

Joel: With All Your Heart
Sermon 5-19-19
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Joel 2:12-18

¹²Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; ¹³rend 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. ¹⁴Who 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? ¹⁵Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; ¹⁶gather 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. ¹⁷Between 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?'"

¹⁸Then the LORD became jealous for his land, and had pity on his people.

Message:

Imagine with me a new reality for the people of Providence. I'm not talking about Providence as an organization, but for each one to experience individually and corporately. Imagine that you come to a church every Sunday morning and you experience the power of the Holy Spirit. Every time you come, you can feel that God is in the room. You sense energy and a powerful movement of the Spirit. Imagine that this isn't just pleasurable, but it moves you so deeply that you change the way you live. When you go home and see your neighbor outside doing yardwork or getting ready to get in the car to their next activity, you can't help but go up to him and tell him about Jesus. You are so passionate and moved by the Spirit that you have no care what he or she thinks about you or if they think you're crazy, you have to tell them about Jesus. You are moved to boldness like the apostles. Imagine a reality where every single Sunday 3 or 4 people are coming to faith in Jesus Christ for the first time. Imagine that every time you look at the scriptures you are filled with new insight and a new understanding of God's work in your life and in the church. Imagine a church that isn't just about serving you, but about getting into the hard issues of our community. We may hear that a school is struggling to find teachers aides, we plug in. We may hear that kids don't have a place to go after school before mom and dad get home from work, so we

provide a place for them to come, do homework and have a nice hot meal. Imagine that we don't just watch our neighbor struggle with that yard project, but we jump in with him or her and help them complete their goal. And imagine that through all these efforts, the Kingdom of God grows. Not because we need more butts in the seats on Sunday morning, but we are exuding with passion and life as a church. Imagine that as we read the scriptures we are driven to the same depth in our prayer life as the apostles that you begin to see and experience signs and wonders. Imagine that when we have prayer gatherings it's not something people begrudgingly attend, but it's more exciting and thrilling than watching the Philadelphia Eagles. That we are willingly giving up our passion for the Eagles because our passion for our God is greater. Imagine a church that can't get enough of studying God's word. Houses that host Bible Studies are overwhelmed by the turn out that our living rooms can't contain the hunger from people to know God more through the Word of God. Imagine every single Sunday that we're baptizing at least one or two new believers in Christ. Imagine our parking lots overwhelming full and our sanctuary so full of people, that we have to use our fellowship area to catch the overflow. Imagine a people that can't get enough of Jesus. That is a church that is truly alive in Christ. A church that knows the power and salvation of the resurrection. Later in the Book of Joel, we'll get there more in depth next week, God says, "...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 the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit." This picture that I painted and God paints in Joel, I know that many of you want this for the church. You deeply desire this for the church, but there is a catch. I hate to break it to you, but there is a catch. We can't have salvation, we can't have redemption, we can't have dreams and visions until we are willing to die and to repent. Let's be honest, none of us likes the "death" reality that I painted the other week. I don't like it. But it doesn't make it any less true. We want salvation and redemption as a church, but we don't want to pay the cost of admission. I'm sorry, you can't have it both ways. You can't have redemption and avoid death. Many of you know this on a personal level. When you professed Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, you had to put to death those former ways in order to receive new life in Jesus Christ. You had to repent.

Remember what I talked about the other week, Joel calls the people to put on "sackcloth." It's a symbolic gesture used in a few different parts of the Old Testament. If you recall, "sackcloth" has a double-meaning. It means to grieve AND to repent. In verses 12 and 13, Joel says, "¹²Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; ¹³rend 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.” “...return to me...” Joel is saying that God wants redemption for His people, but He can't give it to them if they won't give Him their heart. “...with ALL your heart...” Not just some of your heart. So you can't say, “Well...God if I can't just keep this one thing over here that I love, then we have a deal.” This is not up for negotiation. You have to give God “...ALL your heart...” “...with fasting...” God doesn't just want to hear you utter sweet words, He wants to see commitment and sacrifice. That you're willing to give up your hunger for food for more of God. “...with weeping...” God wants you to cry out to Him and begin your reliance upon Him today. “...with mourning...” express your sorrow and grief upon the present circumstances. Now, here is where it goes next level in faith, “...rend your hearts and not your clothing.” In the ancient world people would tear their clothes in grief. Even in the passage in Acts that we studied the other week in Bible Study, Paul tears his clothes in grief that after performing a miracle, the Gentile Greeks believe that Paul is Zeus. They don't get it. But when people would tear their clothing it sometimes was used as a show. They wanted to manipulate people and didn't have good intentions. God is saying through Joel, “I don't care about your show, I want your heart.” “...rend your hearts...” is another way of saying “Repent!!” “Return to me...” “Return to the Lord...” are other ways of saying “Repent!!” Be reconciled with God.

