Zeal and Saul to Paul

Zeal is the mighty force that incites the winds, the tides, the storms; it urges the planet on its course, and spurs the ant to great exertion. To be without zeal is to be without the zest of living. And so Charles Fillmore begins his discussion of Zeal in the Twelve Powers.

The character I have chosen to provide a framework for our exploration of zeal is Paul. Paul started out as Saul. Saul was a passionate opponent to the new teachings and followers of Jesus. Saul knew the Jewish law and was going to enforce that law in all of its minutia. It is recorded that he sought to bring the followers of this new teaching up for trial, punishment and often, execution. He was passionate about extinguishing this threat to traditional Judaism.

Then something happened. The report we often rely upon found in Acts was neither written by Paul nor consistent with Paul’s own letters. The blinding on the Road to Damascus may or may not have happened. Something, however, turned Paul’s theology from south to north. Suddenly Paul is the loudest, strongest voice in support of the teachings of Jesus. Many believe that without Paul, Christianity today would not be the same. Perhaps our faith tradition might not even exist at all.

Paul was a historical, real person so we may know more accurate information about his humanity than any other Bible character. Paul’s letters are thought to be the earliest New Testament writings we have, even earlier than Mark, although Paul did not convert until after the death of Jesus. Paul was responsible for spreading the news of Jesus teachings or at least his interpretation; cultivating church groups; and encouraging and supporting them in the face of persecution. Paul supported groups in Thesalonia, Corinth, Gallatia, and Phillipi against the very kind of persecution he once perpetrated.

It is the dramatic nature of Paul’s conversion and the level of his zeal which give us demonstrations of the positive power of zeal and cautionary notes about the danger of zeal.

Before I get too deep into this discussion I want to share with you where the term Zealot came from. In the time of historian Josephus, around the first century A.D., there were three main sects of Judaism: the Pharisees, the
Sadducees and the Essenes. A fourth sect arose who were called the Zealots, from the Greek “zelotes” or emulator, follower.

The Zealots were a militant group who sought to overthrow the Roman rule by force. They found Roman rule to be in opposition to monotheism, or having only one God, and they sought to eliminate it by military action. However, in their passionate pursuit, they also began to eliminate Jews they felt were too passive or who pursued compromise with the Romans. It does not appear that anyone liked the Zealots but the Zealots. There is no indication Paul was a Zealot but let’s see what we can learn from Paul’s experience.

Fillmore writes in the chapter on Zeal: “Never repress the impulse, the force, the zeal welling up within you. Commune with it in spirit and praise it for its great energy and efficiency in action. At the same time analyze and direct its course. As zeal alone, it is without intelligence or discretion as to results. As Jesus taught His disciples and combined their various talents, so every man must grow in wisdom and zeal. You are not to repress but to guide the spirit of enthusiasm, which in co-operation with wisdom will bring you happiness and satisfaction.”

“As zeal alone, it is without intelligence or discretion as to results.” How many of you would say that weeding your garden is a good thing? Most of us see the benefit of that. Now imagine that you send a 3 or 4 year old out to weed the garden. They are enthusiastic and energetic. And usually, about half of the pile they pull is weeds and half is flowers or vegetables. They lack the ability to discern, the wisdom to distinguish between weed and flower. Their energetic efforts do not take the time to look carefully.

Zeal is not the energy of the conversion Paul experiences because zeal is constant in both Saul and Paul. Will and Wisdom change the direction zeal is moving. Paul has a new awakening to the power of the message of Love that is Jesus’ life teaching. He finds comfort in these ideas of grace and forgiveness that go beyond the strict laws he enforced as Saul and through his Will, Paul changed the direction of his enthusiastic efforts. He is now the advocate for this new way of living.

As you read Fillmore’s text on the Twelve Powers you will find in every chapter some pairing of the focus power with another.
We might think of Love is perfect all alone but Fillmore says, “Even love (John), the "greatest thing in the world," is linked in the twelve-power integration of Jesus with James (judgment). Jesus called these two brothers "Sons of thunder," comparing the effect of their combined power to the tremendous vibrations set up by unrestrained electrical energy. Judgment says to Love, "Look before you leap." Do not let unselfish zeal and enthusiasm for the loved one run away with your judgment. Remember that these two are brothers and that you should sit on the throne of your I AM dominion, with love on the right hand and judgment on the left.” “Sit on the throne of your I AM dominion.” Fillmore has some interesting images. But here is what I think he’s saying:

There is a center of our being which is the I AM, the Christ of our being, the imprint of the Divine from which all consciousness arises. Before we allow Will to choose a direction, before we unleash the energy of Zeal to move us forward, we must find balance through Wisdom and Love. I am using the word “Wisdom” instead of “Judgment” because of another facet of S/P I want to explore. S/P means it is present in both Saul and Paul.

