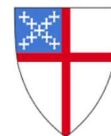




Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon, the Rev. Glenda Empsall, Deacon, Oct. 26, 2025

[Joel 2:23-32, Psalm 65, 2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18, Luke 18:9-14](#)



May the words of my mouth & the meditations in all our hearts be pleasing to You, O Lord, my strength & my redeemer. Amen.

Not much is known about the author of today's OT lesson. In Hebrew the name Joel means "Yahweh is God." There are many others in the OT named Joel, and not all of them were "good guys." Joel, the firstborn son of Samuel, "did not follow in Samuel's ways, but turned aside after gain; took bribes and perverted justice." All we really know about the Prophet Joel is that he is the son of Pethuel.¹ From the historical references in the Book of Joel, and because there is no reference there to the Assyrians or Babylonians, my Oxford Annotated Bible places Joel as a prophet in Judah during the Persian period.² Joel's writings suggest that he was a "cultic prophet" meaning that his ministry was closely tied to the temple and "priestly circles."

In today's OT reading, Joel reminds the people of the times when swarms of locusts ravaged the land as God's judgement on the people. Then he assures everyone that good times are coming, "and my people shall never again be put to shame." The rest of this OT reading³ are the verses you have heard Peter say as he addressed the crowd on the Day of Pentecost. You know this is your favorite line ever to come from Peter's mouth. "Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel."⁴

Psalm 65 expands on the power, majesty, and benevolence of God, promising forgiveness of the people's sins, as well as prosperity and abundance. The good life described in Psalm 65 contrasts with Paul's second letter to Timothy which begins with a little, "woe is me..." Paul has proclaimed Jesus' message even to the Gentiles, and even from prison in Rome. Paul is certain that his "crown of righteousness" is assured. Perhaps it is his way of encouraging Timothy to "keep the faith." If I, Paul, can do all of this, so can you!

Who is Timothy? His grandmother, Lois, was a "believer" as was his Jewish mother, Eunice. His father was a gentile non-believer. They lived in Lystra, a city in southern Galatia that was a regular stop for Paul's "missions." Timothy embraced the Christian faith and had "received the spiritual gift through prophecy and the laying on of hands."⁵

During his second missionary journey, Paul recruited and circumcised Timothy.⁶ Timothy's circumcision reveals how committed he was to the gospel, and it also

¹ Joel 1:1

² 539-331 BCE

³ Joel 2:28-32

⁴ Acts 2:17-21

⁵ 1Tim 4:14, 2Tim 1:6

⁶ Acts 15-18

mitigates skepticism from detractors who might claim Paul only preached circumcision as “unnecessary for salvation” because he had a gentile friend.⁷ Timothy continued to help spread Paul’s evangelism as documented in other letters attributed to Paul and in Acts.⁸

Scholars agree that the letters of Paul are the earliest Christian writings, predating the Gospels. We know that the Apostle Paul was a Pharisee and the son of a Pharisee, a man of learning who could read and speak many languages. In the Book of Acts, there are 3 slightly different accounts of Paul’s conversion from a zealous persecutor of the early Christians to a devout evangelist (even to the Gentiles) and a steadfast follower of Jesus.⁹

The verses in today’s Epistle that this Sunday’s Revised Common Lectionary skipped [2Tim4:5-15]¹⁰ tell us that near the “end” of Paul’s ministry only Luke was with him. Luke was a companion of and chronicler for Paul which may explain why the gospel of Luke is ‘nicer’ to Pharisees than is the gospel of Matthew.¹¹ Recall that Matthew was a tax collector...

About a dozen years ago, John Dominic Crossan, a famous, or infamous New Testament scholar, depending on your beliefs about Jesus, gave a series of lectures at Gonzaga University, Spokane, and at St. Pius Catholic Church, CdA. In his lectures on the Parables, Crossan said there are three types of parables:

1. **Examples** that teach either “do this” or “don’t do that”
2. **“Reversals”** that challenge our perceptions of the way things “are” and the way things “ought to be”
3. **Riddles**, that teach an important concept, to which “there is only one ‘correct’ answer.”¹²

I believe today’s parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector is two out of three, the **example** and the **reversal**. [I didn’t find a parable that was a riddle and Crossan used the OT story of Samson as his example, not a parable.]

⁷ <https://www.theologyfortherestofus.com/pauls-four-missionary-journeys-the-complete-guide/>

⁸ 1Thess 3:2, 3:6; Acts 18:5, Acts 19 (3rd missionary journey); 1Cor 1:19, 4:17, 16:10; Rom 16:21; and maybe 2Cor 2:12-13 (Troas); Phil 1; Col 1:1, 4:10; Heb 13:23; Acts 20:4-5.

