the handling of scripture for the sake of others, I prize the ways in which the gospel can be healing medicine and a balm for the anxious and afflicted.

But then comes the reminder that the Gospel of John is not exactly a message about the sort of health that I would wish for: the gracefully balanced walk of the serenely wise down life's way. Serenity and wisdom may be described and promoted, but Jesus himself is no paragon of either social adjustment or blissful transcendence. My savior hangs on a cross, and my salvation has something to do with what put him there, the zeal that ate at him.

Consumed. It's a potent verb, this one from Psalm 69 evoked in today's gospel reading. In the 19th century tuberculosis was called consumption, and the image is now often applied to the working of cancer in human flesh. To be eaten up is not a state of health, and when the image describes the effect of zeal, we know that this kind of passion will exact a terrible toll.

Of course, pausing to reflect on this theme of consumption can be salutary—health-working—for us. As economic and environmental consumers, we may recognize the ways in which the fevers of consuming consume us. Jesus' forceful decommercialization of the temple may then signify the healing we need. Similarly, we might recall the classical distinction between the consuming and regarding forms of love and hear ourselves called from the one to the other, to delight in the free

bird's beauty rather than grasping and eating it. Additional wise and therapeutic insights could be explored. Yet although this story can rightly be heard as describing an exorcism, it tells of *Jesus* as the one possessed. His zeal consumes him.

This temple, he cries, is his Father's house. He knows what it is meant to be, and that is not one more place for the world's commerce. A swinging whip in his hand, he shouts and shoves and overturns the tables. He must have seemed crazy.

John says that the disciples remembered this scripture about zeal and consumption. When? Was it then or perhaps only later, after the cost had become clear, that they recalled both that psalm and where this zeal had brought their teacher?

In the synoptic accounts, Jesus' action at the temple is part of the final days of his ministry. It seems an intentional piece of political theater, initiating the events that follow at the end of the week. In John, however, the raising of Lazarus is the provocative sign at the culmination of the journey. This incident stands back here instead, near the beginning. Moreover, the action is not an act of provocation: it is Jesus who is provoked and driven to react. Near the outset of the long narrative that will finally return to Jerusalem, John sets this theme: Jesus zealous for the house of God, Jesus being eaten up.

It is striking that it is in John that we have this form of the story of the cleansing of the temple. The fourth Gospel is, after all, the one in which Jesus appears most majestic, in control even at his arrest and trial and triumphant even in his crucifixion. Yet it is also in John that we find some of the most poignantly human moments in the Gospels' depictions of Jesus: the weeping, the thirsting, even suggestions of hesitation, yearning and regret. The evangelist can seem a bit embarrassed by these and is quick to point to their typological meaning. So also here Jesus is soon speaking with divine prescience of the temple as a type for his own body, the body that will be raised.

Those concluding words about resurrection are where this piece of narrative concludes, and it is to that transfiguring vision of vindication that the story will go. That *is* therapeutic: healing and wholeness, courage and hope.

But to go there I cannot leave behind this troubled Jesus—something eating at him, consumed.

What's at stake for me here isn't just remembering Jesus aright. Many people I've known, so many who have blessed me and taught me and shown me the kingdom, have been people in spiritual pain whose voices were strained with the zeal within them, their manner awkward, their spirits restless. Sometimes it was their passion for this world, for this desecrated house of our Father, that seemed the curse. Often their unhealth was not due to anything so holy; it was the product of spirits that Jesus exorcized with the same zeal with which he cleansed the temple. But in either case, they were not well.

The distinction between godly and sinful zeal is important. It matters *what* consumes us. But that's not the point for me now. It is rather that these words call me away from the tyrannical ideal of well-adjusted happiness and draw me back to feel rather than flee the dis-ease of which they speak. This verse is precious in that it ties Jesus so intimately to so many troubled spirits.

Finally, when I think of his compassion and solidarity with them, I remember his strange saying, just a few chapters later, that they—we—should eat of him.