

2019 10 29 TUMC, Candidating Sunday
From the [Lectionary](#): Joel 2:23-32, Luke 18:9-14

It's an interesting time to be a pastoral candidate. This country has just settled on a new balance of federal political power, and over the last two weeks as I have visited groups and connected with committees of this church it has been hard to remember that I am not in fact campaigning. Here I am, a candidate, and here we are, getting ready to vote.

Let me assure that, unlike my opponent, I am going to support hardworking TUMC tithepayers! We're going to build a baptistry and the Lutherans are going to pay.

Electioneering isn't really my style. But neither is a classic job interview. Job interviews are set up for you to sell yourself - boasting about your achievements, framing your failures positively, and trying to give the impression that you already know how to do everything involved in the work. For me that is a difficult mode to enter.

After all, I'm British, and it's terribly impolite to boast. Where I come from there is nothing worse than a braggart. I was also raised with the belief that for a Christian, your actions rather than your words should speak for your character and abilities. The voice of doubt whispers "if you have to persuade someone of your worthiness, maybe you're not really worthy". And in more recent years, as I've become more aware of the unearned privileges and attitude of entitlement that can come with being a white, cisgender man, I have tried to be very careful about putting myself forward.

So in between British politeness, Christian meekness, and a sort of Woke Stepbackwardness I am not a fan of the classic interview process. I am pleased to say that the process created by the Search Committee gave space for genuine exchange, for 'I don't know' and 'we'll have to see'. I'm grateful that our plans to visit my in-laws this weekend could be accommodated and that so many TUMC groups made space for me to visit, sharing their thoughts and questions.

It was difficult to know what to share in this time. So I turned to the scriptures as my starting point. Let's do a quick review of the scripture texts assigned for today that we did not use.

The reading for today from 2 Timothy is the sign off where Paul talks about being at the end of his race, the time of his departure, and how he wants God to forgive everyone who betrayed and abandoned him along the way. So I wanted to save that sermon for if you all vote No.

Whereas the scripture text assigned from Jeremiah has him complaining about how badly everything is going, and trying to emotionally manipulate God into fixing everything. So I will save that for if you vote Yes.

Instead of either of those texts I asked for the reading from Joel 2. Doesn't it sound like a campaign speech, a vision of hope? A vision of abundance, an end to shame, restoration of

everything that has been taken away and destroyed. We know how seductive this vision is. Make God's People Great Again.

And after that, promises God, I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh. It will be a flood of prophetic and spiritual awakening that is not restricted by the ages, genders or social status of the individuals. These verses have been a meaningful promise for the church in many different ages of its history. They were said to have been fulfilled in the founding of the Church on the day of Pentecost. I suspect that any of the great movements of reformation and recentering of Christian faith and practice have shared the same energy and sense of possibility that is invoked by these passages. And these verses echo and interact with other scriptures which show how God's world include people of all national origin and ethnicity, all sexual difference and reproductive capacity, all languages and customs. What does this promise of God's spirit being poured out mean to us today?

One of the suggestions to me was that I could use this time to share with you my vision for TUMC. But in these verses we hear of a community overflowing with vision. Look around. For all of our faults and flaws as a community, this is a place where vision can flow. Where people can speak what God is whispering to them, regardless of age, gender or social class. Where we strive to take vision seriously, where we ask good questions, among which is 'how can I help'?

If we get anything right, it isn't because it sprang magically into being or descended from heaven, fully-formed. It is because people thought hard, prayed hard, struggled and limped away and kept on struggling.

You do not need me to have a vision for this church. But you do need to know that I will take the vision of this church seriously.

It would be ever so satisfying to preach these words from the prophet Joel, of a church filled with God's Holy Spirit, alive with energy and prophesy and well-coordinated intergenerational programming that always starts on time. And I hope that we will explore the many gifts of the Holy Spirit. I hope that we will hear the longing for God's presence that lives within this community. I hope that we will explore the ways that we can make space for hearing the purposes of God in the visions of young people, in the dreams of elders, in the words and work of marginalized people, working people, sick people.

That might be the best place to take a sermon which I hope will mark the beginning of a new ministry in this congregation. But the scripture does not end there.

God's Spirit is poured out alongside an equally generous outpouring of terrifying images – blood and fire and columns of smoke, darkness of the sun and fear on the earth. The text speaks of survivors. This isn't what people want to hear! What happened to all the nice stuff about abundance and nice food? If God was campaigning for election, God's speechwriter would have been fired.

But as ever, God is not interested in campaigning for our votes. God is not selling us a fantasy, but calling us into relationship with truth. And the truth is that it is a frightening time to be on this planet. Humans are busy exterminating our sibling species and setting up ecological collapse. Humans have designed weapons to kill everything on the planet and have built enough of them to get the job done several times over. In the midst of an amazing wave of technological advance and prosperity, people are still poor, still hungry, still dying of preventable diseases.

At times like these, we need to share a vision with the world. We need to be able to say that things can be better! It is possible for material sufficiency, for communal prosperity, and for spiritual awareness to flourish in the world. But first we must honestly notice the fear and fire and blood. When the Bible uses these frightening apocalyptic images, it is a message to hold firm, to remain in the space of struggle and do the practical and spiritual work of care and accompaniment, even when there is a cost.

