



Joel 2:23-32, 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18, Luke 18:9-14

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

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Wesley Steven Rowell

Today's scripture is not just a word for ancient Israel. Not just for Paul in a Roman cell. Not just for the Pharisee and the tax collector. Today's word is a word for us-for now. It's a word for every soul that's been pushed to the brink, every-body that's been told it doesn't belong, every person who knows what it feels like to live in the lion's mouth. We are living in a time when queer and trans people are still being legislated against and shamed. Black and brown bodies are still profiled, still policed, still grieving. Immigrants and refugees are treated like a threat instead of a blessing.

And too many churches, too many so-called Christian nations, have forgotten what Joel meant when God said: "I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh." All means all. Not just cis-gendered flesh. Not just privileged flesh. Not just American flesh. All flesh. Joel's prophecy came after devastation. Locusts had stripped the fields bare, the people had lost everything: harvest, hope, stability. And into that emptiness, God speaks: "Be glad, O children of Zion... I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh." This isn't a small comfort; it's a cosmic reversal. When God says, 'I will pour out,' it's abundance after famine, restoration after loss, new life after everything looked dead. And notice where the Spirit lands-not just on prophets and priests, but on sons and daughters, on old and young, on male and female slaves. That's radical inclusion. God says, "The ones you've overlooked are the ones I'm going to empower." God says, "The ones you've silenced will speak my word." That's still God's pattern today. When the church, when the nation, when the world, tries to narrow who counts, God widens the circle again.

My friend Stacy is a trans woman. She uses the word transition, but when she talks about her journey she prefers another word. Revealed. Stacy told me, "My truest self wasn't created anew; she was finally revealed." And it's glorious. That's what Joel was talking about, the Spirit poured out not to erase or replace, but to reveal what God has already planted in us. It's not about becoming someone else; it's about being unveiled as the person God dreamed before the foundations of the world. When Stacy walks into a room radiant in her truth, that's scripture in flesh and blood. That's the glory of God being revealed in human form.

Then comes Jesus with his parable. Two people go up to the temple to pray. One stands tall and polished, reciting his résumé before God: "Thank you, Lord, that I'm not like them. The sinners, the outsiders, the unclean."

The other stands far off, can't even look up, whispering through tears, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." And Jesus says: That one, the broken, honest one, went home justified. The Pharisee trusted in his performance; the tax collector trusted in God's mercy. One left full of pride, the other full of grace. THIS is the heart of the Gospel-God's Spirit fills the humble, not the haughty. God's presence pours into those who know their need.

And then there's Paul. Now, some of us know what the lion's mouth feels like. When the news debates your right to exist. When the church that raised you weaponizes Scripture against you. When your accent, or your color, or your body, or your truth becomes a target. But some of us have never faced that kind of persecution. Some of us carry a different kind of pain, hidden, polite, well-dressed suffering. The grief you don't name because it feels unearned.

The loneliness behind privilege. The exhaustion of keeping it together. Hear this, beloved: God's Spirit is being poured out on you, too. Your wounds may be invisible, but they are not ignored. Grace

rushes to the cracks in every heart, whether they were made by oppression or by silence. All flesh. All stories. All of us.

There is a woman named Gloria at a church I attended in New York City.

She was one of those women who carried herself with quiet elegance-pearls, pressed linen, never a hair out of place. When she read Scripture, she did it properly: steady, dignified, every syllable clear. But one Sunday, she stood up to read from 2nd Timothy. And as she read, something began to happen. Her voice trembled. Her posture shifted. The Spirit started moving. And suddenly it wasn't just Gloria reading, it was Paul speaking through Gloria: "I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." Her words quivered, but they burned. You could hear decades of endurance in her voice; like she knew that race, like she'd run it herself. "The Lord stood by me and gave me strength," she said, her voice breaking open, "So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom." By then she wasn't reading anymore, she was testifying. Tears streaming, voice rising, as though the Holy Spirit had reached through two thousand years and set those words on fire again. "To Him be the glory forever and ever." It was one of the most embodied moments I've ever witnessed in church: Paul's letter alive in Gloria's flesh, a living libation poured out before us. And in that moment I thought: this is what it means to be poured out and lifted up. This is resurrection power happening right before our eyes not someday, but now.

So, beloved, if you've been living in the lion's mouth, if you've been told you're too much or not enough, if you've been carrying fear, shame, exhaustion, or rage hear this good news. The Lord stands beside you. The Spirit is being poured out on you. You are not forgotten. You are not excluded. You are not disqualified. You may be poured out...but you are not empty. You may be humbled...but you will be lifted up. You may be scarred...but you are sacred. And so we praise God with Paul and Gloria: "To Him be the glory forever and ever." Because after all the attacks, after all the erasure, after all the fear and fire, God is still rescuing. God is still pouring out. God is still lifting up the broken and breathing life into dry bones. And God will get the glory, not through the powerful, but through the faithful. Through those who've been told they don't belong, and yet still dare to believe they are beloved. If you've been hiding in the shadows, if you've been wondering whether there's still a place for you in God's story, this is your invitation: Come. Come to this Table and receive the Spirit again. Come to this Table and be revealed again. Come to this Table and remember that God is not done writing your story.

"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." TO GOD be the glory forever and ever and ever.

Amen

