

Westminster Sermon – Early and Later Rain
Scripture Readings: 2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14, Galatians 5:1, 13-25
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Our first reading, the second chapter of Joel, verses 23-32, offers prophetic words of hope to the people of Judah as they face starvation after the horrific damage of a locust swarm. Hear now God's holy Word.

O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the LORD your God; for the Lord has given the early rain for your vindication and 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, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent against you. You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the LORD your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. And my people shall never again be put to shame. You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the LORD, am your God and there is no other. And my people shall never again be put to shame. Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. 2:29 Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit. I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. Then everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved; for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls. Amen.

For our second reading we turn to Luke, chapter 18, verses 9-14, continuing Jesus' journey to Jerusalem that we have been following over the past several weeks. Having just told the disciples the parable of the widow's persistence, he continues his teaching through another parable. Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people.

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Early and Later Rain

Let us pray: Holy and mighty God,
pour out your Spirit on young and old alike,
that our dreams and visions may bring
justice and peace to the world. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

In Youth Group this year, we've been working our way through verse eight of the sixth chapter of Micah. Just as many of us know and recognize Joel chapter 2, verse 28—"I will pour out my spirit on all flesh" but may not have realized there is a book of Joel in the Bible, Micah 6:8 is easily the best known verse of that prophetic book. "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God."

So we have spent the past several weeks working our way through these requirements God has for us. We have discussed justice and mercy. We have seen some pretty hilarious skits of what each looks like, and what they don't look like, and we've also seen some fairly grim portrayals of what doing or not doing justice looks like in today's world. We have considered what God requires of us, and what our lives would look like if we tried to live those requirements.

Micah 6:8 is obviously not one of our readings for today, but I kept thinking about it as I considered the Pharisee in Jesus' parable.

First of all, because I always need to remind myself of this, it's important to remember that Jesus' parables are not factual stories. Jesus is not relating something he saw last time he went down to Jerusalem. Instead, this is a parable, a sermon illustration—a story he has crafted in order to teach.

And at this point, this is a well-known parable. In fact, a preacher friend of mine lamented having to preach on it this weekend, calling it a template parable. It's got all the elements: the Pharisee and the tax collector, the Temple, and a neat little saying to conclude it.

And because Jesus is a good teacher, we know he's always keeping us on our toes in these parables. But we know this particular trick! Despite our negative contemporary understanding of the Pharisees, Jesus' listeners would have expected the Pharisee to be the good guy, and the tax collector to be the bad guy. The Pharisees were the religious leaders, thoughtful, wise, spiritual guides who did their best to maintain Jewish identity and worship under Roman rule.

And tax collectors were the absolute worst. These were folk who had totally sold out—Jews who had taken up the work of the empire, and who were making a living off the oppression of their brothers and sisters of the covenant.

Jesus has played this trick before—he is upsetting the expectations of his listeners, and turning around their preconceptions.

But Jesus is being extra tricky here.

For what has the Pharisee done wrong?

Often, people assume the Pharisee is lying, that his crime here is hypocrisy.

Yet Jesus makes no such mention of hypocrisy in this parable he has crafted, and he is never shy when it comes to shaming hypocrites.

The Pharisee, a good, religious man, likely is telling the exact truth. He obeys the Ten Commandments, he fasts twice a week, he donates a tenth of his income to charitable endeavors. Would that more people did the same.

The Pharisee follows God's requirements for living. There seems to be no question about that.

And Jesus draws our attention to his prayer, not his actions. Standing by himself, the Pharisee thanks God for all that the Pharisee does and has accomplished. The Pharisee thanks God for not being like other people, especially not like this tax collector.

In his prayer to God, the Pharisee does not lie, but rather boasts, pointing out how great he is while showing contempt for others, especially this tax collector.

For Luke tells us Jesus is telling this parable to "some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt."

And this is where Jesus gets extra tricky.

Because how easy is it for us to respond to this parable with some version of "Thank you God, for not making me like that Pharisee."

Now, the book of Joel appears to have almost nothing to do with this parable. In fact, the book of Joel appears to have almost nothing to do with anything, for it is based on locusts.

Joel was written about 400 years before Christ, when the nation of Judah had suffered a horrendous swarm of locusts. "What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten. What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten, and what the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten" the opening of Joel laments in a description that evokes utter devastation.

And so the people of Judah are living in great fear of scarcity and starvation.

And I wonder how many people, in their fear, began to remind God of how well they in particular had followed God's requirements. I wonder how many of them began to compare themselves with others, trusting in their own righteousness and regarding others with contempt.

