

2-17-21 ASH Wednesday, One Service

Sermon- Return to Me, Even Now!

Scripture- Joel 2:1-2, 12-17, CTW PS 51:1-17

Hymns- 81, 552, 463

Theme- As we enter this dark time, repenting in ashes, contemplating the blackness of our sin, and preparing to revisit the story of how Jesus was sacrificed for us, things can look pretty bleak. This passage reminds us that we are to gather in strength and the mercy of God, who calls us back to Him, **Yes even now!**

I. We Have A Gracious and Merciful God!

A. There but for the grace of God, go I! A young employee secretly misappropriated several hundred dollars of his business firm's money. When this action was discovered the young man was told to report to the office of the senior partner of the firm. As he walked up the stairs toward the administrative office the young employee was heavy-hearted.

He knew without a doubt he would lose his position with the firm. He also feared the possibility of legal action taken against him. Seemingly his whole world had collapsed.

Upon his arrival in the office of the senior executive the young man was questioned about the whole affair. He was asked if the allegations were true and he answered honestly, yes.

Then the executive surprisingly asked this question: "If I keep you in your present capacity, can I trust you in the future?" The young worker brightened up and said, "Yes, sir, you surely can. I have learned my lesson."

The executive responded, "I'm not going to press charges, and you can continue in your present responsibility."

The employer concluded the conversation with his younger employee by saying, "I think you ought to know, however, that you are the second man in this firm who succumbed to temptation and was shown leniency. I was the first.

What you have done, I did. The mercy you are receiving, I received. **It is only the grace of God that can keep us both.**"

II. When God's People Turn to Him...

A. In our passage from Joel, the people of Jerusalem and Judah are facing a crisis. They are struggling with a locust plague. The locusts were everywhere and destroying their crops, like the invasion of a huge, powerful army could destroy a country.

So Joel, God's prophet, organized a time for the whole country to **fast, mourn and weep**, as well as repent of their wrongdoing and return to worshipping and serving the true God.

Joel, in verses 12 and 13 appeals to his people and speaks for God, saying: **"Yet even now, says the LORD,** return to me with all your heart."

Those last four words are important, since they echo the first commandment: **You shall love the LORD your God with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength.** The heart is the place where our deepest thoughts, emotions and will combine to determine our state of being.

We have a habit as Christians of pointing out "that other person" who is not very committed by saying: "His or her heart is not in it." Or we speak of someone else as being very committed by saying: "He or she puts his or her whole heart into it."

B. Joel then in verse 13 goes on to capture the true nature of who God is and what he is about when he says: "Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing."

These words give us one of the most beautiful pictures of God and God's activity in the whole Old Testament.

The LORD is affirmed as "merciful" (**raham**), "gracious" (**hannun**), and abounding in "steadfast love (**hesed**). We remember the word **hesed** as the "lovingkindness" that Ruth showed her mother-in-law, and God showed to Ruth and Boaz.

The adjective **raham**, evidently related to the noun rehem, “womb,” evokes a divine mercy as boundless as a mother’s compassion for her child.

The term **hannun** describes God’s inclination to bestow **favor freely**, without expectation of return or benefit.

Hesed of course shows the LORD’s loyalty because of the **covenant, a steadfast love that endures even when the covenant is broken.**

C. Merciful, gracious and abounding in steadfast love—those three words remind us of who God is and what he does for us. His mercy is like that senior executive in the story who had mercy on that young employee. **In God’s mercy we receive more than we deserve.**

God is gracious, his grace, his acceptance of us is so great that we can never measure it or exhaust it.

The story is told of a gentle Christian of the Society of Friends, a lady by the name of May Haviland, who lived alone. One night as she entered her bedroom, she found a burglar rifling through her bureau drawers.

When she turned on the light, he pointed a gun at her heart. She gently said to him: “Put that thing away. If there’s one thing I can’t stand, it’s guns. Besides, if your need is so great you have to steal, then you must need my things more than I do.”

She not only gave him what he was pilfering, but shoved money into his hand, all the while expressing concern for the circumstances he must be facing.

The next day she found all her possessions in her box, along with a note which read, **“Lady, I can face anger and danger and death itself, but I was powerless before your kindness!”**

III. God’s grace is like that—when we think that we are so bad that we deserve only punishment for what we have done, God surprises us with his amazing grace.

A. His grace accepts and favors us even though we don’t deserve it. His grace has the power to move us so deeply

that we, like the burglar in the story, do not want to continue to do what is bad.

Rather, like that burglar, we will be so moved by God's grace that we will want to please God and do what is right in his eyes.

Joel also tells us that God is abounding in steadfast love. It is true that we all deserve to die for our sins, there is no doubt about it. But even when we are unlovable, God loves us anyway.

God always has enough love, mercy, and grace to forgive us! Think of the thoughtless, unkind, heated words you spoke in sudden anger to someone lately.

The words hurt, injured, and maybe even destroyed that person. Can the injured party forgive you, or want to? Maybe so, maybe not, **but God can!**

During this season of Lent, starting today on Ash Wednesday, we are given the opportunity to return to God, to repent of our sins, to be so moved by God's grace, mercy and steadfast love for us that we will want to please God by doing what is right and loving him with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength.

As we come to the table which He provides through His grace and the actions of the Holy Spirit, let us not come lightly, or out of some sense of obligation.

Let us come to this table as a means of accepting grace for who we have been...and who we have not been.

Even now in the midst of personal heartache and global unrest, and despite the fact that we may have lost our way since the last time we were fed at His table, He calls us to come, eat and be filled with His grace. Amen?

Let us Pray...