

ONE THING LEADS TO ANOTHER

Order of Service (bulletin)

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Video (recorded live stream)

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October 26, 2025

Pentecost 20

Joel 2:23-28

Rejoice, Children of Zion! Rejoice! Be glad in [Adonai] your God, who sends you rain – the autumn and spring rains as of old – and a new spring crop. The threshing floors will be heaped with grain, the vats will overflow with new wine and oil. I will repay you for the years that were eaten away by the locust swarm, the winged locust, the scavenger locust, and the bark-stripping locust – my great army, which I sent against you. You will eat your fill and be satisfied, and praise the name of [Adonai] your God, who has died wondrously with you! My people will never again be out to shame! You will know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, [Adonai], am your God, and there is no other. My people will never again be put to shame! After that, I will pour out my Spirit on all humankind.

Luke 18:9-14

Jesus spoke this parable addressed to those who believed in their own self-righteousness while holding everyone else in contempt: “Two people went up to the Temple to pray; one was a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed like this: ‘I give you thanks, O God, that I’m not like others – greedy, crooked, adulterous – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I pay tithes on everything I earn’ “The other one, however, kept a distance, not even daring to look up to heaven. In real humility, all the tax collector said was, ‘O God, be merciful to me, a sinner.’ Believe me, the tax collector went home from the Temple right with God, while the Pharisee isn’t. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, while those who humble themselves will be exalted.”



Now, some of you will probably know that I'm a sports fan to some degree, >> although I'm nowhere near as fanatical as I was, say, 30, 40 years ago when I would get really, really, upset and I would carry a loss with me. I mean, how do you remain an Elks fan over the last decade and not let that piece of your fandom go? I can watch pretty much any sport and enjoy myself in the moment, you know. Ooh, chess is on. My guess is that even non baseball fans have found themselves paying a little bit of attention to the World Series over the last little bit. Maybe less so after last night, but certainly yesterday morning, people were thinking a lot about baseball. Now, in the midseason, I couldn't tell you who's leading what division and how many games back, what team is on top, or who's pitching well, and who's got a great batting average. Couldn't tell you any of that. But if a game's on and I've got nothing else to do, I might find myself kind of getting into it no matter who's playing. When I watch baseball, the fun for me is strategizing what the pitcher is going to do next. That's what

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kind of keeps me interested in the game. I love that they've sped up the game to a certain degree. The pitchers have only 15 or so seconds to throw the ball. If you bring in a reliever, they have to face at least three batters. You can't just bring them in for one batter and then change pitchers again. The amount of times that a batter can call a timeout or a pitcher can step off the mat is limited and so I enjoy quickly moving to the next play and you don't have a lot of time to think: okay do I send another fast ball inside; do I throw a curve ball away; do I use one of those four seam fast balls or a two seam fast ball; is the base runner going to try and steal; will the batter bunt? Baseball keeps track of so many statistics. I mean that it's crazy when you think about what they do. The fact that they knew instantly when the home run happened the other day that that was the first pinch hit grand slam ever in World Series history means that somebody got their hand on the Google machine pretty quickly. So, there are so many statistics and there's so much analysis, is it really a mystery as to what happens next? Oh, this person, on second pitches, tends to chase the balls away. So, of course, the pitcher's going to throw it away. Or do they? Because no matter what the analytics say, no matter what I might predict with my limited knowledge of overall baseball, the next step is not actually going to be known until after the next play is over. You still have to wait to see what happens and then we can start the cycle all over again.

The Gospel of Luke has passed on that teaching story of Jesus where we have two people each offering prayers at the temple seeking God's grace and God's blessing, God's assurance of God's presence. And Jesus sets up the parable, sets up the story as a competition. Whose prayer is going to garner God's greatest favor? Now, it's a false premise, I think, given what I believe about the nature of God. As if God's grace is scarce and God's grace is limited and that God has to live within a quota of how much favor they're going to offer to the pray-ers at the temple. But that's the context that Jesus gives us in the story. That's the assumption we have to work into our reading of this story from the beginning. That's what the audience that Jesus is talking to is asked to assume as they listen to the parable. Whose prayer is going to win the day? Now, it's a tough metaphor given the FBI's arrest of a bunch of basketball related people on gambling, but the smart money would be on the Pharisee, not the tax collector.

There's a similar parable of Jesus that Luke also tells a couple chapters later that comes from Mark about two people in the temple seeking the favor of God. And that one the two people are bringing financial offerings and one is a very rich man and the other is a very poor widowed woman and the question is who gave the most? Now, if their generosity was based on the amount of coins that that clanged into the offering box, then the rich man was the easy winner. But Jesus' point at the end of that parable is that it was not about the quantity, but about the quality. It was about one's attitude and their deepest commitment. And so the widow, even though they offered the smallest amount of money that could possibly be put into coins, was declared the most generous. The people in today's parable are likely both rich. So it's not a complete parallel. It's not about who gave the most or who gives the most. They're both rich. The Pharisee and the tax collector probably lived very comfortable lives financially. Even the Pharisee doesn't try to claim that they are giving more to the life of the community through the temple. Even so the Pharisee says, "Look at how faithful I am. I give a tenth of my income, every bit of income to the temple. Even the stuff that I wouldn't claim on my taxes to Caesar, I'm giving to the temple. I will go without food. a couple times a week just to punish myself in a spiritual practice of humility and sacrifice (easy to do when your belly is full on the day before you fast). But ironically, humility is actually how Jesus distinguishes these two people who are praying.

