

“The Spirit of Stewardship”

Joel 2:23-32

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Pastor Tom Williams

Stewardship - the notion of caring for and managing resources

Last week Doug Poland and his panel provided us with an excellent kick off to our Stewardship Campaign. I want to spend a few moments not belaboring the idea but hopefully expanding on the notion of stewardship. This week in the Milwaukee paper there was a very nice story about one of the food programs in Milwaukee – a place called the Gathering and how they had received many more fresh garden vegetables than it was possible to use in one meal. In the past they would use what they could and then toss the rest. This year they decided to freeze the excess! What’s interesting is that the volunteer leader of the group said that they did this to reflect that stewardship is a part of their mission and stewardship is the notion of caring for and managing resources. Stewardship is the notion of caring for and managing resources! I like that a lot.

Today’s readings have a lot to say to us about stewardship. Joel may seem to require a stretch but I want to spend a couple of minutes examining it and thinking about what it means when the prophet reminds us that God’s spirit, that is God’s presence is poured out upon all of us, all of humanity. Written or at least developed sometime in the 5th Century before the Common Era, Joel is one of what are called the Minor Prophets, I think minor only because of the length of the book. If you read the entire book which consists of but three chapters, it begins with a description of the devastation visited upon the country and symbolized by the hordes of locusts which have destroyed the crops of the people. However, about half way through it, the book changes tone and begins a recital of how glorious it will be that God will provide salvation for the country. And it is from this latter half that our reading for today is drawn.

Before we get too far into this sermon, I would like to point out a couple of things about this pericope which you may find interesting and even perhaps troubling. One of the interesting parts of this passage is that in verse 23 that which is translated as early rain could be translated as teacher and the vindication spoken of could be righteousness. Thus, as in the writings from Qumran and its cult, we could have here a reference to a teacher of righteousness. This teacher has sometimes been viewed by interpreters of the scrolls found at Qumran as Jesus but here it may be that Joel was looking not for rain for the harvest but teaching for the long run education of the people as to what righteousness might be. The “teacher” rained down on the people righteousness which they would then reflect in their lives? The locusts have come and destroyed as an act of judgment but God’s promise of salvation is found in the coming of the teacher of righteousness.

I in no way want to imply that I believe this prophet some 500 or so years before the birth of Jesus was offering a notion of his particular appearance. Rather that the prophet wasn’t simply looking to nature as a symbol of God’s salvation but may have been looking to the possibility of learning new ways of living as that which fulfills the promise. It’s an interesting difference of understanding if one translates this as “teacher for your righteousness” rather than “early rain for your vindication”!

In another verse, verse 25, I hope you will note that what in the NRSV is translated as “repay” is translated as “restore” in the RSV but in either case what is translated is the verb form of “shalom”, peace or well-being! I think we can only take from this that what is promised is not simply an abundance of foodstuffs but a time of peace and well-being for all. Perhaps Joel is here seeking to assure the community that their God is not simply a god of nature as so many of the gods of those around them were but indeed a God of all life.

Now I point these ideas out and the challenges they present neither as some sort of academic exercise nor to impress anyone with my ability to read commentaries but to remind us that the Bible is a historical book meaning it was developed in history and is effected by history! It is vitally important if we speak of our faith as Biblically based we spend time grappling with the Biblical witness and seek to understand it as such a historically based document.

While the above may simply be interesting, there are a couple of other parts of this passage which can be downright troubling. For example, the passage offers a foundational theological understanding that God is to blame or thank for natural disasters and/or blessings. Such initially may seem to be an idea with which we’re comfortable but then do we seek to find the people of New Orleans guilty of some sin so great that hurricane Katrina can be seen as an act of God? Are the people of Southeast Asia so sinful that the great Tsunami which hit the area and killed hundreds if not thousands several years ago ought be seen as God’s judgment upon them?