⁹ Acts 9 The Road to Damascus, Acts 22 Paul’s testimony to a crowd in Jerusalem regarding his Damascus experience, Acts 26 Paul’s defense before King Agrippa.

¹⁰ Only Luke is with me.

¹¹ [Matthew 23:12,13,15,23,25,27,29](#) “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted. **Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!**” and Mt 3:7, 12:34, 23:33 and Luke 3:7 **“You brood of vipers!”**

¹² Judges 14:14, if you care to check it out later.

It is an **example** because Jesus tells his hearers, “I tell you, this man (the tax collector) went down to his home justified rather than the other (the Pharisee); for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

This is also a parable of **reversal**. Depending on the time in history, Pharisees were a political party, a social movement, and a school of thought. Pharisees insisted on strict adherence to the letter of the Law. They were a group that kept themselves separated from impure people or things, and scorned those who did not meet their exacting standards. They were self-righteous and did not associate with “sinners.” That explains why some (but not all) Pharisees criticized Jesus and were upset by his association with “those people.”

This parable challenges the crowds of people surrounding Jesus. Pharisees were revered by ordinary people. Hearers of the parable might have asked, “What is wrong with thanking God that one is not a sinner? The Pharisee does not congratulate himself for his own sanctity, but thanks God for his grace.” The traditional “good guy,” the Pharisee, fares badly in Jesus’ parable and the traditional “bad guy,” the tax collector, does well. It is a challenge to the normal expectations and presuppositions of Jesus’ listeners when Jesus says, “The humble will be exalted and the exalted will be humbled.”

This Pharisee feels good about himself. He marches up to the front of the temple to talk to God. He knows the law. He gives the appropriate amount of money to the church. He thanks God that he is better than other people – especially better than that despicable tax collector.

The tax collector suffers from low self-esteem, and no wonder. Tax collectors were collaborators with the occupying Roman forces. It was bad enough that they collected taxes from their fellow Jews for the Roman authorities, but some took more than the taxes owed and used the extra money to live lavish lifestyles. In this parable, the tax collector also cries out to God, but he begs for forgiveness for the evil he has done. The tax collector recognizes his sinfulness and takes personal responsibility for his behavior.

(Note that the Pharisee is a tither! The Hebrew word for tithe is (mah'ah**sher** מעשר), which means "a tenth part". To “tithe” describes the practice of giving one-tenth of one's produce, income, or livestock. Historically, the tithe was used to support the Levites, the priests, and the poor. St. Luke’s is launching its **stewardship campaign**. “Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”¹³)

¹³ 2 Corinthians 9:7

With our 21st century perspective, we see the parable in hindsight, perhaps blaming the Pharisees for Jesus' eventual condemnation and crucifixion. We see the Pharisee as the "bad guy" and the tax collector asking for forgiveness as the "good guy." To our ears, it makes sense that Jesus rebukes the behavior of the Pharisee.

Once again, Jesus has turned the story upside down. God receives those who, with penitence, plead for mercy, rather than those who tout their self-professed virtues. The moral for the children's version of this story is that the first man thought he was all good, but he wasn't. The second man knew he was doing bad things, but he was sorry, and God forgave him. There are no "good-all-the-time people." Everyone makes mistakes and we need to say, "I'm sorry." to God, and make amends to the people we have harmed. That is not bad theology for God's children of all ages.

I could say "Here endeth the lesson, but part of my job is to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." Who do we see as our modern equivalent of Pharisees, and who do we believe are our modern tax collectors? I suggest to you that, "We have seen the enemy, and he is us..." The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector is one with which we can identify because we sometimes live a double standard; being self-righteous and looking down at "sinners," judging them, knowing all the while that we are sinners too. As soon as you say, "Thank you, God! I'm glad I'm not like that Pharisee!" or, "I'm not like that tax collector!" or, "I'm glad I'm not like that fill-in-the-blank!" You are. When you draw a line in the sand, whose side is Jesus on? Yours? It ain't necessarily so. Jesus sees both sides of a story – loving you and loving your adversary just the same.

It is easy to judge others, but it is not our job to be judgmental. The Lord is the righteous judge. To be JUDGE is above our pay grade. As followers of Jesus, our job in this world is to love our neighbors. Our job is to love our enemies. Our job is loving the folks some might call "unlovable." Our job is to care for and help those in need "Our sins are stronger than we are, but God will blot them out."¹⁴ God will rescue us. May we always pray, "Oh, God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

Now and always, may the forgiveness of God surround us, the unconditional love of Jesus enfold us; and the fire of the Holy Spirit burn in our hearts & shine forth in our lives. Amen.

¹⁴ Psalm 65 v. 3