We can imagine the contrast in their physical postures. You've got the Pharisees standing tall, arms out, head up, and eyes to the sky. *Here's my resume. God, I'm a big financial giver. I will go without food. I will fast and pray. In fact, I'm way better than a lot of other people. I don't cheat. I'm not greedy. I'm not a thief. I'm not a rogue. I don't commit adultery. I'm not even like that guy, that tax collector.* Then you got the tax collector whose arms are in, even beating their chest. I imagine them being crouched if not down on the ground, eyes

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down, maybe even closed. The Pharisee spoke loud enough and gestured publicly enough for everyone to see. And I think that was the Pharisee's intent. *Look at me while I pray.* Whereas the other one is down low. And if other people hear it, it's not the intent of the pray-er to make a show, but it's the intent of the prayer to be so into their conversation with God that they are speaking only to God. *My resume, God is not good. I collaborate with the Romans. I make my income from charging a premium over what I need to give to the Romans. And the higher premium I can exact from people, the better I do. If I take advantage of them, I get rich. And I think it's worth it >> just to have money. Or is it? God, I am not living well. I am sinning. Have mercy on me. Forgive me. Give me a realization that I'm not completely alone.*

Two prayers.

- I am great and better than the others.
- I'm aware of my shortcomings and want to be different.

Two prayers.

- God's blessing is just assumed.
- God's mercy is desired.

Thinking about Joel's reading... the second chapter of Joel is often referenced on the Sunday that follows Easter by seven weeks. Joel's chapter 2 is quoted in Acts chapter 2, a time when Jesus' disciples were back in Jerusalem for the spring harvest. The wheat was being brought in. It was Shabout. They told the story of the deliverance. In Greek, they referred to it as the festival of fifty days, the Pentecost. The disciples experienced the Spirit in a moving and new and impactful way. First blowing among them in the house where they're gathered and then affecting every person out in the square, out in the streets. And the impact was so deep and so affected that people, that no matter where they came from, no matter what language they spoke, they had a mutual understanding as if they were close kin. And Peter responds by quoting Joel.

Now, the part that gets remembered most in the Acts version that's quoted is the part of Joel that begins with what we had as our last verse today. We would need to keep reading in Joel to hear what Peter preaches on the streets of Jerusalem. *I will pour out my spirit on all people.* And if we need Joel to further clarify what all means, that all actually means all. He says, "People of all genders are going to prophesy." There was a divide between the status of men and women, of rich and poor, of slave and free within the ancient world. And here's Joel saying into those assumptions that God's spirit will pour out on everyone, men and women, the old and the young, even those who've been forced into servitude, are going to be affected by the spirit just like everyone else. These characteristics that are so often used to divide and prioritize are not going to be taken into account by the spirit. Our gender, our age, our social status. It's not going to be influenced.

The context of these very hopeful words in Joel was that the people had been experiencing very useful rain after years of drought. And it's allowing people to realistically hope that they might have a bountiful harvest for a change because when the seeds were planted, they were skeptical because of their recent experience. They had to plant and they had to wait. Would the weather cooperate this season? Would another dry season encourage an increase in the grasshopper population? The pouring of rain brings hope. And here Joel extrapolates that physical reality of the people, the pouring rain, and talks about the pouring of God's spirit raining down on all people. Just like if it's raining outside, everyone's going to get wet. The rain's going to affect the harvest and the spirit is going to affect the people. All of the people.

What is done and what is known today is going to affect what happens tomorrow. just as we've been impacted by yesterday. What are some of the things that affect us? There's physical things like the weather. There's emotional things like the strength or the tension of family or friend relationships. There's our interactions with

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our neighbors, those we know and those we don't. We're impacted by events that happen far from us. You make a joke in a commercial and all of a sudden your products go up by 10%. And the prime minister goes *Doug, Doug, Doug, Doug*. A person's access to financial resources has an effect. The status of our health has an effect. What we learn affects what we might do and how we might behave and what attitudes we expose. What we observe, what we take in, what impacts our empathetic parts.

So when I listen to Jesus' parable, I hear the tax collector realizing the impact that he has had on others. I think that's the challenge that I take from today's scripture. How are we impacting others? Is it always us or them? Can we both find blessing out of this moment? Can I be self-aware enough of my own influence of my own power? Even if I don't like to use those kinds of descriptions for myself, can I see the influence and the impact that I have on others?

On Friday, I do what I try not to do very much. I commented on a social media post where someone I've known for 20 years was trying to be funny at the expense of trans people. And my response was to be personal. How this meme was impacting myself and people I love... and someone this person should know. Now, it was quickly deleted, or at least I was not given access to being able to see it anymore. And we had a message conversation, a direct message conversation, where I expressed the impact of these jokes. Now, I don't know, but I'd like to think at least on trans issues, eyes were opened maybe a little bit that a heart was softened a little bit to say, "When you tell those jokes, think about this person. Think about Blaine's family."

We all need enough humility to be able to open our perspective wide enough to see that we have influence that we impact each other. Yes, what happens to us will dictate what we might be possible next. But we have the humble and the gracefilled responsibility to recognize the impacts that we right now are having on each other. Let's not see it as a competition of this-or-that but... both-and because the grace of God the spirit of God certainly has the capacity to be poured out on all.

Let's pray.

Spirit of God, remind us of the shared life we have together. Amen.

Hymn: #381VU Spirit of Life

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