

**The Lessons Appointed for
Use on the
Sunday closest to October 26**



**Proper 25
Year C
RCL**

Track 1

or

Track 2

Joel 2:23-32
Psalm 65
2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18
Luke 18:9-14

Jeremiah 14:7-10,19-22
Psalm 84:1-6
2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18
Luke 18:9-14

The Collect

The Collect

Almighty and everlasting God, increase in us the gifts of faith, hope, and charity; and, that we may obtain what you promise, make us love what you command; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns

with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and
ever. *Amen.*

Joel 2:23-32

O children of Zion, be glad
and rejoice in the LORD your God;
for he has given the early rain for your vindication,
he has poured down for you abundant rain,
the early and the later rain, as before.
The threshing floors shall be full of grain,
the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.
I will repay you for the years
that the swarming locust has eaten,
the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter,
my great army, which I sent against you.
You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied,
and praise the name of the LORD your God,
who has dealt wondrously with you.
And my people shall never again be put to shame.
You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel,
and that I, the LORD, am your God and there is no
other.
And my people shall never again
be put to shame.
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.

I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth,
blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be
turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the
great and terrible day of the LORD comes. Then every-
one who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved;
for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those
who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the sur-
vivors shall be those whom the LORD calls.

Psalm 65

Te decet hymnus

- 1 you are to be praised, O God, in Zion; *
to you shall vows be performed in Jerusalem.
- 2 To you that hear prayer shall all flesh come, *
because of their transgressions.
- 3 Our sins are stronger than we are, *
but you will blot them out.
- 4 Happy are they whom you choose
and draw to your courts to dwell there! *
they will be satisfied by the beauty of your house,
by the holiness of your temple.
- 5 Awesome things will you show us in your righteous-
ness,
O God of our salvation, *
O Hope of all the ends of the earth
and of the seas that are far away.
- 6 You make fast the mountains by your power; *
they are girded about with might.
- 7 You still the roaring of the seas, *
the roaring of their waves,
and the clamor of the peoples.

- 8 Those who dwell at the ends of the earth will tremble
at your marvelous signs; *
you make the dawn and the dusk to sing for joy.
- 9 You visit the earth and water it abundantly;
you make it very plenteous; *
the river of God is full of water.
- 10 You prepare the grain, *
for so you provide for the earth.
- 11 You drench the furrows and smooth out the ridges; *
with heavy rain you soften the ground and bless its
increase.
- 12 You crown the year with your goodness, *
and your paths overflow with plenty.
- 13 May the fields of the wilderness be rich for grazing,
*
and the hills be clothed with joy.
- 14 May the meadows cover themselves with flocks,
and the valleys cloak themselves with grain; *
let them shout for joy and sing.

Jeremiah 14:7-10,19-22

Although our iniquities testify against us,
act, O LORD, for your name's sake;
our apostasies indeed are many,
and we have sinned against you.

O hope of Israel,
its savior in time of trouble,
why should you be like a stranger in the land,
like a traveler turning aside for the night?
Why should you be like someone confused,
like a mighty warrior who cannot give help?
Yet you, O LORD, are in the midst of us,
and we are called by your name;
do not forsake us!

Thus says the LORD concerning this people:
Truly they have loved to wander,
they have not restrained their feet;
therefore the LORD does not accept them,
now he will remember their iniquity
and punish their sins.

Have you completely rejected Judah?
Does your heart loathe Zion?

Why have you struck us down
so that there is no healing for us?
We look for peace, but find no good;
for a time of healing, but there is terror instead.
We acknowledge our wickedness, O LORD,
the iniquity of our ancestors,
for we have sinned against you.
Do not spurn us, for your name's sake;
do not dishonor your glorious throne;
remember and do not break your covenant with us.
Can any idols of the nations bring rain?
Or can the heavens give showers?
Is it not you, O LORD our God?
We set our hope on you,
for it is you who do all this.

Psalm 84:1-6

Quam dilecta!

- 1 HOW dear to me is your dwelling, O LORD of hosts! *
My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the
LORD;
my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God.
- 2 The sparrow has found her a house
and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young;
*
by the side of your altars, O LORD of hosts,
my King and my God.
- 3 Happy are they who dwell in your house! *
they will always be praising you.
- 4 Happy are the people whose strength is in you! *
whose hearts are set on the pilgrims' way.
- 5 Those who go through the desolate valley will find it
a place of springs, *
for the early rains have covered it with pools of water.
- 6 They will climb from height to height, *
and the God of gods will reveal himself in Zion.

2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18

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. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

At my first defense no one came to my support, but all deserted me. May it not be counted against them! But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heav-

only kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever.

Amen.

Luke 18:9-14

Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

SERMON

Pharisees get a bad rep in the New Testament. Every time the word is mentioned, we mentally stick a black hat on the poor guy's head. That is not how a Pharisee would have been seen by the original readers of Luke's account, though. A Pharisee in Luke's time was one who dedicated his entire life to a scrupulous pursuit of the Law of God. I saw a documentary once about a Jewish winery. They were producing kosher wine. The presenter was standing by a pipe and said that he had to be careful not to touch the pipe, through which the grape juice was running, because, had he done so, the winery would have to be stopped, the juice discarded, and the pipe disassembled and purified. When he finished speaking, they kept the camera on as a worker carefully lead him away from the pipe.

That's how you should think about Pharisees — people who took the Law very, very seriously, and who were trying to live scrupulously within its confines. So, for Luke's readers, the Pharisee would be seen as the guy that was trying very, very hard to do exactly what God told his Chosen People to do.