A second example at least for me is the final verses of this pericope and its apocalyptic portents! I don’t think many of us believe in such apocalypticism nor wait with joyful longing for a divine intervention that will end history! Our faith while Biblically based cannot be dishonest about the fact that there are theological ideas within the Biblical witness with which we disagree. That neither denigrates the book nor disables our faith. The willingness by faith-filled people to live out that faith in history is truly something to be celebrated and not disdained. We are 21st Century people whose faith just like the faith of those of the 5th Century BCE is a historically based and involved faith and that means it lives, it changes, and it is different from theirs. Our call is to read these writings we call the Bible and delve into their meaning for their time that we might glean from those efforts meaning for ours. This search for inspiration, for the inspiration which God offered them is always a historical search which respects without sacralizing the history in which and of which the stories speak.

What I’d like us to look at and listen to this morning as we think about the Biblical witness and stewardship is the radical nature of verses 28 and 29 in the pericope we read. Read it again and listen with the ears of the 5th or 6th Century BCE. These verses challenge so much which had to be accepted social mores of the day. This is a confession that God’s spirit, the presence of God is made available to sons and daughters, men and women, and age is no barrier either though there what we would see as the sexist mores of the day raise their head. However, it is verse 29 which is so completely out of character for the age, for the time.

“God will pour out God’s spirit upon male and female slaves!!” That dear friends has to be one of the most radical ideas found anywhere in the Bible. A quick word about slavery- as I understand it slavery at about this time in history wasn’t about some paternalistic utilization of

prisoners of war to do chores around the house. Slavery was (and is) a brutal use of another human being in any way the owner of the slave chooses! It is the complete control of the other by an overseer and is made possible by the de-humanization of the slave. To understand how it worked especially for female slaves read the story of Abraham and Sarah. When Sarah cannot conceive a child for Abraham she “gives” her maid to Abraham to impregnate! Sarah gives Hagar to her husband without regard to her wishes or desires! Slavery denied the basic humanity of the other. Yet if God’s spirit is poured out upon even slaves does that not recognize their humanity, recognize that they also are created in God’s image? Is this not a confession that God doesn’t recognize or respect those divisions which we as humans put between each other? This is God practicing the ultimate in stewardship, I think. This is God caring for and managing resources. The pouring out of the spirit upon all is God caring for and managing humanity as one of God’s resources! This pericope is really about the stewardship of God and that the prophet believed that all were part of God’s resources to be called, visited by God.

OK that’s nice! Now what does that mean to us? Simply enough it means we seek to build communities of justice and hope for all people not out of some ideological or political ideal but because we know and celebrate that all people have the possibility of participating with God in their lives. Our participation with God in our lives means we are called to be stewards of the resources of those lives. And those resources range from the ones we perhaps always think of such as our monetary ones or ecological ones but they also include seeking to assure that the opportunities exist for all people to live with joy, hope and pleasure in societies of justice for they are also, as we are, resources of God to be respected and loved.

And we seek to engage the other in conversation that we might all learn and grow and build societies, communities. As we move through this political season, we might want to consider what such an insight might mean for the political entities of the world. What would happen to the world if all people were humanized and their needs, their desires were listened to regardless of their social status? Think how that might change this country’s foreign policy if we sought to implement such an idea. Instead of seeking to dominate the world people might seek to create with all its citizens a place of security and respect for all. If God’s spirit could be poured out on slaves in the 5th Century before the common era, then that spirit can be known by the poorest of the poor in the world and the call then becomes to seek to be stewards of such humanity is to listen to their needs, desires, and, as Joel puts it, their dreams.

In this congregation and this community, we have just gone through a process which has offered each of us, I hope, the opportunity to share with all, our hopes and dreams as we believe God’s spirit is poured out on us. To be stewards of that process, though, is to recognize and celebrate the ministries of which we dream but also to celebrate and recognize that there are limits to what we can do. And living in a community, we manage our resources by accepting that and by celebrating that it is not always MY ideas which are the ones in which we find ourselves called to be engage as a community. Stewardship is the willingness to live within a community and share and celebrate with that community. It is knowing of God’s presence in my life and celebrating it in the lives of others as we learn from them and move forward with them in ministry that we might truly be stewards of all and with all. AMEN

