**October 27, 2019 – Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

Scriptures:

Joel 2: 22-32

Luke 18: 9-14

**SERMON**

Father God, may these words that have been prayed over and meditated on be pleasing to You. Mother God, may those here hear these words and know your voice. Amen.

The stories found in Joel and Luke are ones of black and white, all or nothing thinking that lets us humans grasp onto a way of being that is easy and all to often comfortable. It is easy for us to see the us and them thinking and choose that way of being for our everyday lives.

Listen to this contrast in Joel. First there is a call to life: “he gives rain…abundant rain, floors full of grain, vats overflowing with wine and oil, we will be repaid, we will eat plenty and be satisfied, we will never be put to shame and God’s spirit will be poured out onto us.” Wondrous and amazing!

And then the contrast of doomsday darkness:

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.

I wince as I see in my mind’s eye an old-time preacher thumping a Bible and yelling “Repent, Repent or go to hell!” The focus on the apocalyptic smothers the vision of hope and light with a patina of self justification and righteousness.

This theme of all or nothing thinking continues into Luke, with the contrast presented in two praying men. The righteous Pharisee against the justified tax collector. We are often taught that one is better than the other….and Jesus words point out exactly who that is: “I tell you, (referring to the tax collector) 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.”

Yet, in Joel and Luke, this message of contrast, this us and them, black and white thinking, is this really what these scriptures are teaching us? Is this the message God wants us to take away? I don’t think so.

Theologian William P. Brown notes that while the theological centre of Joel focuses on the key themes of judgment and salvation, and destruction and restoration, its main message “dramatically moves from repentance to the explosive possibilities of new life and worship.” In fact, Joel’s passion for life, in the midst of warning, offers us a view of the grey area found in the midst of black and white thinking. We are all children of Zion, we all, as further mentioned in Acts 2:17, have God’s Spirit poured out on us. We have not been left in the wilderness, we continue to move forward into God’s vision of life, and love, sometimes with difficulty, sometimes imperfectly, sometimes with ease, but always forward.

In this grey area Joel invites each one of us to claim a new vocation in our journey forward with God. We are called to be mystics – to reach beyond the easy interpretation and be open to God’s inspiration ready and able to share God’s wisdom with others. No one is exempt from God’s showers of blessing. No one is left out, including those we perceive as outsiders. Including Pharisees and tax collectors.

Luke's parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector contrasts the two praying men as polar opposites. Imagine the scene: the righteous Pharisee, stands in the temple, looks to heaven, boldly declares how he fasts, tithes, how he does not steal, or commit adultery. We would be right in noting that he viewed others with contempt, and we may even identify him as proud and arrogant. And then there is the other man, standing away from the place of prayer, unable to look to heaven, bent over, he beats his breast, begs “God be merciful to me a sinner.” He knows himself a tax collector, he knows he is considered by society as one the lowest forms of human, yet here he stands before God.

Like in Joel, it is easy for us to see the contrast. It is easy for us to look at these two men and say one is better, one is worse. Luke helps us in that thinking by sharing Jesus’ words that the tax collector is the humble one, he is the one more justified. And that is that…we should be like the tax collector and shun the Pharisee. But is that really the message?

In this parable, and remember the point of a parable is to ‘stir the mind to active thought’, Jesus sets in bold relief two men praying, yet it is not the men we are to focus on, but the two different ways the men are being religious. The Pharisee is being righteous, he is doing exactly as his religion told him to do, his prayer even reflects traditional Jewish thought, following a pattern of a thanksgiving piety prayer in the form “O God, I thank you I am not..”. Yet in the parable, as in other Lukan parables regarding the Pharisees, there is a distinct lack of spiritual perception that connects the acts of day to day life with the humbleness that allows relationship between God and self. In truth the Pharisee and his actions are not bad, we need people who focus on the rules and laws to keep society going, but the message here is that only focusing on the laws and the rules is death-dealing. The other man, the lowliest man, the society scorned tax collector, bows to God, literally and figuratively, he knows he is a sinner, he knows he is not righteous, he doesn’t always do what he should, he is not perfect, yet he knows that he can come before God and share his sorrows, his burdens, he reaches out in humbleness, he knows he is not alone. And in the life-giving spiritual attentiveness we see the path to God, to relationship. We find the grey area in the middle of the contrast.

The grey space in the middle, the place where contrasts and black and white thinking fail, the place I believe we are called to, is found in the hope and light shining through Joel, the fact that we are all children of Zion, we are all poured in to. It is found in the fact that God loves both the Pharisee and the tax collector, that both are beloved, that both are needed, that both can reach life giving relationship with God in humbleness by choice. Life it not as simple as black and white, all or nothing, but choosing life, in all its myriad ways of being, is the grey area where we find our personal relationship with God.

Amen