The tax collector, on the other hand, would have been seen by the people to whom Jesus was speaking as a state-sponsored sneak thief. He collected taxes for the Romans, which was bad enough, but the system permitted him to keep anything he collected above an amount the Romans demanded of him. That means that he fed and clothed his family by taking too much tax from those from whom he collected, paying the correct amount to the Romans, then pocketing the rest. It was institutionalized corruption by a foreign occupying army.

The tax collector is a bad guy and knows he is a bad guy, and comes to the Lord ashamed. Jesus tells us that the tax collector goes to his home

“justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Think how that message played out to Jesus' listeners. The Pharisee who has done everything for the church and will continue to do everything for the church is not justified, and the tax collector who is going to go back and do some more tax collecting is?

Once again, Jesus has put a pretty problem before us. Jesus starts with the good guy, the Pharisee, and the bad guy, the tax collector, and then reverses their roles. But why, precisely, is the prayer of the Pharisee wrong, and why, precisely, is the prayer of the tax collector right? Will not the Pharisee leave and continue in his efforts to

abide by the law of God, and will not the tax collector leave and continue to live from the collection of taxes? What is Jesus teaching? It's important to know who his audience was:

Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.

Now...do we know anybody like that? Do we ever run into any "Holier-than-thou" folks? Well....yes. I'm afraid we're all guilty, though we don't like to admit it. Something there is within us — a nagging need, perhaps given form and voice through many Saturday afternoons at the Paramount theater — to see God's children through the lens of cops and robbers — good guys and bad guys. Something there is within us that seeks to measure our righteousness against our judgment of the sins of others. Something there is within us that be-

believes that for our own righteousness to shine, we must paint those around us in the darkest of colors. Jesus is telling us that we cannot shine by extinguishing the candles of others. This is not a happy thought for any of us.

You see, church, God's mercy is freely given to all who ask, but to ask God for His mercy, you first have to know that you are in need of it. Preaching about sin fell out of vogue forty years ago. It's much more in fashion to preach about God's great love than God's great mercy but Jesus is speaking about justification, mercy and confession. We have to face it. You can't experience God's forgiveness unless you first confess that you are in need of it. "I'm good, God, but forgive me for whatever I might have done that wasn't perfect" won't do it, church.

The Pharisee doesn't confess his sins — instead, he compares himself to the tax collector and gives thanks

to God that he's not as bad as the tax collector. It's exactly the situation of the old joke about two guys running from a bear. One says, "We're never going to outrun the bear." The other says, "I don't have to outrun the bear. I just have to outrun you." It's not a question of being the best of a bad lot. It is a question of living into God's mercy, by knowing that we need it and turning to God to confess our need. We cannot experience God's forgiveness by trying to bamboozle God. God is not bamboozable. He knows your sins. And He knows that it won't get any better until you confess it. What we're looking for here is a personal acknowledgement that we know them, too.

It is ultimately a question of how we measure ourselves. Do we measure ourselves against God's instructions, or against what we perceive to be the shortcomings of our brothers and sisters? If we're being holier-

than-thou about the things we think our brothers and sisters have failed at, we are not focused on God's mercy. If we focus on God's grace and love for each of us, even though we disappoint Him constantly, it should knock the wind, and a lot of the silliness, out of us.

From that realization, we can confess "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" That confession, church, is the beginning of a new walk with God. If I admit that I am a sinner as well, then I ally myself with my brothers and sisters, and can petition God for restoration.

The Pharisee in Jesus' story did no wrong in focusing his attention on God's Law. The Covenant was given to the Jews, and he was doing his best to follow faithfully the demands of that Covenant. That wasn't the problem. The problem was that he had decided to appropriate God's role and become his own judge of himself. To nobody's surprise, he found himself innocent of wrong-

doing. This is where we get ourselves into the most trouble with our own holier-than-thou attitudes. We are not honest judges of ourselves, and we are not honest judges of our brothers and sisters. We're conflicted. We're dishonest with ourselves and with each other. We want to see everybody in terms of roles we have assigned to them — good guy, bad guy, cop, robber, butcher, baker, candlestick maker. It doesn't matter which roles we assign to whom. We're wrong when we do it because we are dishonest judges. And the only response we can make when we realize what we are doing is, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner!"

Jesus ended this example story with the comment:

I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.

This is the real heart of the matter. The Pharisee

thought he could pursue justification in the eyes of God by outrunning the tax collector. The tax collector recognized that justification between us and God comes from God, not from our own evaluation of our personal righteousness.

This is what makes Christianity so radical in the history of the world. We understand that God pursues us. It's not a question of doing the right things or being "good enough", and certainly not a matter of being a better person than our neighbor, be he tax collector or cleric. It is a matter of turning and allowing God to catch us, or, rather, to turn and realize that we are His to begin with.

It is our relationship with God which should inform our relationship with our brothers and sisters. We cannot count our lives as righteous by outrunning our brothers and sisters. We must outrun the bear of our

own failures to live into the relationship with God which is offered to us. That relationship begins with an honest humbling of our prideful selves. We have to admit that God is God and we are not. God exalts and God judges. That's not an easy thing to accept, for any of us.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

Everybody wants to be the star of their own show.

Everybody wants to be assured that they are the good guys. At the same time, living as a Christian instructs us that we are not the star of our own shows — we are all bit players in a drama beyond our grasp, and we are not the good guys — we stand in need of God's grace. It's humbling, church. It's meant to be.

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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