

“Humble Extravagance”
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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The book of Joel is one of the 12 minor prophets in the Hebrew Bible. It was written as a lament over terrible things that have happened to Israel, but also as the promise of the blessing of the healing balm of God’s extravagant mercy.

Just ****when**** it was written is anyone’s guess– since majorly bad things happened to Israel for centuries, scholars place the book’s date as a moving target, anywhere from 900-400 BCE. In other words, it could have been anytime. It could be about these times, right now!

And so, I took it upon myself to write a creative project, and see this prophecy as if God were writing to us today. What would extravagant blessing and mercy look like to us, in our church, today? Here is how I imagined God speaking such blessing to us today:

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“O Presbyterians of and around Leonia, be glad and rejoice in God, who has given you early stewardship pledges for your budgeting. God has poured down on you abundant volunteers, and eager and resourceful committees, as before.

The sanctuary pews shall be full of people, the offering plates shall be filled with checks and the blue cards will be full of joyful gratitude. Your programs that help the poor will no longer be needed, for all will have enough; instead of coming to church to receive food, people will just come to offer thanksgiving and praise, and make new friends.

I will repay you for the years that saw the decline in mainline protestantism, the moving away of beloved members, the Sunday morning soccer games, and the pandemic, that great vehicle of change, which left none of us the same.

You shall have churchwide potlucks again with the tastiest offerings, and more than enough volunteers to clean up. Coffee hour would have such a bounty that there would still be more than enough, even after the children rush the snacks. And you will praise the name of your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. And the Nominating Committee will get yesses on their very first asks.

You shall know that I am in the midst of New Jersey, and that I am your God, but encourage you to befriend people who come from other places and worship other gods. The cultural diversity here looks alot like the Beloved Community I imagined– can you imagine it too? And no one will make bridge and tunnel jokes about you, say that your highways smell, or compare you to the cast of the Jersey Shore.

Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your baptismal font will spring with waters from all the babies and children you baptize; youth and adults will make joyful professions of faith; your sons and your daughters shall beg to go to church, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions that cause them to join the choir, which will have a waiting list. The sanctuary will be air-conditioned in the summer, and your gender-queer members will lead the way in a successful capital campaign because they are so excited about this ministry. The passing of the peace will include greetings in Korean, Japanese, Spanish, and more, because you have all learned the minimal language skills to greet one another in another tongue. Strangers will stumble into the church and ask, “Is there a committee that could use my help?”

Even on the few people who have always ended up doing everything in our church, in those days, I will pour out my spirit, and it will bubble forth with such inspiration that new people will gladly jump to step into and redefine their roles; and the old leaders will finally sit back in the pews and simply relax and receive.

I will show new ways of being, so that you can be a nimble church in a quickly-changing world.

For the world *is* changing; you receive and trust information and institutions differently, and that impacts how people want to receive and to trust my love. Global warming is a growing reality, and you need to take it seriously as you care for this earth I have shared with you and its creatures.

But you, O church, guided by my Spirit, will unlock new levels of being in this complex world. Then everyone who calls on my name shall find peace; for in Leonia and in all of Bergen County those who can shall vote on November 8, All will respond to my call then and always to seek justice and healing— not only for yourselves and *your* community, but for *all* peoples and creatures of the earth.”

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In *my* head, that’s what extravagant mercy and blessing looks like. But I also realize that my imagination is pretty limited— mercy and blessing, to me, is still defined by what I can see right now— in someone else’s backyard, if not in my own. I’m not sure if I can yet glimpse into God’s mind to dream dreams and see visions of what blessing can *really* be. For example, if we were really tapped into the Holy Spirit, maybe we would not need committees, because we would imagine different forms of leadership, that work for a newer generation.

In a way, each of the people praying in Jesus’ parable today are also limited. Each person praying could only see blessing from the limits of their own experience. But I think each prayer showed extravagant mercy and blessing.

But that’s not how I grew up interpreting the parable. Perhaps you were like me, made to feel disdain for the Pharisee, who is so self-assured of his extravagant ways of worship: he fasts

twice a week and he gives away one tenth of his income. Even though he's standing alone, he and his prayer seem to take up the space with feelings of extravagance.

The tax collector, on the other hand, I pictured in a corner, unable even to look at the heavens, beating himself up in humble remorse, saying, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner!"

And the way I used to hear that parable is that God cares more about the prayer of the humbled tax collector than God cares about the prayer of the man with extravagant piety. After all, the parable concludes, "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

But there's a trick embedded in this parable. Because it beckons us to look at the Pharisee, and compare ourselves to him: Well, I don't brag about what I give to the church. I don't fast twice a week— that sounds pretty extra. And I don't judge the people around me. I'm no hypocrite.

