

At the Intersection of Locusts and Luxury

23rd Sunday after Pentecost

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Text: Joel 2: 23-32

Sometimes God convicts us through burning bushes. Sometimes God convicts us through parables. Sometimes God convicts us when we get to the ends of ourselves and our sins. I was convicted by the humble confession of a complete stranger.

Let me open by sharing with you a testimony about the discovery of my own privilege.

It was a little over a year ago. I was with a small group of pastors, civic leaders, and professors journeying together to study urban violence through a program associated with Western Theological Seminary. For two and half years, we would get together every 4 -6 months or so to study the most violent cities in the US. We met in cities like Detroit, new york and New Orleans, to learn from churches and civic organizations what they were doing to influence healing changes in their respective cities.

A year ago we visited Los Angeles and for this meeting each of us brought a guest peer learner to contribute to our conversations. During our first evening together, we all sat around the oversized conference table in the small events room at a Hyatt Regency in Los Angeles. There were fifteen of us. Being that there were a number of us who were new to the group, we engaged in my least favorite American past time, the icebreaker. Thankfully this one wasn't too awkward. We each went around the room and introduced ourselves. We were to give our names, where we were from, and one interesting fact about ourselves. I said "Hi my name is Beth, I am from Holland, MI and I do not perm my hair." Obviously.

One by one, we each went around the room introducing ourselves, until we got to George. George stuck out in our group a little. He was one of only three persons of color, was by far the oldest person in our group and

was very quiet. When we got to George, he said “Hi my name is George and I am a pastor from Nashville, Tennessee. My interesting fact is that I am a recovering sexist and homophobe.”

I inwardly gasped a little bit. And I started playing with a piece of my non-permed hair; a habit I have when I am a little nervous. Something about George’s admission made me a little uncomfortable and I was having trouble figuring out why.

While our group leader went on to describe our agenda for the next couple of days, I sat processing what was jarring about George’s humble and honest confession. I think this is why I was taken aback. As an older black man, George represents a couple of segments of our society that are pretty marginalized, no thanks to racism and ageism. Because I care about issues of justice, I had sized George up as one who suffers from oppression. Yet in our time together both at the table introductions and the subsequent three days of meetings, George didn’t talk much about his marginalization. He spoke about all the ways he had been a part of systems that marginalized others. I didn’t have a place in my brain to put this. George should be talking about his own justice not the injustices of others.

A flurry of questions ran through my head. What does this mindset mean for him? What does it mean for women and the LGBTQ community? What does this mean for me, a woman, greatly concerned and affected by sexism? What would it mean for me to expand my needs to also include the needs of others? Does this mean that my needs become overlooked? Does it mean that I don’t matter? If I don’t fight for myself and other women, who will?

Does it mean that I will go unseen? Does it mean that the world doesn’t care about me? Does it mean that I don’t care about me? Does it mean that God doesn’t care about me?

And then this small quiet voice spoke to me heart. Might it mean the opposite? That God is the God of abundance offering justice enough for every man, woman, free person and slave alike?

Not my most fully engaged self at that conference now was I?

There's this famous passage we read from Joel today: "Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit." What a radically beautiful vision of the inclusive nature of God.

I think we have this idea that ancient Israel was this noble, elite, group of people. After all, they were God's chosen, right? But actually they were the opposite. Israel was a marginalized community; a weak and undesirable group of people in the ancient world. God chose them in part to choose the most undesirable people; to show that if God is to choose all of us, God needs to start with the lowliest.

When Joel was speaking these powerfully prophetic and apocalyptic words to Israel, it was in response to two losses: First, they had suffered a great catastrophic loss due to a locust infestation that had destroyed their crops and their way of life. Being a part of a culture that revolved around agriculture, this meant that not only were they worried about starving, they were concerned about perpetuating their very existence as a nation.

Second, the more powerful nations, who surrounded them, mocked and laughed at Israel. Near east people viewed natural disasters, which were beyond their control, as a manifestation of the divine realm. Israel was being accused of serving a God too weak to prevent or rescue them from their destruction. What was Joel's response in the face of this dual calamity? Was his first concern one of retaliation or self-preservation? Did he worry that Israel didn't matter? Did he ask God if their needs had been overlooked? Did Joel ask God if Israel even mattered?

Or did Joel believe the opposite? That God is the God of abundance offering justice and care enough for every man, woman, free person and slave alike?

What is modeled for us both in scripture and by my new friend George is that while the world tells us that justice is scarce, only enough for the strongest, (which is not even real justice) God's justice starts with the weakest and is expansive enough for all. In God's economy, justice is available in abundance. While I might be worried for myself, I can trust that God not only is working for my salvation and care, but that God is working for the salvation and care of all humanity.

So what does this all mean for us, the church? One thing I think this means is that we have the freedom to examine our own privilege. Privilege. White privilege. Straight privilege. Male privilege. What an uncomfortable, ugly, eye-rolling inducing word that is. The idea of privilege, for many Americans, is cringeworthy, maybe you are one of them. I know it was for me.

When the idea of privilege comes up, that is the idea that some people have benefits in this world they didn't earn but possess because of their skin color, gender, age, economic status, a number of people either feel great shame or great irritation that someone somewhere wants to take something away from them. We suddenly succumb to a mentality of scarcity that I possess something finite that will be taken from me and given to someone else.

But what we see in Joel and in the gospel reading today is that God sees resources differently. When Jesus says in Luke "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.", we see the key to where abundance starts. If we look to the weakest and ones that have less than us, we can take what has been privileged to us and use it to the benefit of others. Because this is in fact why we've been given privileges in the first place. Not to make us more comfortable; but so that we can risk our comfort to benefit others.

Humbling ourselves means having supernatural faith that trusts that as we share what we've been entrusted we can live in to the full blessing of being a true community and church. Humbling ourselves means that we can trust that even as we might be marginalized ourselves, we can still share whatever gifts or platforms we DO have for those who are marginalized in

other ways. George can use his male, straight, and cis privilege to care for those in his community who are women, trans, or gay. I can use my voice and opportunities as a way to hold the door open for people of color and the LGBTQ community.

George and I and you can do these things because we know that God's justice is not a few drops of water. God's justice is a roaring wave. It is an overflowing stream ready to burst its bank after a huge rainstorm. The prophet Amos tells us that God's justice will one day roll down like waters, and God's righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. It is unending.

Examining our privilege and asking God who should benefit from it doesn't mean siphoning off the stream so that we thirst. It means undamming it so that we all have enough to lap it up, swim in its cooling rapids and give thanks to the source who constantly replenishes it.

So as your act of joyful worship, I ask you, where is your privilege? What has God given you so that you can share it with the women, enslaved, and tax collectors among you? Who might benefit from your voice at your work place? What jokes do your friends and family still make about our gay community? What will you do once you begin seeing that women are not ever promoted at your work place? What will you say when you notice too few of the academic awards at school are given to your classmates of color? Where can you humble yourself so that others can be exalted? Where are the ways you are blessed to be a blessing?

Go to the river. Let down the dam. And dive in.