

***Sermon – “Humbled, exalted, and everything in between”***

God is in charge. That is pretty clear through the prophets and Psalms. Praise God for this – wait on God for that. God will deliver...God will send...God will provide. And the hope of God's people is that we will find favour (somehow) and be blessed by God's providence. So far, so good.

But when God's people imagine that they have found the secret to success – and when we claim it as our right – and when we dare imagine that we hold the keys to the divine heart of God...that's when it all goes sideways.

Joel is helping the people understand that there is a cycle of 'good times and hard times' that must be accepted. The rain for vindication comes after the destroying locust has ravaged the land. The outpouring of the Spirit will be accompanied with strange signs in the sky. Our preference for constant comfort is not going to be honoured – that's just not how it works.

And Jesus' parable for the day makes that abundantly clear.

The self-proclaimed righteous man applauds the blessings he enjoys – claims them as his right. “Thank God I'm not like those other folks – like that tax collector over there. I'm a good person, doing good things. Aren't you pleased, God? Aren't you glad I'm 'one of the good folks?'"

When faith turns into self-congratulations, then faith has been undermined.

Faith is concerned with things beyond ourselves – big, broad issues – compassion, connection, humility in the face of grandeur. Faith is not a contest - a race among the faithful to be exalted - it is a journey through the highs and lows of life. Faith is a constantly changing encounter with the work of God in, among, and sometimes against the desires of our hearts. Faith is the tax collector, bowed in the shadows, wanting mercy, not magnificence.

Grandeur and magnificence are part of the created order. The vast spread of the prairie landscape; the towering mountains; the restless oceans; the diamond-studded night sky. These things are hard to ignore. They ought to give us perspective; even a quick glance at the majesty of our surroundings should help us realize that there are forces at work that we can't manage – there is something in the universe bigger than us.

History suggests that we don't easily accept that lesson; what's more, it's a big world and we have much smaller problems to deal with. Our day-to-day needs are enough to keep us occupied, aren't they?

The gospel invites us to make grandeur and magnificence personal.

"He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and regarded others with contempt." This is not a 'kingdom of God' story, it is a story against the kingdoms we create for ourselves.

And for all the efforts of social justice warriors through the 60's and 70's - for all the efforts in recent years to find equity and justice for dozens of different groups, causes or countries who have been historically (perpetually) marginalized -

the truth is we're not very good at being good to one another...especially if the 'other' thinks, looks, acts, loves, votes, prays or lives differently than we do.

I'm not breaking any ground here - we've all seen for ourselves the way that the world dissolves into 'teams' over any issue under the sun. And to my perpetual despair, 'faith' is often used as a measuring stick for these battles. Often - too often - it becomes a case of 'they who claim God loudest make the rules (and win the day.) I have a hard time imagining that God is honoured by any of this.

Jesus' parable proves my point.

I offer these thoughts, not to champion any one 'side' over the other, but as an invitation to all sides - and especially those who choose to make faith a building block for their political platform - to be careful. Consider that instead of a 'call to arms' to protect and ensure personal freedoms, that perhaps the next faithful step is to invite people to open-armed compassion and concern for the well-being of all. Consider that a call to inclusion should include the like-minded and the contrarian. Consider that your economic package - your social safety-net - your national energy policy - your foreign policy - is not the solution for every single problem, but your intelligent collaboration within the global community might go a long way toward ensuring peace, justice and security for all (and not just some.)

No - Jesus doesn't say any of this - but in Jesus' call for humility in the face of differences - in Jesus call to honour God in a way that actually honours God - we are invited to live into a faith that displays that humility in tangible ways.

We are not called to be humbly invisible - to 'not make waves' and live our best lives - too many of the best of us are doing just that to no real effect.

We are called to be actively humble - to point out the inconsistencies of those who would loudly and publicly 'claim the faith' in the service of their own self-aggrandizement. We are called by Jesus to notice the self-righteous, and to question their self-assessment. We are called to honour the image of God that lives in every single human, no matter what we think of that persons address, accent, activist cause or political alignment.

This is the most difficult task Jesus gives to those who would follow him: to love one another. The God-honouring thing to do, in a world obsessed with it's own importance, is to offer that love in humble certainty. It is by this that 'they' will know that we are followers of Jesus. It is our humility that lets us see where God is at work.