

## Written Copy: Joel 2:12-13 "Return to the LORD

Ash Wednesday

Wednesday, February 17, 2021

### Text: Joel 2:12-13

<sup>12</sup> "Yet even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; <sup>13</sup> and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.

### Exegetical Statement

The prophet Joel has warned God's people about a coming day of disaster and suffering, the Day of the LORD, that is illustrated symbolically by a plague of locust that destroys everything. This was an illustration for any of the conquering armies that the LORD sent to invade His people who refused the prophet's call to turn away from wickedness and idol worship and return to worshipping Him alone. But all is not lost! Even now, it's not too late to return to the LORD with repentant hearts. The prophecy and the reality both are the Law at work in the lives of God's people to break their stubborn, self-centered hearts that only look to themselves, so that they once again confess their need and dependence upon the LORD for His grace, mercy and restoration. And they find the power to confess and repent because the LORD doesn't want to punish them but to bless them. The evil He allows has the purpose of moving them to turn back in faith so that they live in faith toward Him now, and therefore with Him forever in eternal life. While they are called to gather in a holy assembly to confess and repent, this is done not as a corporate outward show, but to encourage each of God's people to turn again in their own hearts and hold fast not to themselves but to the LORD who promises He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and ready to perform great deeds of mercy for all who believe in Him. While He may not remove all the consequences of their sin, He doesn't allow us to receive what we deserve for our sin but lifts us up and lightens the consequences, so they are not crushed by them. And He will make sure they remain in faith toward Him and so avoid eternal separation that will come at the Last Day, the Day of the LORD, when all chances of repenting and returning are over.

### Focus Statement:

The LORD knows our sin, all of it, even those we try to hide from everyone, even ourselves. He points sin out to us and calls us to repentance not out of anger, but out of love. Sin separates us from Him, and He desires that we spend our lives in repentant faith with Him now and eternal life to come. He sent His only Son to suffer and die for us, and thus be the remedy for the eternal separation we deserve. On the cross Jesus showed us a glimpse of just how strong and endless His love is for you by suffering for all your sins so that you are completely forgiven. In Christ we can return and repent knowing that God's answer to our cry "Please forgive me" will always be, "YES! Already done! You remain right with me"

### Function Statement:

#### Why it's important to know:

We can be reluctant to confess certain sins, fearing that they will meet with God's anger and wrath because they are too awful, or occur too many times. We are afraid to hear His voice of anger and judgment, just as we may have heard from our parents, or have shared with our children.

#### What the hearer should do as a result:

As we walk through the time leading up to Jesus suffering and dying on the cross, focus on the ways His Disciples fell short in obedience and love for Him, and how Jesus responded with love, compassion, and forgiveness. Seek application in our own lives of sin and be encouraged by Jesus message of love and forgiveness to us whenever we Return to the LORD in repentance.

### Subject Sentence: We can repent through faith in Jesus love for us

## **Opening Illustration: My First Visit to St. Louis Seminary**

When I first went to visit the Seminary at St. Louis, they hooked me up with a 4<sup>th</sup> year student who was my emissary and guide for the visit. At that time I was not only contemplating which Seminary I should attend, but if I should even go, if I was truly being called to be a Pastor. But the LORD knew of my struggles and questions and hooked me up with a guy who had been, as I was at the time, a Licensed Deacon in the Church. We shared with each other how through that ministry we both felt the tug and call of the LORD upon our hearts to be trained to serve in a greater way as an Ordained Pastor. He was older like me and had been out of college for a good long while, like me. And he was forth coming on how hard it was, and how he had to study more than some of his fellow classmates.

Being out of school for a long time was an issue in my contemplation. But there was an even bigger issue. I understood that when I applied, I would need to sit down and more or less confess my life story in writing to one of the Directors of Ministerial Recruitment. And as I have alluded to before, I had a 20 year plus period in my life where I lived outside of the Church and outside of the faith. I knew my life then was not the kind of lifestyle befitting of a Pastor. I knew they encouraged new applicants to be as forth-coming as they could about their past and to make sure all of the skeletons were out of the closet. I told my emissary/guide that I was afraid that when I let all those skeletons out, and broke into those dark closets in my heart, that they would deny me entrance quickly. In fact I imagined them laughing at me for even having the thought that I could be “Pastor” material.

