

Twenty-Third Sunday After Pentecost – Jessica Chambers

Joel 2:23-32; Psalm 65; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14

Throughout Luke, the characters of Pharisee and Tax Collector are used to illustrate a number of points; the Pharisee is always self-righteous and super-pious, while the tax collector is a sinner with whom Jesus associates. Today's reading is no different. The Pharisee proudly proclaims his piety while holding the tax collector in contempt. Today's reading contrasts the prayer of the Pharisee, who depends on himself for righteousness, and the prayer of the tax collector, who depends on God for righteousness. The Pharisee seems to believe that he has earned God's mercy while the tax collector knows he does not and cannot deserve God's mercy.

The text does not assume the Pharisee or the tax collector is any less sinful than the other. The text does not suggest that one needs God while the other does not. Both acknowledge God; the difference between these two men is in how they acknowledge God. The Pharisee thanks God for the Pharisee's own piety while the tax collector identifies himself as a sinner in need of mercy. The Pharisee assumes himself justified by how well he keeps Torah Law; the tax collector knows he has broken the law and needs to be saved from his own sins.

Like any good Pharisee, this man would believe that Torah Law applies beyond the priests and beyond the Temple to Jews everywhere. The Pharisee applies the laws of Torah to the tax collector, but what he fails to do is remember that the hope of Torah, that is God's mercy, also applies to the tax collector; in doing so, he excludes himself. The tax collector is sent away justified while the Pharisee is not. In his prayer, the Pharisee separates himself from the tax collector; in doing so, he separates himself from God. From this parable, we see that justification is not found within ourselves, but is rooted in God's mercy. Our ability to keep the law is not what makes us justified. In the juxtaposition of the prayers of Pharisee and tax collector, we see our own inability to sustain ourselves compared to God's sustaining grace.

To be clear: we are not the tax collector in this text. We are the Pharisee. The text calls for a humility that acknowledges our sin and allows God to save us from it. This humility requires that we also remember from whom our righteousness comes, and that righteousness is not extended to us alone. I am not even convinced that Americans know what humility is; we know we are self-righteous, and we kind of like it that way. I am not convinced I have ever been actually humble myself. I vacillate between being self-loathing and obsessed with my own depravity, and being boldly and glaringly arrogant.

Now that I have suggested that you are all horribly depraved, maybe I ought to offer a bit of hope. At the beginning of the book of Joel, there is destruction and devastation – either literal locusts or metaphorical locusts that represent the constant overtaking and exile of Israel – but by the time we get to today's passage, there has been repentance and an acknowledgement of

Israel's need for God. God responds to the Israelites in much the same way he responded to the tax collector. There is a movement from repentance to mercy. God promises abundance at harvest, overflowing vats of oil and wine, God's own presence, and that Israel never again be put to shame. There is even a promise that God's own Spirit will be poured out 'on all flesh' and there will be prophesying, visions, and dreams – even the slaves will receive this outpouring of God's Spirit. Basically – everything will be awesome.

Joel (and most of the rest of the Old Testament) assumes that when there is destruction, it is because Israel has lost favor with God, that it is God's intent to cause destruction. And when there are blessings, it is because Israel has gained favor with God. We have some of Jesus' parables, Job, and our own experience which lead us to believe otherwise. In this text, however, we can still see a reflection of the devastation caused by our own sins, which leads us to repentance and the gift of mercy.

So – the tax collector seeks mercy and it is granted. Israel repents and everything will be awesome. We repent and we receive grace. But in Joel, all of a sudden, things get sort of weird. Seemingly the hope that was just promised comes to an end. "... blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood... then everyone who calls on Yahweh will be saved." Ummm. That sounds pretty awful. But maybe, just maybe, this is not as bad as it seems. I think this part of the text can be as hopeful as the first part. The imagery here is actually really great. Certainly this text would remind the Israelites of the pillars of smoke and fire that brought their people out of slavery and into the Promised Land. With thoughts of the Exodus come thoughts of manna and miracles and God's saving mercy.

