

Bible Study
Proper 25, Year C
October 23, 2016

[RCL] Joel 2:23-32; Ps. 65: 2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18; Luke 18:9-14

Joel 2:23-32

In the brief writings of the prophet Joel, Israel has suffered a devastating loss of crops due to swarms of locusts. This destruction of natural resources seems to have come as a kind of discipline that pointed toward “the day of the Lord” in which God’s justice would come and eliminate the evil and unrighteous, and restore the faithful. Once again, however, we see the Lord graciously call his people to repentance and restoration -- always his primary goal! When the nation turns back to him, a celebration is called for: “O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the Lord your God” (v.23). The Lord promises to restore their crops abundantly – bread, wine, and oil for all! Not only is the Lord’s mercy poured out in his blessing of natural resources, but the promise of his very Spirit is given. Joel speaks of a time when God’s Spirit will be poured out “on all flesh” (v.28). We know this to be fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost (see Acts 2), the so-called “birth of the church”.

- Recall a time that you felt the Lord’s displeasure. How did you go about seeking to be restored? When you turn back to the Lord, how do you rejoice in his grace and in his love for you?
- How have you experienced the pouring out of God’s Spirit in your own life? Are you aware of particular spiritual gifts God has given you?

Psalm 65

Psalmists know how to revel in the beauty of God’s creation. In today’s psalm, you can imagine the author praying in the temple, barely able to contain his joy. Perhaps his hands are lifted heavenward; perhaps tears of joy, of gratitude, stream down his face. He is bubbling up with thanksgiving that he is invited to dwell in the “courts” of the Lord, the locus of God’s Holy Presence. As Christians, we have the joy of knowing God’s presence resides in us as individuals throughout each day, but also that the Holy Spirit is with us powerfully when we worship corporately in our churches. The One who set the boundaries of the seas, provides grain, and laid green pastures upon the earth, meets us each time we gather for the liturgy, and our hearts are turned toward Him in praise, wonder, and thanksgiving. He then gives us his very Self in the Eucharistic elements of bread and wine.

- How have church buildings shaped the way you think about God?
- Are there particular things in your church (icons, statues, architecture, etc.) that touch your senses and lift your heart towards God in worship?
- Do you experience God’s presence in a different way when you are gathered with others than when you are worshipping alone?

2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18

Paul is always calling his apprentice-in-the-Lord Timothy to boldly embrace the gifts he has been given, and to proclaim the Gospel in all situations. Here, Timothy is given imagery of Paul's life as a drink offering, poured out before the Lord. Paul has emptied himself out, giving everything that he may obtain the "crown of righteousness" that God will give to "all who have longed for his appearing" (v.8). Paul had a strong sense that, even in the face of opposition, the Lord was right there with him, enabling him to be bold and to announce the Gospel to all. We too live in an age where the Gospel message is not always received favorably. In some parts of the world, to proclaim that message is to seal one's imminent fate. Yet, we are called by our Lord to be resolutely committed to the proclamation of his forgiveness and saving love in Jesus Christ.

- How do you proclaim the Gospel? Have you tried different ways of telling people about Jesus? What has worked best for you?
- Have you ever felt rejected or scorned by the people around you because of your faith? Were you aware of the Lord's presence with you in that situation?

Luke 18:9-14

You will often hear people saying that Jesus preferred the company of prostitutes and sinners to the religious folks of his day. Certainly Jesus did hang out with such people, but the statement often becomes an argument for what Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace" – that is, an understanding of grace which minimizes concern about sin, and simply "rests in God's grace." But when someone receives God's grace, they will show signs of truly loving God, which Jesus says is manifested in obedience to his commandments (John 14:15). And to even recognize the need for God's grace, one must first recognize a problem in oneself -- sinfulness. Jesus' parable criticizes a self-righteous Pharisee who believes himself to be right with God by contrasting him with a tax collector who recognizes the depths of his own sinfulness. The latter cries out to God, admitting his unworthiness and his need for redemption. Jesus says that this infamous sinner is the one who is justified because of his humility. He doesn't simply praise him because he is a sinner; he calls him "justified" because of his willingness to admit his sin and to seek forgiveness. To this humble cry, God is always pleased to respond in acceptance, and the angels in heaven rejoice.

- Have you heard anyone use "cheap grace" theology to justify sin?
- Notice how Jesus' interactions with "sinners" often ends – he announces forgiveness and sends them off, telling them to cease from their sinfulness. Why is this cessation necessary for the life of the Christian disciple?
- Do you use any practices or spiritual disciplines which help cultivate humility? How have they made you more aware of your need for God's grace?

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