And this is not an ancient impulse.

We may not be under threat of famine, but I think our world knows the terror of starvation.

We have our own locusts, especially today. Even apart from the devastating swarm of the rhetoric of this election season, we suffer from the cutting locusts of perfectionism, from the swarming locusts of too-busy schedules, from the destroying locusts of anxiety.

We are starving. We live in terror of scarcity, that the world does not have enough for us to live in safety and contentment, and that we are not enough for the world.

And I'm sure the Pharisee lived in the same terror, for out of that fear of scarcity we all begin to draw lines between ourselves and others. We begin to decide who matters, and who matters less, about which lives are worth something, and which are not.

"Thank you, God, that I am not like those others."

"Thank you, God, that my life does not look like that."

And this is complicated, for it is not a bad thing to be thankful for what we have. And it is an important thing to be made aware of the good things we take for granted, those sobering realizations of our privilege when we encounter the experiences of others.

But what do we do then?

The Pharisee stands by himself, and thanks God for how well he has followed God's requirements, and how much he has accomplished, and how unlike others he is.

The tax collector hasn't followed a single requirement, and he knows it. He stands far off, hardly able even to approach the Temple, beats his breast, and cries out, "God, be merciful to me!"

He doesn't even seem to know the Pharisee is there, for he is not focused on others and how he does or doesn't compare. He is focused on himself, and his relationship with God.

He cries out to be reconciled with God, fully aware of his sins.

He knows he is starving, and begs to be filled.

And it is the tax collector who goes home justified and freed, rather than the Pharisee.

He knew he was starving, and cried out to God in his terror and his fear. He knew his places of brokenness, and cried out for mercy, and for reconciliation. And he was made whole and made strong. From his willingness to be weak, he is able to be lifted up.

And the Pharisee was unable to name his fear, unable to acknowledge the terror of scarcity that made him point out his own accomplishments to God in hopes of being found to matter, and so he remains empty, remains starving. From his show of strength, he sets himself up to collapse.

It is so easy to make idols of our accomplishments. It is so easy to trust in ourselves, in our ability to follow the rules, to get stuff done, to work our way through a never-ending to-do list, even if it means losing sleep, forgetting to care for our bodies, cutting out time for rest and renewal with self, loved ones, and God.

But when we do so, when we make idols of our accomplishments and our busy-ness, of our privilege, of all the things that set us above and apart from others, what do we do when it disappears?

What do we do when someone is more accomplished, or more productive? When disease strikes? When we simply can't follow all the rules? What do we do when the swarm of cutting and destroying locusts appear?

Our first reading today marks the halfway point in the book of Joel, where the prophet turns from terror and desolation to hope.

And not just hope, but lavish and overwhelming promises of abundance.

In our fears of scarcity, in our fears of not being good enough or perfect enough, in the face of starvation and the attacks of locusts, like the Pharisee we try to prove ourselves more worthy than others, better than others.

In our last week of exploring Micah 6:8 together, the youth group discussed what it means to walk humbly with God. They focused on what it means to be humble.

I have to admit, knowing the ways in which these youth achieve and accomplish, I was bracing myself to have to guide the conversation a gentler way, softening the “requirement” aspect of this, so that it didn’t appear to be yet another way for them to strive for perfection.

But they had no need.

For in their conversation, they decided that humility means being able to be comfort with your gifts along with your faults.

They decided that humility means living to your best ability without seeking glory.

They decided that humility means not making yourself smaller or bigger than you are.

And they agreed that humility means knowing that you are enough.

This is the abundance of God.

This is lesson of the tax collector and the Pharisee.

Know you are enough. Know there is no need for comparison with others, for you are enough. Know that you can cry out to God in your fear, that you can admit you are starving and in need of mercy, for you are enough.

Know that you never have to prove your worth to God.

For God is abundance, and God gives abundantly.

And so we can live generously, giving abundantly to others, rather than finding them wanting, because we are assured by the prophet Joel that the early rain is not the last rain.

A later rain will come, an abundant rain that will fill the threshing floors and make our cups overflow with goodness.

And we are assured that when God’s spirit is poured out, it will be poured out upon EVERYONE, regardless of position or privilege, regardless of comparisons, regardless of our accomplishments or perceived worth.

And so we are called to approach God in true humility, to confess the places where we are starving, trusting not in what we can achieve, but in the knowledge that we are enough, so that we might be justified—that we might be freed from fear, assured of God’s all-encompassing love, and so live in abundant generosity. Thanks be to God.

