

Sermon – Restorative Justice
Sunday, October 27, 2019
Scripture – Joel 2:23-32, Luke 18:9-14
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Springfield, Illinois

On this Stewardship Dedication Sunday our first scripture reading is Joel 2:23-32. Following the judgement and lament with which the book of Joel begins, today's reading anticipates a reversal of God's redemption because of Israel's repentance during the post-exilic period. With the coming of the autumn rains the prophet speaks of a new crop and a new pouring out of God's spirit on all flesh. These words are quoted by Peter in the Book of Acts. on the Day of Pentecost. Listen to what the Spirit is saying through the prophet Joel.

O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the LORD your God; for God has given the early rain for your vindication, God has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain, as before.²⁴ The threshing floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.²⁵ 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. ²⁶ 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.²⁷ 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. ²⁸ 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.²⁹ Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.³⁰ I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. ³¹ The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. ³² 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.

Our second scripture is Luke 18:9-14. Jesus continues to teach about prayer. Last week we learned from the widow to persist in prayer and not become quickly discouraged. In today's reading, the Pharisee warns us about our presumptuousness in the presence of God and the tax collector personifies the one essential prerequisite for praying – an honest recognition of our place before the justice and mercy of God. Listen to what the Spirit is saying through the gospel of Luke.

*⁹ Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:
¹⁰ "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' ¹³ 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!' ¹⁴ 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.'" Amen.*

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

The title of the sermon: Restorative Justice

The text: "O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice ...for God has given the early rain for your vindication, God has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain, as before." Joel 2:23

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, how grateful we are for the meaning of the rain that falls in our lives and for your redemptive presence through the storms we persevere. As we reflect on your word, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Two weeks ago Peter and I met our son Paul halfway between Springfield and New Orleans in Memphis, Tennessee. The occasion was the fall break of Tulane Law School where Paul is in his final year. On Friday morning we worked out, enjoyed breakfast, and witnessed the parade of the ducks from the elevator to the fountain in the lobby of the Peabody Hotel. As we headed out for the National Civil Rights Museum located at the Loraine Motel where the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, the rain was falling gently and steadily against a dark sky.

As we made our way through the well-appointed rooms that told the illuminating story of our country's dark journey through the Jim Crow Era and the hard fought Civil Rights Movement, it occurred to me that the falling rain capsulated this experience precisely. The rain felt like a combination of God's tears and God's judgment. I felt a deep sense of regret not only for our country, but also for my personal participation in this dark part of our history and the contempt with which we treated God's beloved children of color.

The night before we visited the museum, Peter, Paul and I ate at B.B King's Blues Club on Beale Street. The last song we heard before walking out into the night was Prince's iconic ballad *Purple Rain*. There is something beautiful and powerful about this song. The lyrics are somewhat ambiguous.

*I never meant to cause you any sorrow
I never meant to cause you any pain
I only wanted one time to see you laughing
...see you laughing in the purple rain,
Purple rain, purple rain, purple rain,
to see you bathing in the purple rain.*

Prince once explained the meaning of *Purple Rain* as "When there's blood in the sky – red and blue equal purple...purple rain pertains to the end of the world—Judgment Day, being with the one you love and letting your faith guide you through the purple rain."

Rain and water can be a symbol of judgment as in the ancient flood story in Genesis. Rain and water can also be a symbol of God's abundance. In Dr. King's open letter from the Birmingham Jail in 1963, he defends the strategy of nonviolent resistance to racism and affirms the moral responsibility to break unjust laws. Appealing to modern day Pharisees, clergymen who presumed their righteousness before God and who treated others with contempt, he quotes the prophet Amos. *Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.*

In today's scripture reading the prophet Joel references God pouring down abundant rain and the restoration of the early rain for Israel's vindication. The tenor of Joel's words has shifted from his earlier warnings about God's judgment. The change of tenor is possible because of the change within the lives of the Israelites. They saw the light, they recognized their place before the justice and mercy of God, and they changed their ways. Their lives were restored to community within the covenantal relationship. In the book of Leviticus, we read:

If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully, I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit...

The Levitical code surmises that if the community will treat its members and land, along with servants, livestock, and the wild animals that live around them, with care and equity they will all prosper together.

Joel specifically mentions the early and later rains. An interesting part of Israel's history and an example of restorative justice is that when the forests of Israel were cut down, particularly the cedar trees in the building of Solomon's temple, one of the rainy seasons was curtailed. Generations later, in the mid-twentieth century, when Israelis began planting trees and restoring those forests, the second rainy season returned.

The good news of the prophet Joel and the teachings of Christ is God's restorative justice. Judgment and lament are not the last words. When we recognize our place before the justice and mercy of God and ask to be restored, God hears our prayers. Restoration can be personal, societal, physical and ecological. As the psalmist proclaims in gratitude:

You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O Lord, my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

Along with the early and later rains, Joel announces the outpouring of God's spirit in a beautiful and powerful way upon all God's children: sons and daughters, old and young, male and female, slave and free. God's abundance is present when our lives humbly reflect the inclusive reign of Christ. We experience restorative justice when we all God's children and creation with care, respect and equity.

During seminary when I was feeling vulnerable and far from home, I found comfort in a song by Carol Bayer Sager called "Come in from the Rain." The lyrics are:

Well hello there, Good old friend of mine. You've been reaching for yourself for such a long time. There's so much to say, no need to explain. Just an open door for you to come in from the rain.

How grateful are we to have a God who opens the door for us to come in from the rain, a God who gives the early and later rains, a God who turns our mourning into dancing, and a God whose reign we know in the gentle strength and grace of Jesus Christ. Amen.