Let's clarify what repentance is and it isn't. Repentance is not saying your sorry. Repentance is not confession. You can say “sorry” for being caught, but have no remorse. A convict can confess that they did something wrong. They can confess that they violated the law, but it doesn't mean that they have a changed heart. When a convict leaves the prison life, this is the challenging question, “Did they change? Are they going to do it again?” So when we talk about repentance, God isn't interested in lip service or some warped attempt to manipulate Him to get what you want. God knows your heart. God knows my heart. God wants heart change. Heart change is truly repentance. And He even promises some good news if you do. “Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.”

As I've been reflecting on my previous sermon and the hard news that I broke of “death” for Providence, the Lord placed a scripture on my heart that has been my prayer over the past two weeks. It comes from 2 Corinthians 7:9-10, “Now I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because your grief led to repentance; for you felt a godly grief, so that you were not harmed in any way by us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death.” And by “death,” Paul is referring to eternal death, annihilation or damnation. The “grief” Paul is talking about is the grief he caused in his previous letter. He knew that his words in 1 Corinthians were harsh. He didn't know how it was going to turn out. His hope is that it

would lead to repentance and lead to salvation. I know that to mention the “death” of Providence is to talk about something that is harsh in it’s own nature no matter how pretty I may try to make it sound. My prayer for us is that the grief we experienced and contemplated would lead us to repentance that would lead us to salvation. To redemption. Godly grief and repentance leads to salvation. Earthly grief leads to despair. In her reflection on our Joel passage, Biblical Scholar Elizabeth Achtemeier says this, “In Joel, Judah has no hope of a future, unless that future be given by God. It is no different for us. Our lives depend on our response to this call for penitence and trust... Finally, we repent and trust in Christ, not to save our own skins, but because we know that God’s work in us will magnify the Lord’s glory throughout the earth. Judah’s salvation was a glorification of the power and love of the God who continually rescued the people; we know from the Scriptures that God is a great God because of what the Lord did in Israel’s life. So, too, will all peoples know how great our Lord is by what God does in our lives. By the Lord’s work alone the church becomes the city set on the hill and the light shining in the darkness of this sinful world.” If we trust in this process of grief and repentance with God, what salvation and redemption will God bring? Imagine how God would be glorified and how we would literally be a city on this hill shining the light in the darkness of this world.

Now, some of you are going to fight in opposition of this death reality. I understand why you would. No one likes death and we want to cherish all that we’ve built. I would love to see that fight in you. I would love to see you fight passionately for God’s church. But be clear about what you’re fighting for. Are you fighting to stay alive or are you fighting to live? Do you hear the difference? There is a big difference between fighting to just stay alive and actually living life abundantly. If you’re fighting because you want to stay alive, that’s not the same as living. Fighting to merely stay alive until the money runs out and there are two people left is not living in Christ Jesus. How can we define this fight within us? Whether it’s a fight to stay alive or a fight to live? I think many of you know the passage in Revelations 3. A very simple way to define your fight is to answer this question, is Providence Church hot or cold? If you say, “neither,” that’s not good news. “Neither” is fighting to stay alive, but that’s not living. For our Revelations passage speaks very negatively of this. “So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth.” Some of you say, “...but we’re not dead yet.” And you’re right, you’re not. You’re not cold yet. But neither are you hot. If you wait until you have two people left and no money, you won’t have the same redemptive options that you have before you today. In fact, there will only be one option for cold and dead people, shut the doors and relinquish the property. This is a critical point to decide. Not that you have to make that decision today. But it’s a critical season to decide. And I believe God is

giving us the grace at this juncture to have the opportunity to decide how we end and to discern the redemptive options that can happen thereafter.