Still... there is that sun being darkened and the moon being turned to blood, which seems pretty hopeless. Well, in Israel every year comes this wind and sandstorm called the hamsim. It is almost unbearable; it blows in hot and dry and sandy. The days are darkened and the moon looks red because of all the sand in the air. It is the same harsh east wind that parted the Sea of Reeds during the Exodus; it is the same wind that, every year, dries the crops to allow for harvest; without this wind, there is no harvest. Before the winds come, all of the farmers are anxious for it to get there so they can start work again. When it is there, everyone hates it – everyone gets grumpy and no one goes outside. But when it ends, the relief is as palpable as the tension before. In the darkness of the wind-and-sand storm, there is hope. The Harsh East Wind and the Exodus signify a change in season.

Today's Joel passage is quoted in Acts 2 – the Pentecost text. In Joel, all who call on the name of Yahweh will be saved. In Acts, all who call on the name of Jesus will be saved. All who call upon the God, which Israel calls Yahweh and which Christians call the Father-Son-and-Holy-Spirit, call for hope and grace. To call upon the name of God is to expect to be saved from something and for something. To call upon God is to be saved from sin and despair; it is to be saved for righteousness and hope. Joel's prophecy and the echo of it in Acts are surprisingly inclusive. God's promise is to pour out the Spirit on all flesh. Even the Psalm

gives hope to “all the ends of the earth” that God might answer prayer and forgive transgressions.

I’ve recently finished a book called *Pastrix*, a memoir about a really grumpy pastor who planted a church in Denver called *House for All Sinners and Saints*. Nadia’s shtick is inclusivity; she planted a church for those excluded by the church. In her book, she tells a story of when *House for All* had only about 40 members, none of whom look like the sort of people who might show up to an average church service – and she liked it that way – these people with their tattoos and their shady backgrounds were her people. Then, there was an article written about her, so the church got publicity. She was really hoping that more people would start coming to her church. The next week, more people came to her church, but she was just livid because they were all the sort you might expect to see at any average Sunday service. They were all rich, white people, so she didn’t want them there. I find this to be both hilarious and unfortunately realistic.

God’s grace and mercy consistently extend beyond what we might expect. The Pharisee is certain that the tax-collector will not receive mercy, but he does. Paul extends the Gospel to the Greek, to the woman, and to the slave. Jesus extends the Gospel to the Gentile, the prostitute, and the leper. I like to extend the Gospel to the homosexual, the intellectual, and the mentally ill – and I like to think that I am being especially good when I do so.

Like the Pharisee, and like Nadia, I forget that it extends the other direction as well. I am the Pharisee; I thank God that I am not a fundamentalist, I am not uneducated, and I am not a Charismatic, because I find it too easy to forget that God’s mercy extends to the fundamentalists, to the uneducated, and to the Charismatics. Really, I am not sure where the line is. Is there a point where God says no and stops extending mercy? Seemingly when we recognize our own inability to sustain ourselves, and ask for grace and mercy we can have as much as we need – so long as we are willing to extend it to the tax collectors too.

The Harsh East Wind and the Exodus are liminal periods; they are that in-between time that always seems to last forever and always seems hardest, but in which we always seem to grow the most. It is in the liminal periods where we know we have left something behind and, eventually, there will be something new to come. It is in this season after Pentecost – in this time between the descending of the Spirit and the coming of the Kingdom – where we are asked to stretch ourselves beyond our usual limits; in this season after Pentecost, who do we dare exclude? Who do we say is not allowed to have mercy for their sins and to be saved from their despair? It is easy not to extend mercy and grace when we think righteousness comes from within ourselves. When we remember, however, that it is only by an extension, a grafting-in, that we are included too, it becomes harder to point to the line where grace stops. The Kingdom does not belong to use alone. Maybe we ought to be careful when we do choose to draw that line, lest we become even more like the Pharisee.