And as we do that, which I think the scripture invites, all of the sudden we have become the pious Pharisee! And we, the listeners, are the ones who are humbled.

As an aside let me say, there's also a history of anti-Semitism read into this parable. With the Pharisee as a Jewish religious leader, they are often made out to be the bad guys of the gospels. But the truth is, they were probably talked about so often because they were among Jesus' close friends and followers. It would be like if I were to pick on Pete a little to make a point in my sermon. Everyone respects Pete as a valuable member of our church, and I think we have a close enough relationship that if I chose him to make a point in a sermon, he and everyone else would take it good-naturedly. We should also recognize that the tax collector, since he was praying in the Temple, was a Jew, too.-- as was Jesus. So this parable should *never* be read as comparing Jews to something better.

In fact, there is so much about what the Pharisee said that would be a great prayer in and of itself. If we could take time to thank God when we are able to make the choice to do something good, something that stretches us a bit in our faithfulness, that is a very fine prayer. But this man had to go on to compare himself to a whole bunch of other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, and this tax collector, who is also offering a prayer, but of a different kind. It occurs to me that this man's fascination with thieves, rogues, adulterers and tax collectors may indicate that there is something compelling or alluring about these ways of life; that the Pharisee is naming how glad he is that he's not like *them* may show that there is an inner part of him that is actually *very much* like them— but he's made a choice to do otherwise. The thing we often judge in others is sometimes something we struggle with at some level within ourselves.

The good thing about the Pharisee that I want to name is that this is a man of extravagant action. He puts his money where his mouth is. He gives generously to the one he praises. Not only that, he puts his whole body in the game too: he fasts twice a week— nowhere in the bible does it instruct you to fast twice a week. I figure he's the guy who will likely sign up for a committee *and* show up for its meetings.

Now let's look at the humble tax collector. The gospels mention tax collectors several times—usually in scornful accusations that Jesus hung out with them. Why were they hated so much? I mean, I like to think that my taxes help to pay for essential services: police, fire, roads, schools, a fair justice system, a safety net for the vulnerable, parks... My family benefits directly from the tax dollars we are assessed. But in Jesus' time, people did not see how taxes went to the common good. Instead, they went to build up the wealth of the Roman Empire. Additionally, those who were tax collectors were known to skim a little extra to pad their own pockets. I'm not saying that has *never* happened in New Jersey, but if a tax collector showed up in our church, it feels pretty neutral to me; I would be happy to pray alongside them.

But there are people that I could not even eat a meal beside, let alone pray beside. I don't need to name who they are— just to say that being around them or reading their social media posts raises the hair on the back of my neck enough that I don't only want to tell them how wrong they are; I also want them to be experiencing a reckoning, a come-to-Jesus moment, where not only they are filled with compunction for the wrong they have done in the world; they also go about making amends, taking responsibility, *making it right* for the harm they have caused.

I confess that I witnessed one such person have something go quite visibly wrong in their life, and I felt a gleeful satisfaction about it instead of compassion. "Serves you right!" I thought, triumphantly.

So I know there is something in this parable I really need to hear. But there is also a part of me that wonders what happens to the tax collector after he begs for mercy. Scripture doesn't stop there. If his prayers do not change his life, are they really worth it, or are they just as performative as the Pharisee's prayer?

Willie Dwayne Francois III , a baptist preacher in NJ writes, "Guilt without growth is trivial. It is not enough to announce your sins without a sincere hunger for change. Remorse is not a good alibi for spiritual stagnation. Self-deprecating inaction is not a spiritual maxim to be espoused. Humility before God and honesty about self should drive us to new vistas of productivity, creativity, and love.

He goes on to say, "Guilt is not enough on a national scale, either. We need a concerted shift from apology to action, from guilt to justice. The redemption of America is only possible through naming sins and undoing generations of damage. White guilt has to translate into black-brown justice. We cheapen mercy when there is no forward movement, nothing percolating at the inner recesses of our soul, drawing us to revolutionize our life."

Let's fantasize for a minute about what would happen if the Pharisee and the tax collector would pray together, instead of alone in their separate places of the Temple. What if they could get over themselves enough to do that? If the Pharisee could bring his extravagant sense of action together with the tax collector's humble cries for mercy? What if they could, as Joel says, dream dreams and see visions together? I suspect that what they would come up with would

not only look like the Beloved Community to which Jesus calls us; they would also come up with a plan of action for how to get us there.

My modern interpretation of Joel's prophecy for our church has some things in it that we are already doing pretty well. It has some things we aren't doing, but that are actually achievable. And it has some things I'm pretty sure will never happen for our church. But if we can approach this church ministry with a sense of extravagant action, and sharing with a humble spirit, our dreams and visions may actually be seen together in this church, in this community, in this life.