If you want to fight for this church and go after revitalization, praise the Lord. But, again, count the cost. Just as Joel called the people to “fast” to convey their commitment to change, you too are going to have to sacrifice a lot to turn this church around. And that sacrifice is going to have to be sacrifice that isn’t just sustained for a month or two, but possibly for years. Are you prepared for that? I would love nothing more than to be wrong. I would love nothing more than to see our church in a year and half booming with life. I will happily eat crow on what I’ve said if that happens. If my sermon the other week caused you to pray more, praise the Lord. If my sermon the other week caused you to dig into the Word of God more, praise the Lord. If it caused you to not only grieve, but to repent, praise the Lord. If it caused you to dream of different reality and a different church than we have today, then praise the Lord. That same deep relationship that you’ve had with the Lord over the past two weeks in response to my previous message, that’s the same type of deep relationship you’re going to need to sustain with the Lord if you want revitalization. It’s going to take deep commitment not just in word, but in action if you want to revitalize this church.

But know that revitalization isn’t the only redemptive action you could take. The elders may share some those other redemptive options in the Congregational Business Meeting following this service. But all of the options require death. You can’t avoid or skirt it. It requires us getting on our knees, grieving where we’re at, repenting and receiving whatever redemptive reality God wants to provide. Another way of interpreting repentance is answering this question, “What are you willing to give up for salvation/redemption?” What are you willing to give up to see His Kingdom come?

The Lord has been pouring a lot of scripture into me over the past two weeks. Let me share a few. I would encourage you to read all of Isaiah 43, but for the sake of time, I will share verses 18-20, “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.” I know some of the redemptive options here are going to trigger negative past memories for you all, but “do not remember the former things or consider the things of old.” We’re not dealing with yesterday, we’re dealing with today. Don’t let your woundedness from previous experiences cloud your judgment and discernment of the new thing that God is doing today. If you have a grudge or beef about something, address it or let it go. God is doing a new thing through our death and

repentance. God will redeem his people and we will declare His praise. In fact, our passage in Joel says this to a degree. In the last verse Joel says, “¹⁸Then the LORD became jealous for his land, and had pity on his people.” So the Hebrew word for “jealous” can also mean “zealous.” “¹⁸Then the LORD became zealous for his land, and had pity on his people.” Upon their grief and repentance, God came with zealousness, passion, for His people and His land. God came with purpose and meaning. Providence Church, even though we may die, I believe God is zealous for you all and wants to give you a renewed sense of purpose and meaning. There can even be purpose and meaning in the face of death and beyond death. The church is the people of God saved by the power of God for the purposes of God. The church is the people of God saved by the power of God for the purposes of God.

God wants to redeem you Providence. There are plenty of us who are surprised by God’s timing. In most cases, if we’re honest, we don’t like it. We tend to become fearful of our circumstances because it seems as if it’s too late for God to make a way. However, this assumption is based on *our* inability to make huge transformations at the last minute. What I’ve brought before you is not based in fear of our circumstances, but is based on faith that God wants to redeem you. You may not see it this way, but I am fighting for you. I am fighting for life abundantly in Christ Jesus. I’m fight for your honor. Anything is possible with God. I shared this passage on Friday at Ken’s graveside on Romans 14:7-9, “We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.” Whatever happens, let’s give it to the Lord. Whether we live or die, it’s not ours. It’s the Lords. Just a few more passages. I encourage you to read all of Lamentations 3 because it speaks to the breadth of our experience right now, but the only place that God speaks in all of Lamentations is in chapter 3, verse 57, “You came near when I called on you; you said, ‘Do not fear!’” Do not fear Providence, God has you. God will redeem this situation. Likewise, hear this from Joshua 1:7-9, “Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go. This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful. I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.” Providence Church, I know you want redemption, you want that positive reality that I painted and you want to flee from this grief, but I’m

calling you to a number of things. Do not fear. Trust in the Lord. Be strong and courageous. And especially now, when it counts the most, repent. Joel didn't name any specific sin and so I won't either, but search your heart and search for the sins of Providence and repent them with rendered and changed hearts. But I will name my sin before you. The bold words I shared with you the other week, I should have been more blunt with the elders. I tried multiple times to have this difficult conversation with them in gentle ways, but I probably wasn't blunt enough. So I didn't live out Matthew 18 very well. And for that, I ask your forgiveness. I should have been more blunt with the elders before delivering that message. If our grief leads us to repentance, we will find salvation in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. God will redeem the people of Providence. I hope that we can find salvation through repentance together. Amen.