

2025 Proper 25C

We don't often have a reading from the prophet Joel in our three year lectionary cycle. If you come on Ash Wednesday, you hear the first chapter, raising the alarm about a coming invasion of locusts and calling on the people to repent. If you are here on Pentecost, you hear Peter quote part of what you heard today, about the Spirit of God falling on all people—male and female, young and old, Jew and Gentile. It is an option for Thanksgiving Day when we're in Year B. And then there's Proper 25 in Year C, which in the past I have bumped in favor of the standard Reformation Sunday readings.

It's been a few years since I mentioned Reformation Sunday on this last Sunday of October—since I finished my work with Trinity. But it seems like a good time to revisit the topic. As I'm sure I have mentioned before, I had a seminary professor (a Lutheran, in fact) who pointed out to us that the Reformation was not just a 16th century event. It continues to play out. "Don't be fooled, my friends—we're in the middle of a reformation right now."

It's 25 years after he said this, and it's still true. God continues to reshape us, so that our witness to the Gospel fits the context in which we find ourselves. The truth of God's love doesn't change—but as we learn

more and more about the breadth and depth and height of it, we have to allow ourselves to be changed so that we can be agents for change in this world, in these circumstances.

Joel would have understood that. He was not a prophet in the same way as Isaiah or Jeremiah or Ezekiel, someone called to dedicate his or her entire life to speaking the word of God. To be honest, he was kind of a nobody. Joel stepped forward to speak of God's activity on one occasion in the life of his people and then disappeared again. Perhaps it's less surprising that Joel appears to so little in the lectionary, and instead surprising how outsized a role it plays in the journey from repentance on Ash Wednesday to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost.

Joel may not have been anyone special, but that didn't keep him from reflecting on the events of his life through a theological lens. His community is invaded by either a literal plague of locusts that destroys their crops or an invading army that is equally as destructive. He sees it as the consequences of their failure to maintain their covenant with God.

I don't think you have to accept his interpretation of the plague of locusts (literal or metaphorical) as a direct intervention from God to be moved by what he writes in response to this disaster. Yes, the earlier section, that one we hear on Ash Wednesday, is a desperate call for

repentance by everyone in the land—from the priests in the Temple to the bride and groom newly married to the nursing infant. No one is outside the call to prayer in that desperate moment.

Our reading today picks up once the locusts have gone. They've done their damage. The people are left looking out at a barren land, fields that will not provide a harvest despite all their hard work and fervent prayer. And again the prophet speaks, but this time it's a word of reassurance. A promise of new fields, new crops. New prophets even—and what strange prophets they will be! Sons—and *daughters!* The old *and the young!* Free persons *and slaves, male and female!* *Female slaves* will be speaking God's word!

Can you imagine?!

It's not just a promise, it's a challenge. No one will be outside the power of God's Spirit. No one will be able to say, "Oh, I'm just a...girl, slave, child..." as an excuse for not being involved in God's activity in this world.

More importantly, no one will be able to say, "Oh, *you're* just a..." girl, slave, child. Tax collector. Gentile.

That's where Jesus goes in that parable he tells today.

One of the key tenets of the Reformation was the idea that we do not earn God's favor or love or salvation. It is a gift from God, freely given. That is the very definition

of grace. Martin Luther came to this understanding after he spent countless hours trying to be “good enough” to be counted as righteous. He also saw how the religious institution of the day had been corrupted by wealth and political power and was using that desperate desire to be good enough to swindle people. They played upon people’s guilt and fear, rather than sharing the Good News that through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, they had been set free from the power of sin. They considered themselves somehow more worthy, more redeemed, because they could afford to buy their way into heaven.

They were like a new swarm of locusts, bent on self-satisfaction and destruction. The Reformers stepped out in faith—and risk—and spoke the hard truth. They had lost sight of the truth of the Gospel. The Reformers called those in power to repentance and reminded the people that God’s Spirit was promised to *everyone*.

A lot of good came from the Reformation, not just for the church but for society.

But there are some problems, as well.

Because Jesus wasn’t just criticizing the tendency to put one’s faith in one’s own abilities rather than trust God.

He was also pointing out that that kind of self-righteousness tends to lead to contempt of others. It’s bad enough to stand up and say, “See how great I am!”

But what's even worse is to then turn to the person next to you and say, "I am so much better than you."

That is the dark side of the Reformation, as my friend Erik Karas might put it. The Church of the Middle Ages may have responded to the challenge to its power by killing Protestants—but we have to be honest. The Protestants killed quite a few Catholics, too. Contempt flowed in both directions. For many hundreds of years. It's still around today.

Ask someone in our community what they think of when they hear the word "Christian" and I am not confident you'll like the answer they give you. "Judgmental," "hypocritical," "closed-minded," "hateful." We are met with contempt because for too long we treated others as inferior to us. And not just Christian vs. non-Christian. I hear far more nastiness directed between people who are supposed to be siblings in Christ.

Now I want to be clear—I know that some of you are here because you have been *hurt* by another branch of Christianity. I also know that there are people who aren't here because they were hurt by *us*. None of us can claim to be completely without sin. None of us gets the Good News of the Gospel 100% perfect all the time. We all need to be asking ourselves on a regular basis, "Who are we leaving out? Who do we treat as less worthy? Who do we secretly believe is beyond the mercy of God?"

“Who do we really hope goes to church...*somewhere else?*”

The Reformation is still happening, my dear ones, because we still aren't perfect.

But, thanks be to God, there are still people who are stepping forward in their own gentle ways and offering a word of hope. God's Spirit is still falling upon us like rain that brings the harvest.

Next Sunday is All Saints Sunday. I hope you will spend some time this week thinking about the people you know or have known who really do embody the grace and love and mercy of God. Make a list and think about the things you have learned about God from their example. And then next week, when I invite you to do so, name them as one of the overlooked but faithful saints of God, who did what they could to cooperate with God's ongoing work to reshape us to look more and more like the Kingdom of God.

Amen.