## **My Former Deacon Mentor Shares His Story of Forgiveness**

At that point my guide shared with me the following story from his past. Later, I received his permission to share it for use in ministry as long as I kept it an anonymous tale. He told me that when he was a Deacon serving at his home church, he had a teenage daughter who attended the local Christian school. He loved her very much, but his daytime job at the Post Office, along with his responsibilities as a Deacon, kept him very busy. He was busier than he should've been, and his family suffered. He loved his daughter, but was not always there for those special school occasions, or even on the weekends for regular family time. His wife kept reminding him he needed to set aside more time with her, and he realized it was true. But there was always something that needed to be done, a worship service to cover in Pastor's absence, a Bible Study to lead, a conference to go to, and in time with his family took a backseat.

He was working in his office at home one evening when his daughter walked in. As he reflected later, she had been more distant and to herself than before, not wanting to join the family for dinner, not wanting to go out for ice cream, often not wanting to go to church or school because she said she didn't feel good. And here she was standing in his office, and he could tell she had been crying. She took a deep breath and told him she had something important to tell him. Then, she simply broke down in big heaping sobs of tears. He got up

and came to her and held her, telling her that whatever was wrong she could tell him. She cried on his shoulder long enough that his shirt was wet with her tears. Then she took a big breath and blurted it out. "Daddy, I'm pregnant! I know its wrong, and I am so sorry I've let you down. Can you ever forgive me?"

It was a slap across his face. He had no idea, although later he said he should've known. He had noticed that she had gained weight but had kept much of the gain hidden under lose fitting clothing, even borrowing shirts from her father because she said they were comfier. She had been hiding the truth from him for as long as she could. She had dealt with the fear and guilt on her own, shouldering the weight until she could take it no more. She was scared of telling her own father, a fear that put the unborn baby at risk as she had not had the proper medical attention she and the baby needed. She was scared that he would explode, that he would berate her, accuse her of bringing shame to herself and to their family. She was standing here now as a last resort. And she was so very afraid that his answer to "Can you forgive me" would be a firm "NO!".

Now we might look at this situation and at his daughter's sin as being more severe than anything we have to confess. We might even, to ourselves, if not in conversation to each other, judge them both as guilty and deserving of the consequences. The daughter's promiscuous behavior had finally caught up with her, and her father was guilty of dereliction of his fatherly duties. Judging they were both reaping the consequences of their actions we could be unforgiving in our attitude towards them. But are we really any better off in our faith walk then they? Don't we all have sins and attitudes that we would rather no one know about? Don't we all have sins from the past, skeletons in the closet, that we hide away from everyone else, even from our heavenly Father. We hide them because if we were to actually stand before Him and confess them, we fear that His answer to our plea "Can you forgive me?" would be answered with a resounding "NO!" We have those sinful traits that we try to master in our lives and end up being unsuccessful. And whenever we do repent of them in private, we approach God with the same fearful attitude as this broken frightened little girl. It could very well be that each of us at times in our life have more in common with her than we'd like to admit. In my case I was suffering from the same fear as I contemplated full disclosure to the Seminary Recruiter.

So, how do you think the Father responded? He said he looked at her and loved her. Any disappointment or anger that he might've had was washed away in his great love for his precious child. She was hurt, she was in pain, and he didn't want her to be hurt or in pain anymore. He said he told her, "Jesus has forgiven me so much in my life, and has given you to me as a precious gift, how can I not forgive you? Of course I forgive you. I love you so much." And he took her in his arms, and they cried together, this time tears of joy and forgiveness as he shared the love of Christ with her.

## **What Jesus Wants Us To Know When We Return to Him**

It's a moving scene, isn't it? And consider that this is the reaction of an earthly father who has his own sinful issues. How much greater is the reaction of our gracious and merciful Heavenly Father when we approach Him and ask His forgiveness? Even when we run and hide away our sins from Him, fearing we will first have to suffer His wrath before we receive anything else, even when we see ourselves like a broken record, confessing the same sins over and over, even then He has a message for you and me in our Old Testament Lesson, **Joel 2:12-13** <sup>12</sup> **"Yet even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;** <sup>13</sup> **and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.** Even now, it's not too late. Now is the time to turn to me with your hearts broken and your soul sorrowful and weeping. Turn to me because for those who believe in me, I am not the hellfire and brimstone God of punishment. I am gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. I am abounding in steadfast love for you.

