

## “Do This”

Luke 10:25-28; Joel 2:23-32 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – October 30, 2022

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our faith might be renewed to persevere being your people, seeking justice. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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As you know, we've been exploring the 12 “minor” prophets this fall in Bible Study. I want to thank Julie & Mandy, and Renee & Steve, and Marianna, and of course, Pastor Tesa, for the work they're putting in to introduce us to each of these books, many of which don't often get much attention. Now obviously, one of the reasons we can study all twelve of them in one fall course is that all of these books are pretty short, especially in comparison to the three “major” prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. But it also makes sense because the themes of the prophets are pretty consistent across the twelve books. Similar language and imagery is used throughout the Book of the Twelve.

And yes, these books are part of why prophets have a reputation for being grumpy, though Jeremiah gets most of the blame for that. But if we look at our two scripture readings today, we'll see that it's no wonder they're a little cranky. You would be too if you kept telling folks how to fix their problems and they kept ignoring all your advice!

Another thing we've been discovering this fall is the dishonesty of that stereotype of the “Old Testament God” as wrathful, in comparison with a “New

Testament God” who is loving and merciful. This idea is as false as it is simplistic.

First of all, the God in the Hebrew scriptures is the same God as the One in the New Testament. Secondly, the portrayals of God in both parts of our Bible are varied and complex, not one-dimensional as this prejudice would suggest. And thirdly, as we’ve noted throughout our study and see today in the passage from Joel, God is frequently portrayed as generous, compassionate and forgiving in the Hebrew scriptures. Not only is this “Old Testament versus New Testament” God thing not true; in these days of heightened antisemitism and violence against our Jewish neighbors, such ideas contribute to a narrative that casts Jews as threatening outsiders, rather than friends and fellow citizens. We must reject such characterizations, and our own Bible study is a good place to start.

What’s ironic about trying to contrast the Old Testament with the New Testament is just how clearly our scripture lessons this morning show that the gospels are a continuation of the holy scrolls Jesus read in the synagogue himself. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” the lawyer asks. And Jesus doesn’t offer him some revolutionary, never-before-thought-of revelation; he asks him what he has read in the law. Jesus didn’t invent “Love God and love your neighbor”; it had been part of the Jewish scriptures and ethos for centuries. The lawyer knew this. But he presented Jesus with the same problem so many of our prophets faced: he wanted to pretend it was more complicated than it is. Ever the lawyer, he was looking for a loophole. I can just see the prophets watching Jesus from heaven, shaking their heads.

The prophet Joel is casting a vision to the people of Judah after a devastating plague of locusts has destroyed everything in their fields. He reminds them that God wants them to flourish, to have plenty to eat and know that they are deeply loved. And like many of his colleagues across the centuries of exile and occupation, he turns to the concept of “the Day of the Lord,” to explain what it would look like when God sets things aright. Living as citizens of an empire as we do, it is likely hard for us to relate to the relief of being promised that God’s people “shall never again be put to shame.” But Jesus’ audience, living under Roman occupation, would have understood the glory of that immediately, in their bodies and their souls.

The part of the vision here that is perhaps easier for us to connect to are those lines you probably recognized from elsewhere. “I will pour out my spirit on all flesh,” Joel has God saying, words that we recall from the Pentecost story when Peter quotes them to explain what was happening as the disciples were overcome with the Holy Spirit and began evangelizing in the many languages of the people living in Jerusalem.

The idea here – or at least part of it – is that everyone will finally get it. The prophets won’t have to repeat themselves over and over. Jesus won’t have to answer tedious, gotcha questions anymore. People won’t waste their breath trying to justify their behaviors that are less than loving. On the great and terrific Day of the Lord, we’ll just get it; everyone will prophesy. Everyone will know that loving God with all that we have and all that we are is the same thing as loving our neighbors as ourselves, and that this is the Way that leads to abundant life, and we’ll stop trying to get out of

it. It almost makes me wonder if Joel is saying that by living out the commandment to love God and love our neighbors, that is how we call upon the name of the Lord for salvation.

Is it really that hard? Do we have to make it more complicated than that? We have a standard by which to measure every choice. That standard is love. No distinctions of race or gender identity or national origin or religious belief or sexual orientation may alter this standard. No distance can make someone not our neighbor. No need can disqualify us from offering or receiving mercy and care. “Do this, and you will live,” Jesus says. “Someday,” Joel says, “someday, everyone is gonna get it.” We’re going to stop making excuses and insisting on asking clarifying questions and looking for loopholes. Some day.

Could it be this day? Could it be every day? Turns out Joel was prophesying to human beings. And Jesus was teaching human beings. And we are, human beings, trying to learn these lessons still. Every day, we must re-dedicate ourselves to learning to love God and love our neighbors, and to understanding how fine the line between those two things is. As the theologian Marcus Borg pointed out, to be in a relationship with someone, to care about and love someone, is to care about what they care about. So if we are to love God, we must love God’s people, even the ones we don’t like. We are to love God’s people across barriers of ethnicity and language and tradition and socioeconomic status. If we are to love God, we are to ensure that none of God’s people are ever put to shame, whether by human trafficking or the

devastations of climate change or laws that single children out at school when they're just trying to use the bathroom. If we are to love God, we must listen for the prophecies coming from all people, for God's truths are being shared, if we have ears to hear. The gospel of love is being proclaimed, by our children and so many other neighbors, many of whom have given up on the church as an institution interested in hearing them. "Do this, and you will live," says Jesus. "Love the Lord your God, with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." Someday, we're gonna get it. May this be the day, the first of many days, when all God's people proclaim love, love, and more love! Hallelujah and Amen!