



Michelangelo's Joel

The Westminster Shorter Catechism defines the chief aim of man as “To glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” Apparently, in the Judah of Joel’s day, there is certainly a lot of enjoyment going on, but the people have forgotten where all this abundance comes from. They’ve forgotten to be faithful to the commands of God. So, Joel warns them that the grain and the wine, that is the materials for all these jubilant celebrations will all be removed in order to remind people that their first priority should be to give glory to God. We read at the beginning of this book that Joel warns the people, *The grain offering and the drink offering are cut off from the house of the LORD.* (Joel 1:9a) “Alright, folks, since you’ve forgotten that your first and primary job is to glorify God, then you will have removed from you the very things necessary to make your sacrifices to The Lord. So even if you do come to the point of remembering

to be faithful, you’ll be denied the privilege.” It would indeed be horrible to be in this position. Should we ever not use our talents for the purposes God intended them – if we instead waste them so they amount to nothing for the Kingdom...well, do you remember what happened to the fellow who went and buried what God had given him rather than using them for the Master’s glory? You may recall that talent was in fact removed, and that fellow wound up in a pretty wretched state. (See Mt.25:14-30) I wonder, are there moments when we have squandered the blessings that God has given us rather than using that grace to multiply the blessings that Our Lord wants to shower on his people? Is Joel warning you and me this morning about how we’re using what God has lent us during our walk on this earth? Because, remember it’s not really ours these blessings of abundance. Oh sure, we get to use them for a while, but they’re all really His in the end. But Joel reminds the people that a fundamental shift in the way they are looking at the world is in order. There is, he says, still time to change course so that God’s judgment might become God’s mercy. Both Jonah and Joel pose the question; Joel asks it of Judah, just as Jonah asks the people of Ninevah, as they both ask of you and me this morning “Who knows whether God will not turn and relent?” (See Joel2:14, Jonah 3:9, 4:2) In the Hebrew, the question is rhetorical and the answer obvious; over and over again in the history of salvation, God has revealed himself to us as yearning to forgive his people and bless us with his love. “If you repent, don’t you think God will save you? Don’t you get it YET?” the prophets ask in wonder. So Joel proclaims, “Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.” (Joel 2:13)

But notice too that in the verses just prior, Joel puts a real stake in the ground with regard to receiving God’s mercy rather than His judgment. In verses 12 and 13 Joel says this, “*“Yet even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.”* You see, a change of direction in our hearts is what the Lord is trying to accomplish. This morning, Joel tells us that he has seen a day when God’s people “*will praise the name of the Lord your God...and [God’s] people will never again be put to shame.*” So there will come a day, no there has already come **the day** when God’s people will cast off their shame and sing praises to The Lord. Because we are a people of changed heart, who not only obey the Lord but actually love to do as He commands, because He loved us first

God doesn’t want to rend the fabric of his creation, but rather to break open our hearts so he can pour into us his love through the might of the Holy Spirit. And in so doing we find the amazing blessing described in today’s passage. “*Be glad, O children of Zion, and rejoice in the Lord your God. He has poured down upon you abundant rain. The threshing floors shall be full of grain the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you.*” (Joel 2:23a, 24, 26a) You see, we discover here in Joel the reason for this required transformation of the human heart: So that God can pour out His spirit upon all people. “*And it shall come to pass afterward, that 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.*” (Joel 2:28) This is the abundant life that Jesus promises to all who believe in John 10. You can also hear echoes of Isaiah 40, when that prophet foretells a day when God will restore His Spirit in a people who will rise up as on wings of eagles. (See Is. 40:31)

The other amazing statement Joel makes here is that all who call on the name of the Lord shall be saved. (See Joel 2:32) Yet this seems to fly in the face of Mt. 7:21, where Jesus clearly says, “*Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven.*” But the seeming contradiction between Joel and Matthew disappears when you read a little farther in that Gospel and discover that an oral confession of Jesus is not enough, without a true change of heart (and some appropriate behavior confirming this transformation). Then we come to the understanding that a true calling on the name of the Lord – that is basing your life on the conviction of just who Jesus is – this is really the same acid test that John was talking about in his *First Letter*. Because, if you remember John wrote to a certain un-named lady of the Church near the end of the first century. And he told this lady that the surest way to determine whether you are in the presence of God’s spirit is this: “*Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not of God.*” (1John 4:2) So no, he wasn’t just a wonderful man, or an inspiring teacher, or another Buddha. Nope, he was the Son of God incarnate who walked among us, was crucified, died, was buried and three days later he rose from the dead and ascended on high to reign for eternity. He is God’s only begotten Son, and Our Lord, and there is no other. That, brothers and sisters is the Confession of Jesus Christ. It was true in John’s day and it’s true now, and will be true forever.

2nd Timothy is evidently among the last things Paul writes on earth. It’s a sad scene, there in the Mamertine Prison in Rome. Paul has been deserted by just about everybody except his friend, Doctor Luke. He’s apparently forgiven John Mark for his abandonment from their first missionary journey in Pamphylia, and Paul desperately wants to see the young man one more time in this life (to make final amends?). His aging body is feeling the cold of night in his prison, so he asks Timothy to bring him his cloak, and also his books. But more than anything else, he begs for his parchments so he can read and perhaps write, something that tragically he won’t have an opportunity to do. Because soon after this letter to his young friend Timothy was sent, they would come – maybe they even sent Nero’s Secret Police, the Praetorian Guard. And they would take Paul in his shackles for the long walk from the foot of the Capitoline Hill across the Forum, the Roman Market Place, as the curious looked on. And they would march him about 3 miles along the Via Ostiense to Aquae Salviae, and make him kneel there in the dust. And the dreaded ‘Boia’ the hooded axe man would cleave Paul’s neck in two, and the last of the Apostles would go home to be with his Lord. It’s a sad scene, full of pain. But that kind of pain really comes with the territory, you know. Satan isn’t stupid. He employs his resources where they are most critically needed. The Prince of Darkness doesn’t bother with the tepid of this life. No, he focuses on the ones who are making the greatest difference for the Kingdom – those are the people on whom Lucifer brings the brunt of his trials. Oh, and in case you didn’t know this, Satan is no gentleman. He will generally attack you from a direction you’re not expecting him, often bringing suffering on the people you love the most. Because he knows that’s how he can create the most pain and cruelty for God’s children. Yes, we are raised with Christ in our own resurrection as God’s children, but that means we also share in His suffering. So, the next time you find yourself beaten down, or unfairly treated take heart. Because it means you’re making a difference!

In the Gospel for today, the humble sinner is righteous before the Lord simply because he realizes how wretched he is, and that his only hope is in God’s mercy. This is not a club for the “in crowd.” The main feature of God’s word is its radical inclusiveness. And that means welcoming even wretches like you and me. So, you see, it doesn’t matter what you’ve done, you can’t be excluded. There’s no expiry date on this particular green card with which you and I are invited into God’s Kingdom. Regardless of where you’ve been or what your life has been like, you are very welcome in this family. So, if you’re still waiting, if you’re ashamed of something, or if you just haven’t chatted with Him in a while, let me invite you to take this moment of calm peace to ask the Lord to visit your Spirit with his own. Because it’s true you know. They who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall walk and not faint. They shall run and not grow weary. And they shall mount up as on wings of eagles. (See Is. 40:31)

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy spirit. Amen. JWB+ 10/18/16