It is the LORD Himself who uses the Law to make us see the ways, and the occasions, when we have disobeyed and turned away from Him. It is the Holy Spirit working in our hearts that drives us to despair and sometimes to tears over our sinfulness. He does this work not out of anger or retribution, but out of love. A great love. A love that in its totality is beyond our comprehension. It's a love that we can't manufacture in our hearts, it must come from outside us, from Jesus Himself.

It's the love that drove Him to take your sins and mine upon Himself and suffer all the torture, anguish, and even the separation from the Father that our sins would earn for us. He loved you so much that He took all of it upon Himself and died to remove it from your life forever, so that you would never have to suffer for them, not now, not ever. As Paul puts it in **2 Corinthians 5:21** **For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.** For your sake, Jesus took your sins, so that through His sacrifice all that would stand in the way of you living a life of faith and love in Him would be gone forever. Through your faith in Jesus' death and resurrection you stand as one righteous before God, with nothing left to be accused of that would separate you from Him. It's all gone. It's all forgiven. That's where you stand right now. And He desires that you repent of your sins so that you see this as the truth. In repenting of them we let our sins go, sending them away to the cross, where your forgiveness has already been won.

When you come before Him and confess your sins, He takes you, His precious child, broken and sorrowful, into His arms, and lovingly whispers the Gospel message to you. He whispers the Words of Absolution into your ears. You, my much-loved child, you are completely forgiven in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. I've made you my child in your baptism, and my Spirit is at work in your heart and life to keep you close, as my precious child, in repentant faith toward me.

## **What My Seminary Guide and I learned about Repentance**

My former Deacon guide from the Seminary said that when he took his daughter in his arms and told her that by faith in Jesus Christ she was forgiven, the love of Christ surged through his heart like an electric shock. It was a moment that they both shared. And it changed both of their lives forever. He said, "That was the moment I knew God was calling me to be a Pastor, so that I might share that wonderful and powerful love with others. His story was a moving one for both of us. When he finished telling it his eyes filled with tears, as did mine, and we held each other, and shared that special bond of love, friendship, and forgiveness we have with each other as forgiven children of the Heavenly Father.

That was a deciding moment for me. It was a moment when I began to believe that the LORD was calling me to the Pastoral Office. It was confirmed sometime later when I sat down with the Seminary Recruiter who goes by the nickname "Father Ted", even though he was never a Catholic Priest, and his name isn't even Ted. As sat with him for my interview I saw he had my manifesto in front of him. The document in which I dredged up as many of the skeletons from my closed that I could remember, at least enough of them so he could judge what I'd done, and more importantly see me as the poor miserable sinner that I'd been. Father Ted said to me, "You look nervous. What's the matter?" I told him, "I'm just waiting for you to drop the axe and tell me I'm not Pastor material." He said, "What makes you think I would say that?" I replied, "Well doesn't Paul give us the qualifications for a Pastor in **1 Timothy 3:1-5**?" **"<sup>1</sup> The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. <sup>2</sup> Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, <sup>3</sup> not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. <sup>4</sup> He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, <sup>5</sup> for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?"** I told him that I had the husband of one wife part down, but the rest I'd failed miserably at over the years."

Father Ted responded, “And that is the guide for your life from here on out. That is the goal that you are to shoot for. As a Pastor you will be charged with living as an example for your flock. But being a living example is not your only task. You have a more important one, sharing the grace, mercy, and forgiveness with those you minister to who are broken, sinful, and desperately need to hear Christ’s words of grace and forgiveness. You know about that forgiveness personally. You have in this paper confessed and asked for it yourself. And I’m here to assure you that each one of the things you’ve written down on this sheet, each and every one of them that witnesses against Paul’s qualifications, has been dealt with by Jesus. You stand forgiven. They are no longer any part of your record. Live in repentant faith toward Him. And as you function in your role as a Pastor, don’t forget to keep coming before Him, in private as well as public confession, and be renewed in that forgiveness. And then encourage your congregation to do likewise.”

## **Conclusion**

Father Ted’s message to me that day is also my message to you. I invite you to walk with me during the next five weeks of Midweek Lenten Worship. Join with me as we look at the examples we have in Scripture of how those who were closest to Jesus let Him down, failed Him, sinned against Him. Join with me as we look at how we have been just like them. And then join me in seeing and confessing how Jesus shared His grace and love with them and shares it with us today too. Join with me as we renew in our hearts and minds the reason why and how we can “Return to the LORD”, equipped to share His grace, mercy, and love with those around us who also need to “Return to the LORD”, just as badly as we do. Amen.