

St. Simon and St. Jude
Evensong, 28 October 2005
Northwest Texas Diocesan Convention – Many Gifts, One Spirit

More than anything else, celebrating the feast of St. Simon and St. Jude means that there's hope for all of us. We know almost nothing about Simon and Jude. They show up at the very end of the list of apostles. There are some legends about them, but the Bible itself tells us very little. Simon is called either the Canaanean or the zealous one. Jude is distinguished most often by being named "not Iscariot", i.e., not the Judas who betrayed Jesus. And Jude has a short book named for him – all of 25 verses.

The legends say that Simon and Jude were apostles to Persia, what is today Iran. One version says they were martyred, another that they died peacefully in their beds. What little we know about them gives an impression that they were both zealots. That's not exactly a popular word today. We tend to associate it with religious fanaticism, particularly other brands of religious fanaticism than the Christian variety. Zealous comes from the same word as jealous. We often understand it to describe somebody who's pretty intense, terribly concerned about keeping someone or something safe or pure or well-defined. It seems pretty likely that Simon was one of those folks who insist on keeping the rules. We'd probably call him a control freak today, or maybe a purity freak, because the rules he was concerned about probably had a lot to do with what you had to do to be a "good" member of that religious group. Jude, if he's the one who wrote the book that's named after him, was at the very least a verbal zealot – he, too, wanted the community he was part of to be pure. It may be their zealousness that led to the tradition that they were martyred. If you've ever dealt with a particularly zealous person, after a while martyrdom can begin to seem like a good thing.

Now, I imagine that Simon and Jude were more than a little bit difficult to get along with. Jesus didn't collect a group of perfect people around him. Simon and Jude are included among the apostles, and so are a number of folks who look just as human as we do. The good news is that Simon and Jude are remembered among the apostles not because of what their zealousness accomplished, but because they were apostles. They were sent, and they had a mission – just like you and I do.

The community around Jesus is not a bunch of perfected saints, or folks who are all really nice, or people who always agree with each other. They're folks just like us. Somehow these two fanatics are an essential part of the community. They are the holy ones Isaiah talks about, the ones in Jerusalem on whom God's glory will settle. They are the ones who keep Jesus' commandment to love one another. Oddly enough, we don't know much about how they lived out that commandment, other than the hint that they went off to Persia – or maybe their fellow apostles sent them away because they couldn't stomach any more zealousness...

The community that gathers around Jesus today is still full of challenging folks. Somehow I doubt that you have managed to export all of them! In a healthy community, the different gifts of each person work together in ways that strengthen the whole community. Simon's and Jude's zeal were remembered in that community of disciples just as much as Peter's impetuosity, Martha's busyness, or even the me-first attitude of James and John. Sometimes the qualities we find most objectionable are the ones the Spirit finds most useful! The collect prayed for this feast notes their zealousness and asks

that “we may with ardent devotion make known the love and mercy” of Christ. All of us. Zealous.

This kind of zeal is really about ardent devotion, or better, “burning love.” What are you on fire about? Where’s your passion? What have you been sent to do?

Rosa Parks died earlier this week. Her quiet passion was about standing up for her people, for helping African-Americans take their equal place in this land of ours. She was zealous, in a quiet and **assuming** way. She quietly assumed that she had as much right to rest her feet as any white person on the ride home from a long day at work. That is gospel, and that is the good news she was sent to tell that day in 1955. We might call Rosa Parks the quiet and zealous apostle of the bus seat. However, and this is important, her zeal brought death threats, the loss of her job, and within a fairly short time, forced her and her husband to move to Detroit. Birmingham, Alabama, had become too small a place for her zeal.

I’ve been reading an important little book titled *What Can One Person Do?*¹ It’s about how each one of us can help to heal this broken world of ours, especially what we can do about the Millennium Development Goals. It is an invitation to all of us in this church to become apostles who will spread good news to the poor. Good news in the form of adequate food, clean water, universal primary education, improved maternal health and child survival rates, and ongoing international development that actually improves people’s lives. Realizing this gospel dream needs the support of all of us, at the level of 0.7% of our incomes – national, diocesan, church, and personal incomes. That’s not a great deal – \$0.70 out of every \$100. But zealousness about this can transform the lives of the poorest one-third of the world’s population. Zeal for this godly dream can free the spirits of billions of people. If that isn’t good news, I don’t know what is. Your zeal can make a difference. The Vicar of Dibley took 400 of her real-life sisters, women priests in the Church of England, to visit Prime Minister Tony Blair last January. Britain is wrestling with their role in this struggle. But zeal about this vision hasn’t yet managed to get our own country to sign on. There is lots of resistance in this land, and that is a fairly normal response to the zeal of the gospel.

So where does zeal come from, and how does it work? It’s about being on fire with love – love for God, the gospel, and our neighbor. It’s what Jesus means when he says, “if you love me you will keep my commandments.” Finding our passion has something to do with being vulnerable, with allowing our inner selves to be inflamed. Episcopalians get a bum rap when it comes to zeal – we’ve been known as God’s frozen chosen for far too long! Let go and get lit. Feel that zeal!

We all have it, somewhere deep inside, maybe hidden away. As Jeremiah put it, “there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones. I am weary with holding it in. Indeed, I cannot” (Jer 20:9). That zeal is a gift that’s meant to see the light of day, to burn bright and transform this world we live in. What’s your passion? God wants to see it burn, and all your neighbors need to feel its heat. We need all kinds of zeal to set this body alight, to get this Easter fire glowing. The world needs passionate writers and zealous parents and earnest teachers and bus drivers afire with the love of God. Someone has said that the church is to mission as fire is to burning – we have our purpose in being aflame. This bush, this branch is meant to burn and not be consumed. This kind of fire

¹ *What Can One Person Do?* Sabina Alkire and Edmund Newell, eds. Church Publishing, NY: 2005.

does not exhaust its fuel, for the love of God is beyond all measure. Let your love be a flame that will transform the world.

Oh yes, some of your neighbors and some of your fellow churchgoers are going to find your zeal a bit annoying. Doesn't matter – there's hope for us all!