

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod  
Pentecost 19  
September 30, 2018  
Sermon by Pastor Justin Gran  
***Are you jealous?***

—Numbers 11:16, 24-29

Dear friends in Christ,

Are you jealous? Do you get fired up and become obsessed over whatever it is that makes you jealous? Are you ever so jealous that you would sooner amputate a limb to possess what your heart truly longs for? Have you ever been so jealous that you would rather die than let go and give up?

When we hear the word “jealousy,” the primary connotation is a sinful, selfish envy. That kind of jealousy is certainly not a virtue. But there is a kind of jealousy worth striving for. Jealousy is an attitude of the heart. It is a strong, burning desire for something. It can be for something we already have that we want to guard jealously, or it can be for something we want more of. Whether we have a proper or improper jealous attitude depends on what we are jealous for.

“Are you jealous?” That’s what Moses asked the young Joshua. Two men, Eldad and Medad, received the Spirit of the Lord and they prophesied in the Israelite camp, even though they weren’t there at the tent of meeting with Moses and the other 70 Elders. Joshua saw this and ran to Moses and tattled on them—“Moses, make them stop!” So Moses asked Joshua, ***“Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the LORD’s people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!”*** Joshua’s problem wasn’t simply jealousy. It was that he was jealous for Moses, and not for the Lord. He was upset that Moses wasn’t being honored. And maybe this is unfair to assume, but I wonder if Joshua wasn’t at least a little bit jealous that he didn’t have what Eldad and Medad had.

A strikingly similar situation occurred in the Gospel of Mark. An unnamed man who clearly wasn’t one of Jesus’ twelve was seen driving out demons in Jesus’ name. So John runs and tattles on this guy. “Jesus, we saw this man driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him. That’s our job, not his!” John’s problem wasn’t simply that he and the other disciples were jealous. Their problem was that they were jealous for their own names, and not for Jesus’ name. They didn’t care that Jesus was being glorified; they wanted their own glory.

Just think of all the little things that make us jealous for our own sake. You put in the same amount of work, or even more, than a coworker. And you anticipate at least a “thank you” or a “job well done,” from your boss. But instead he says those things to your coworker. But your hard work goes unnoticed. Does that make you a little jealous? Or what about this: God has generously blessed certain individuals with certain gifts and talents—Wow, she can really play the piano! Man, he can fix anything! He just has a way with people! She’s so patient! The subtle thought, “I wish I had his skills or her abilities” can easily turn to jealousy. “I want to be able to do what he does so that people think as highly of me as they think of him.”

There may be a number of things that cause that spark of sinful jealousy in our hearts. But the main, underlying cause for that kind of jealousy is me. I want the credit. I want recognition. I want glory. I want what should really only belong to God. Our sinful jealousy is no match for God’s righteous jealousy. The Lord our God is a jealous God. He refuses to share his glory and honor with idols. When we seek our own glory and praise for the things we accomplish that is nothing less than idolatry. God is patient and compassionate and slow to anger, but when it comes to idolatry, robbing God of his glory, he has a very short fuse.

***“I the Lord your God am a jealous God,”*** he says. But that is a good thing for us that God is so jealous. God’s jealousy doesn’t just mean that his anger burns against us and our sin. God’s jealousy also means that his heart burns with such a desire to be our God. It’s not like God is on some power trip. Think about it: If we were to stop praising and glorifying God in our lives, would that somehow make God less glorious or special? No! God is great and glorious apart from us. He doesn’t need us. We need him. But purely out of his love and compassion for us he made his glory known. He revealed his glory in Jesus Christ. He placed his Spirit on us so that we can know Jesus and have life in his name. He’s graciously given us every reason to praise him and glorify him. We forsake all vainglory for ourselves, and we glorify God because he alone has created us. We praise God because he redeemed us; he rescued us from worthless empty idols. And we thank him because he jealously guards those he has redeemed. When he says, “I will not give my glory to another.” In the same breath he says, “I will not let you go. I do not want to lose you.” Praise God for his zeal to guard us and keep us.

As the Lord has been jealous for you, be jealous for him. If it still sounds strange to speak of jealousy as a virtue, maybe this sounds even stranger: Imagine a husband and wife go out to dinner, and some sleazy guy comes up and starts making advances toward this man's wife. He tells her she's good looking. He says, "Why don't you ditch the guy you're with and come me. I'll show you a good time." What if her husband says, "Meh, whatever... I'll catch you later!" What's the husband's problem? He's not at all jealous.

Sometimes our problem is that we're too jealous. Other times, we're not jealous enough. If someone were to diminish our love and commitment to Jesus by saying, "do you really believe that? You really think Jesus is the only way?" Do we jealously guard Jesus and give a clear confession? When push comes to shove with our busy schedules and other demands of life, do we jealously guard our time Jesus and his word? Or instead of cutting out the distractions and temptations, do we cut back on Jesus?

If it ever seems as though our zeal for the Lord is lacking, consider Jesus and his zeal. His zeal never lacked. He was jealous for every heart in Israel and many more that were not of his sheep pen. You see that in the many sad cases where people rejected Jesus. Many people came right up to Jesus and he offered them life and forgiveness, and many said, "Nah, I'll pass." A rich young man; nine out of ten lepers; crowds of people at Capernaum—those are just a few examples. But Jesus' never shrugged his shoulders and said, "Whatever, see you later." But it broke his heart. It filled him with a gut-wrenching sorrow to see these people willing go after gods and lifestyle that could not satisfy them. But he didn't lose his sense of zeal. He was zealous enough to die. He was so jealous of the souls Satan led astray, and so unwavering in his determination to buy them back that he was willing suffer ridicule and even death on a cross. And he did. That's how jealous Jesus is for you.

Are you jealous for Jesus sake? Do you get fired up and become so fixated on Jesus Christ and stubbornly refuse to let him go? Are you ever so jealous for Jesus sake that you would sooner cut off a limb and even rip out an eye than forfeit the forgiveness and eternal life that Jesus gives you?

Remember the young Joshua and his misplaced jealousy? "Are you jealous for my sake?" Moses asked. That same Joshua redirected his zeal for the Lord. Decades after that little learning experience, Joshua stood before the nation of Israel at the end of his life. And with such a stubborn zeal for Lord he said, "Throw away those false gods your forefather worship back in Egypt and serve the Lord. He saved. Take your pick: those worthless idols or the God that saved you. But as for me and my household we will serve the Lord!"

Remember those jealous disciples wanting to stifle that man who was driving out demons in Jesus name? Sometime later, they stood before rulers and authorities who would eventually succeed in taking many of their lives, and they said with an unshakeable zeal for Jesus, "We just can't help it. We can't keep quiet. We must talk about what we have seen and heard. We must obey God rather than men."

Where do we get that kind of zeal to sacrifice our own pride, and even life and limb to say, "I follow Jesus?" It's by the very same Spirit that was poured out on the Elders of Israel that day in the desert. It's by the same Spirit that was poured out on the disciples on Pentecost. That same Spirit was poured out on you in baptism. The same Spirit actively works through the word and sacraments to put to death our sinful pride, and create a new heart that loves and serves the Lord. The Spirit kindles in us an attitude that is so set on glorifying the God who saved us. As the Lord jealously guards you and keeps you in his grace, jealously guard and keep him. Amen.