

The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost – October 27, 2019
Joel 2:23-32 & Luke 18:9-14

Our lesson from the prophet Joel begins with this:

“O children of Zion, be glad
and rejoice in the Lord your God;
for he has given the early rain for your vindication,
he has poured down for you abundant rain,
the early and the later rain, as before.
The threshing floors shall be full of grain,
the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.
I will repay you for the years
that the swarming locust has eaten” (Joel 2:23-25)

I have been thinking about that – the years that the swarming locust has eaten. Such vivid imagery of productive and generative time lost; consumed by the locust swarm. What would repayment for those lost years look like? Can we be restored from time lost? Does this restoration turn back time or do we somehow move forward in new and unexpected abundance?

While many things can be restored, the one thing it seems that can't is time. Time flies and it does not return. Years pass and we never get them back. Yet God promises the impossible: “I will restore the years that the locust has eaten” (Joel 2:25). For four consecutive years, God's people had suffered the complete destruction of their entire harvest through swarms of locusts. They were brought completely to their knees. God observes their suffering and feels compassion for his people, calling them to repent and return to him: “Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.” (Joel 2:13)

So the people of Israel do repent and turn in a new direction. In response, the merciful Lord “had pity on his people,” and said, “Behold I am sending to you grain, wine and oil, and you will be satisfied.” (Joel 2:18-19) And in the coming years, God said, their fields would yield an abundance that would make up for what had been lost: “The threshing floor shall be full of grain; the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. . . . You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied.” (Joel 2:24, 26) This wonderful promise for those people meant that years of abundant harvests would follow the years of desolation brought about by the locusts.

Many of us have experienced something similar – lost years of our lives. Commonly referred to as locust years, these lost years are those wasted times we regret we can never get back. They are fruitless years – a lot of hard work may have been spent but the harvest was destroyed. They are also painful years – often spent in sorrow and self-pity. Like all prophets, Joel calls the people of Israel (and us) to repentance – the grand and holy refocusing of our attention away from ourselves – both our self-righteousness and our self-pity – and toward the God of creation, who is merciful and gracious.

Whether the swarm of locusts were the result of persecution from others or the negative consequence of our own selfishness and hardness of heart, God promises to restore these locust years. When we call upon the name of the Lord and we recognize that God is in the midst of us, we will know ourselves to be blessed and loved, and we will experience the holy abundance of God's grace.

From the Gospel of Luke, we heard the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, both of whom went to the temple to pray. While the Gospel authors often depict Pharisees as displaying a punctilious adherence to Jewish law, this Pharisee went even further than what the law required:

fasting twice week and giving a tithe on all he received, even in cases where the religious rules did not require it. His prayer, while professing gratitude to God, seems to express a greater thankfulness for his own efforts of achieving worthiness. "God, I think you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector." (Luke 18:11) Too consumed with comparing himself to and separating himself from others, he also seems unable to commune with God. Confident in his religiosity, the Pharisee asks God for nothing, and thus receives nothing.

In stark contrast, the tax collector, despised by Jews as collaborators with the Roman Empire, is presented very differently. Rather than condemning the tax collector's occupation, Jesus instead holds him up as a model to be followed. This man recognizes his state of unworthiness before God and confesses his need for reconciliation. Coming to God in humility, the tax collector receives the mercy and reconciliation he asks for.

So, who are you, a Pharisee or a tax collector? It is hard to read this parable without placing yourself in the role of one or the other, or, perhaps, hearing yourself in both people. I suspect, like many of us here this morning, that I tend to err on the Pharisee side of the equation. I am pretty sure my own ego is most often the millstone around my neck and I struggle all too mightily to get out of my own way in order to commune with God. I doubt I am alone in this. After all, which one of us has not felt a bit self-satisfied on a Sunday morning? "O Lord," we pray, "I thank you that I am not like other people: my next-door neighbor who is drinking coffee right now and reading the newspaper instead of attending church; my friend in the other political party who does not understand your will for our nation; or even that person two pews over that I don't know but who looks suspicious. I am here every Sunday morning; I pledge faithfully; and I serve on three parish committees. Amen."

For some of us, it is only when we really mess up in a big way that we gain the humility of the tax collector. We often need what Richard Rohr refers to as "holy humiliations" to help us see our need for God's grace and forgiveness. Often, it is only when we review our life in the proverbial rear-view mirror that we can see that these humiliations themselves were powerful moments of God's grace – that they enabled us to turn in a new direction for our sense of self and our source of belonging. These humiliations, in fact, become key instruments in our restoration and reconciliation, and our experience of God's holy abundance.

This parable reminds us, however, how easy it is to trust in ourselves that we are righteous and to regard others with contempt. After all, we do most of the things that are expected of us... we follow the rules and do those things we believe are right. But perhaps what is missing is our faithful trust that God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. Jesus challenges us to avoid trusting in our own efforts in fulfilling the law and, rather, to humble ourselves before a merciful and loving God. Both men in the parable trusted, the difference was in whom the trust was placed.

This week, I was reminded of the well-known Shaker song, "Simple Gifts". The tune itself is probably better known than the lyrics, as it has been recorded and arranged by many artists. Most notably by Aaron Copeland in his score for the ballet *Appalachian Spring* and then later by Sydney Carter who adapted the tune in 1963 for his song, "Lord of the Dance".

The original Shaker version of the song is simple and has only one verse:

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.
When true simplicity is gained,
To bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed,

To turn, turn will be our delight,
Till by turning, turning we come 'round right.

My friend who reminded me about this song says that her spiritual journey has felt like this. That God has called to her continually throughout her life to turn – turn in a new and uncertain direction – and to trust that God will always be with her and that, eventually, in turning she will come 'round right.

This resonates with me. I believe this is the recurring cycle of the human condition of call and return, repentance and reconciliation. We are called every day, every moment, to turn and return to the Lord, our God, who is gracious and merciful, and who promises to be slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. And when we do that, we find ourselves in the valley of love and delight, where the desolate wastelands our locust years are blessed and restored. And where we find the gifts of God's grace and abundance.

Amen.