Think about that Pharisee and that Tax Collector in the parable that Jesus told. Which one had the kind of courage that God is calling us to? Which one knew how difficult it was to be honest, to face his own inner failings, and still chose to come before God and be open to the possibilities of transformation?

The Pharisee is the ultimate insider in the stories that Jesus tells - the person who knows all the right language, follows all the right rules, and crucially - you know it just by looking at him. If he happens to look at you, he's looking at someone not quite as good, not quite as close to God.

And the Tax Collector, we are given to understand, is not intended as a sympathetic figure. This is not a functionary of peace, order and good governance, making sure the rich pay their share towards the maintenance of schools and hospitals. It's a person participating in the plundering of Roman subjects for the Empire, building roads to march armies along.

Jesus counted both tax collectors and Pharisees among his followers, but here they are both characters in a story he tells. And the story is very simple indeed. The writer helpfully tells us that the parable is addressed to people who treat others with contempt, and it teaches that instead of that, those who humble themselves will instead be lifted up by God.

Our task with this simple story is to find a freshness, a newness, re-connecting with something of what Jesus was sharing, all those centuries ago.

Does it change if the roles are reversed?

A tax collector pushes past the people filing into the temple. His rich clothing and grim-faced bodyguards draw everyone's attention as he makes his donation - heavy coins ringing in the bowl. He takes his place and begins to list his blessings aloud, naming the ways he supports his community and so many people depend on his generosity. He is out there working hard to keep the people safe by appeasing the Romans, after all, unlike these God-bothering Pharisees, obsessed with their rules and judgements.

Meanwhile, unseen by anyone, a devout member of the Pharisees quietly slips into his accustomed place, kneeling in a posture of humility. Knowing the law as he does he is deeply aware of his need for forgiveness. He knows how important the law is - an anchor of meaning in a chaotic world. He knows how often he has failed to offer that same graceful guidance to others. And he knows how much grace and mercy God offers to him, continuing to hold out a loving welcome and ongoing relationship.

Or imagine two people who show up for the workshop. One is dressed in thrift store clothes, carries a re-usable mug, introduces themselves with their pronouns and reads the land acknowledgement with perfect pronunciation. "I'm grateful to be here" they say, "I've really been grappling with my privilege and I recognise that it's my role to be an ally, which means calling out people who haven't critically analysed their language. Did you all hear what that person over there said earlier?"

They gesture to the smartly-dressed person here for the first time, clutching a notebook and pen, shifting anxiously in their chair, wondering what to say. Should they apologise, or would that make it worse? Dread and shame descend. Maybe it would have been better to stay at home.

This parable is not really about the position that either man holds in the social structure, although one is an insider, a gatekeeper, and the other is an outsider, perhaps a collaborator. The parable is about heart posture. One person defines himself by looking down at the other person. The second person defines himself on his own terms. He does not even look up to heaven, but he grounds himself within his own body, saying this is who I am, this imperfect human being, this is what I feel, a separation from God, and this is why I am here.

In one of the *Star Trek* movies, someone asks Mr Spock what he thinks. How will the new recruits handle a real situation, not a training simulation. His answer is simple: 'each according

to their nature'. The question is not 'what will they do?' but 'who are they?' Who have they been trained to be? Who are they prepared to be?

Of the two men, the Pharisee might do a lot better in a classic job interview. He can list his accomplishments and charitable works. The tax collector might have trouble simply making eye contact! But is this church a place for us to practice our perfect first impressions? Or a place for truth to be told? The Spirit of God is the Spirit of Truth, and that includes the hard truth, the inconvenient truth, the unwelcome truth. What sort of church would let a person know that this is a place where they can bring their whole, inconvenient self in through the door? What sort of church would support people to honestly state who they are and what they are in need of, rather than expect everyone to pretend that everything is fine and no one has any needs?

What if this parable is not about which of these people we ought to individually be, but how we collectively react to the distinct needs of these two people in our midst?

My desire for the church is to be the kind of place where truth can be shared. My desire for the church around the world is that it will be a place of learning and transformation for everyone who comes into contact with it. That we would become infused with excitement about building a world of mutual respect and justice for all. That we would be able to say yes to God's vision of Spiritual vitality and inclusive community, even knowing that we are also saying yes to the frightening and unwelcome things, the truths that we fear to look at.

Can we be part of that global, ongoing church? Can we be open to what God's Spirit is saying in this moment? Can we nurture the humility necessary to share with one another our hopes, fears, and dreams, and accept them seriously as gifts?

I think that this is part of what the world needs us to be, here and now. Not another set of promises, not another fantasy of control, but a place of honest questions, warm welcomes, and humble beginnings-again for anyone who needs one.

Pray with me.

God, in your goodness you have created an abundant world of wonder and satisfaction. Help us to honour you as Creator of this world.

In your mercy you sent Jesus to restore us to our place as part of your family. Help us to deepen our love which demonstrates our relationship.

Thank you for sending your Spirit to be with us. Help us to practice listening to you and speaking the truth, so that we can continue your work of healing and transformation, everywhere we go.

Bless this community in the name of Jesus. Amen.