

**BGCW2/17/10 Ash Wednesday**, Joel 2:1-2, 12-17, 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

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the lumber from it began swirling in all directions. The tornado, an F-4, white in color at first had dropped directly on top of the barn and was headed down our road toward me. I ran into the house and screamed for my wife and kids to get to the basement. The chaos that occurred outside and inside makes for a long and interesting story which I will not tell here. But for 20 minutes, we huddled in the corner of the basement in sheer terror until the tornado passed. Our son, Heath was almost 4 at the time, and he still shivers in fear over that storm to this day. Indeed like in Joel, the day of the LORD had come, “a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness!” That tornado marched right through our neighborhood like a destructive army.

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Unfortunately, it is a message relevant to us today as we will hear in this story. “One college professor presented his class syllabus on the first day of

the new semester. He pointed out that there were three papers to be written during the term, and he showed on which days those assignments had to be handed in. He said that these dates were firmly fixed, and that no student should presume that the deadline did not apply to her or him. He asked if the students were clear about this, and all heads nodded.

When the first deadline arrived, all but one student turned in their papers. The one student went to the professor's office and pleaded for more time — just a single day! The student spoke of illness and hardships which had prevented him from completing the assignment, but all the research was finished, and a few more hours would allow the paper to be ready. The professor relented, and granted a one-day extension without penalty. The student was extremely grateful, and sent a note thanking the professor profusely.

When the second deadline arrived, three papers were missing from the pile of student productions. The student who had previously asked for an extension was back, and so were two others. As before, all the reasons expressed for failure to complete the assignment were touching and moving and tear-jerking, and the professor again allowed some latitude. The deadline was set aside, and the papers were required by the end of the week. A veritable chorus of praise filled the professor's small office, and blessings were heaped upon him.

When the third due date arrived, the professor was inundated with requests for extensions. Nearly a quarter of the class begged for more time — many other assignments and tests were due, many books still needed to be read, much work was required this late in the semester. But this time the professor held firm. No extensions were to be given. Grades would be

marked lower for tardiness. Stunned silence filled the classroom.

The large delegation that met the professor in the hallway near his office was very vocal in their anger. ‘You can’t do this to us! It isn’t fair!’ ‘What isn’t fair?’ asked the professor. ‘At the beginning of the term you knew the due date of each paper and you agreed to turn in your work at those times.’ The students protested, ‘But you let so-and-so have extensions. You can’t tell us now that we can’t have a few extra days.’

‘Maybe you are right,’ said the professor. He opened his grade book and made a rather public subtraction from the grades given to the four formerly late papers. Each of those students, now also in this group, protested loudly. ‘You can’t do that, professor! That’s not fair!’

‘What’s not fair?’ asked the professor, ‘Justice or mercy?’ The question blanketed them heavily as each student silently slipped away. And the professor, when he reported the incident to others, he simply concluded (paraphrasing Henry Higgins from *My Fair Lady*), ‘They’d grown accustomed to my grace!’ We easily grow accustomed to God’s grace” and end up taking it in vain like the people of Israel did in the time of Joel; and as Paul warned the church in Corinth not to do.

One reason we have Ash Wednesday services is to remind us not to take God’s grace for granted. “We need to become ‘Wowed!’ again by the amazing thing that happens when God chooses to start over in love toward us, even after the ‘great syllabus’”—the law of God “demands a divine reckoning. No partnership can stretch forever to cover bad behavior or infidelity. Judgment day invariably comes.”

“Yet the prophecy of Joel carries with it more than warnings of God’s grim reaping. In the divine plan, justice is always wedded to mercy. The prophet,

therefore, includes a call to a day of fasting, a solemn assembly in which hearts are turned and consciences cleansed before the Holy One. While the actual response of the people in Joel's day is unknown, the prophet ends his short messages with scenes of refuge and pledges of a world renewed. This is not only a theological promise for the future of humankind; it is also the hope we cling to when our relationships to God and others wander through rough places. God will guard the hearts that trust him even in the difficult times. Those who hear the warnings of a prophet like Joel can also be surprised by the miracle of God's care, even when he is angry with us."

Quotes from "Emphasis," Feb. 2007

We learn more about the miracle of God's care, even when he is angry with us in II Corinthians. God comes to us, just as we are, sins, warts and all, in Jesus Christ to reconcile us to him. God wants to be reconciled to us and us to him. He wants to call back his army of destruction, restore the land and the people terrorized by tornadic storms caused by human sin. In his death, Jesus paid the price so reconciliation could occur. From the moment of Christ's death, everyone, everyone"—including sinners like you and me, "has value "The most basic fact for Christians is this: People have value because Christ has died for them. People, whoever they are, whether they have responded to Christ or not are treasured by God." This is the miracle of God's care, even when he is angry with us.

The question in Joel's day and for us today is how will we respond to this grace and offer of reconciliation? Will we treasure what God has done for us by turning from sin and turning back to God? Will we let this greatest of love grow in our hearts so that the desires of our hearts be that which God desires of us? Will we respond in kind to the God who sacrificed his whole

heart in Jesus Christ to reconcile us to him?

And, furthermore, will we extend this treasure to others? Will we reconcile to others with whom we despise and hold grudges? “We often want to establish hurdles that others must jump before we will grant them the value God has granted us. They must think the way we do, act the way we do, vote the way we do, land on our issues the way we want them to—and the list could go on and on. No, each person's value has already been established by Christ's death for them, not by their response to that death, and certainly not by our attempts to reach out to them. “Reconciliation is at the heart of life's business. If the most important single factor about any of our lives is God's having reconciled us to God's very self, then the proper celebration of our reconciliation is to share it with others by fostering reconciliation and atonement wherever and whenever we can.” Lent is a good time to do what God has so graciously done for us. Let us be reconciled to one another. [TNIBC](#), Vol.VII, pg.99.

In closing, let us be reminded of and heed the words of Joel, “Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.” Thanks be to God!

Please turn in your Bibles to the Old Testament Lesson in Joel 2:1-2, 12-17. Joel was written to warn the people of Israel that they were about to be severely punished by God for their sins, unless they sincerely repented by changing their ways of living.

Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near- a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness spread upon the mountains a great and powerful army comes; their like has never been from of old, nor will be again after them in ages to come.

12 Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;

13 rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.

14 Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD, your God?

15 Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly;

16 gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her canopy.

17 Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep. Let them say, "Spare your people, O LORD, and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, 'Where is their God?' " The Word of the Lord.

Please turn in your bibles to the Epistle Lesson in 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10. Paul had royally chewed out the early church in Corinth for their petty bickering, abuse of the Lord's supper, sexual misconduct and the judgmentalism they had toward one another and his ministry. Some elders from that church came to Paul where he lived in Ephesus asking for instruction on how to make things right. Tonight we will hear just a portion of Paul's very helpful response.

...we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 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. 1 As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. 2 For he says, "At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you." See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! 3 We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, 4 but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, 5 beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; 6 by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, 7 truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; 8 in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; 9 as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see--we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; 10 as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything. The Word of the Lord.

First Presbyterian Church

Cheyenne, Wyoming

February 17, 2010

Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: Punishment and Reconciliation

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