

“RIGHTEOUS?”

Rev. Martha ter Kuile

Minister of Worship and Pastoral Care

Bloor Street United Church

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Reading: Joel 2.23-32

O children of Zion, be glad
and rejoice in the LORD your God;
for he has given the early rain for your vindication,
he 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 afterwards

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.
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.

Luke 18.9-14

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.'

May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.

Like the parable we heard last week, today's Gospel story is a stylized portrait. It presents two stock characters or stereotypes – figures that Jesus' listeners would have recognized and whom all early Christians would have been able to identify. One is the Pharisee – a member of that group of serious-minded, and sincerely religious

reformers who favoured careful observance of the moral law. The Pharisees interpreted scripture non-literally, and taught that 'an eye for an eye' should be understood as the value of an eye, for example, and not the eye itself. As we see from what this Pharisee says, he is admirably devoted both to God and to good works, and thankful for his good fortune. Not aristocratic, though certainly well-educated, and probably prosperous. The similar stock character in our dramatic lexicon might be an upper middle class lawyer with a fairly liberal bent. A good person, though perhaps a touch stuffy.

The tax collector is also a stereotype. Everybody knows he is not a good man. Working for the government to gouge the people, and probably cheating to line his own pockets. A rabbinic source identifies this occupation as a 'despised trade', and one that an observant Jew should not hold. Nevertheless there he is in the Temple. A contemporary analog might be a loan shark who stays barely within the law. Predatory, uncompassionate, and greedy.

So it's a pretty clear set-up that Jesus challenges. In a classic reversal story, he says that it is the tax-collector who *went down to his home justified*, repositioned into alignment with God. John Dominic Crossan says that the purpose of prayer is to 'let God get at you'. Because the tax-collector makes no claim to be righteous, it seems that God is able to get at him, in a way that God can't get at the self-satisfied Pharisee. There is a kind of appropriate humility which it is easier for an obvious sinner to achieve.

Now at this point we may groan at the Gospel-writer. Here we go again, taking potshots at the good guys. The prodigal's older brother, the rich young man who followed the law, the son who wanted to bury his father, the ninety-nine un-lost sheep. Those conventional, boring, non-sinners. The ones Jesus doesn't seem to want to party with. A bit defensively, perhaps, we want to say, but wasn't the Pharisee actually a rather good fellow? Faithful to his wife, a good provider and supporter of the temple, honest in business? Wasn't he righteous, in the best sense?

What we read, though, is that the problem was not that he was righteous, but that he *trusted in himself* that he was righteous. And from this distance of many centuries perhaps we may see that his trust was misplaced. The text doesn't question his righteousness, but we might. Through the telescope of our twenty-first century perspective, perhaps he was missing a few key elements. As he prays, he doesn't say,

for example, that he has made a point of educating his daughters, or that he is dedicated to full acceptance of gay lesbian bisexual and transgendered persons in the Temple, or that he is fighting for universal suffrage – nobody voted in first century Palestine, much less women! Among his boasts we do not find that he has been working hard on the matter of human rights in the Roman Empire, or on environmental justice. He doesn't even seem to be campaigning against slavery. Well, of course not. He is a man of his time. Chances are, he is a slave-holder. He belongs in his context.

We see the same thing in the passage that Randi read from the prophet Joel. There we hear about the Day of the Lord – that is, that glorious day when all is resolved and made whole, when the threshing floors are full and the vats overflowing with wine and oil, when God's will is entirely fulfilled. On that day – and it is such a favourite image, wonderful for a Baptism Sunday – sons and daughters will prophesy, the old will dream and the young see visions. On that day, God will pour out a spirit of holiness on the male and female slaves. What? There are going to be slaves on the Day of the Lord? That can't be right.

Well, of course not – again, context. The context of the Biblical writers didn't question slavery, and as respectful readers, we can live with that. We are all living in our own context, and blinkered and bound by it. Slaves to it really. But that blinkering is the key to the point that Jesus is making five hundred years after Joel. It's not just about the Pharisee. *We* shouldn't trust in *our* righteousness either, says Jesus. In our lives and in our prayers, we must recognize that our moral vision too, falls short of the glory of God. Many people here today and in the community more broadly are fighting good fights – against racism, and sexism, and heterosexism. Fighting for the environment. Fighting for justice. Running a race for health. Running a race for the kind of Toronto we want to live in. But that isn't the whole story. We live in a context that is even grander than the aspirations and the dreams that we have. And our prayers are the very place where we can acknowledge that.

Interesting to reflect on where our righteousness falls short. Especially today, when we have taken a young child in and said, we will teach you, we will share our faith with you – interesting to ask, what will Casey see that we don't see? When Casey's grandchildren look back at 2010, what will they observe that seems to them preposterous? Will they be shocked by some things that seem to them an obvious moral failure? Will they identify as appalling sins, things that we cannot even see?

Presumably they'll be amazed at how slow and stubborn we were about environmental measures, and combating climate change.

I wonder if when they look back at us they will also find it surprising that we are so exercised about migration matters. Might they say, imagine thinking you can keep people from moving freely and living where they want to live. Imagine border guards. Imagine thinking it is proper to control immigration. I think of this because of the publicity this week about new legislation to deter human smuggling. And then an article describing the difference in wait times for sponsored immigration from different countries. 15 months if you're from Poland, 33 if from Sri Lanka. This morning's report of the visit of the Dalai Lama, and of the 43 million persons in this world who are displaced from their homes. Questions about who may live where proliferate. What if all over the world there were no legal barriers to migration? For us, it is unthinkable politically, economically – we picture the disruption! No question about that. As disrupting as the abolition of slavery.

Maybe that is what they'll see clearly, what for us may be only a little inkling, a dreamlike nudge. And maybe they'll see other things too, that we can only vaguely imagine. But those are the kinds of dreams that the old are supposed to be dreaming, the visions that the young are supposed to be seeing. When it is our turn to go the Temple to pray, let it be said of us that we let God get at us. Let it be said that the spirit of holiness poured out upon us too, and made us free. Amen