Saul and Paul were harsh in their condemnation. This is the human, ego side of judgment rather than the discerning, spiritual wisdom side. Even as he discovered the forgiveness and grace of the teachings of Jesus, he was filled with self-loathing and forgiveness he found difficult to give himself. Compare what he says in Romans chapter 12 to what he says in chapter 7:

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” Compare that to chapter 7:

“For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.”
There are metaphysical interpretations but at a basic level it presents the kinds of conflict present in us when spiritual guidance is at odds with the more basic urges of our humanity. It is natural to eat, to drink, to enjoy sexual pleasure. However, even intellectually we know there are healthy approaches and unhealthy approaches to those desires. When zeal is left to its own devices and is allowed to be guided by carnal desire, eating becomes gluttony; drinking becomes drunkenness and pleasure becomes promiscuity. “Zeal alone is without intellect or discretion.” It is always balance which restores us to the proper use of our spiritual faculties. Fillmore says, “Man cannot corrupt the inherent purity of any of God’s attributes, but he can unwisely combine them in states of consciousness that bring dissatisfaction and incompleteness to him.” We are not inherently sinful, or prone to error thinking. Our flesh is not inherently corrupt or inconsistent with our divinity. Saul and Paul seem to see only black and white—even as the conversion changes what Saul sees as white to what Paul sees as black. Our lives are nuance, subtle discernments on a moment by moment basis about what is the spiritual thing to do. Not what is right and what is wrong—what is mine to do. Zeal gives us a passion for life, an impetus to seek new ways to live the expression of Spirit we are and to seek new insights in spiritual understanding. We must maintain our balance as we allow wisdom and love to temper our zeal. Even the pursuit of meditation, the pursuit of learning, the pursuit of serving can be misdirected and take us away from the fullness of life.

The New Testament Epistle to the Romans is accepted as being authored by Paul and considered his best work. In chapter 12 he writes: “Never lag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, serve the Lord.” This verse was included in the Daily Word for Wednesday. I was comforted by the gentler “aglow with the Spirit” rather than “on fire” with the Spirit. I noticed “serve the Lord” as the guidance. I could not help but consider the role of zeal in events unfolding this past week. Zeal fueled both sides in the clashes between police and rioters, between militia and protesters in Ferguson, Missouri. What we have seen is the result of zeal flowing without wisdom or love. My heart is sad to see a part of my home state in such turmoil. In a small note in one account I found this line:
“Missouri State Highway Patrol Captain Ron Johnson praised members of the clergy, who were seen in the crowd, helping direct the march and acting as intermediaries between police and demonstrators.”

The clergy were not taking sides. They were acting as intermediaries to facilitate a more peaceful reflection on what was going on. Many actions in this conflict may be revealed as fear driven and many have been destructive of both persons and property. The same can be said for actions in Israel and Gaza; the Ukraine; Iraq; Afghanistan. I am very intentionally not designating any view as right or free from fear or non-destructive. I am not the final arbiter of that.

U.S. Representative Emanuel Cleaver is a Congressman from the State of Missouri and also an active, ordained Methodist minister and someone I respect. In his public statement he said, “I will pray for peace in Ferguson. And I will work for justice.” I believe as people of faith, these are things we can do with zeal, wisdom and love. We can pray for peace and work for justice.

Unity’s teachings instruct us to begin within. Let us first establish peace within ourselves. This was something Paul was not able to do. Let us embrace our humanity and our divinity equally. Let us be patient with ourselves and with others. Let us find our balance in wisdom and love before we unleash the energy of zeal.

As we pray for peace in Unity’s affirmative fashion, we must see the potential for peace present in the situation. Whether it is in Ferguson, Missouri, or a mountain top in Iraq, or a narrow strip of land in the Middle East; within the wounds of misunderstanding, fear and aggression lays the power of healing love. We must be able to place our consciousness in this place of potential before we can be a part of the solution. Arguing for any side in prayer keeps us at the level of human understanding which gave rise to the struggle in the first place. To be agents for peace, we must move to the level of consciousness from which peace arises. We must know that place exists within us.

If we do these two things first, establish peace in our thoughts and pray for peace in the consciousness of that potential, we may rely upon guidance for the justice work that is ours to do. Zeal is our zest for living and each of us has very different gifts.
So justice work for one might be writing or performing music based on love for one another. Justice work for another might be creating a community garden. Justice work for another might be advocating for legislators with a new level of consciousness or for new legislation for equality.

I want to share a fuller quote from Dr. Martin Luther King because I think it is richer than taking a phrase from it:

“The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. So it goes. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.”

We can be violent and hateful in our thoughts and words as well as in our actions. Let your power of Zeal be full and bright and guided by wisdom and love.

Be the Light and the Love that makes a difference in our world.