

I'm going to borrow an image this morning from the music of the seventies, from Carole King. Carole King has been one of those people who have spoken into my soul across time. Her music and lyrics gave my teenage heart a voice. Her music and lyrics continue to speak to me today. This image comes from the first album of hers I ever owned. It is called Tapestry. The title song from that album goes like this: "My life has been a tapestry of rich and royal hues, an everlasting vision of the ever-changing view. A wondrous woven magic in bits of blue and gold. A tapestry to feel and see, impossible to hold."

I love the image of life as a tapestry. And I want to transfer that image this morning onto the Holy Bible because it, too, is a tapestry. It is a tapestry, like the song suggests that holds the **everlasting** image of God amid the ever-changing view of our world. The images in the Bible's tapestry are in the individual stories in scripture; stories like the story of Adam and Eve, Noah's Ark, Jacob's ladder and the story of Jesus.

Today we are working with a series of images that stretches from the time of the prophets, who wrote long before Jesus, through to the time after Jesus' resurrection. Lets think of this series of images as a single but instructive section in the overall tapestry of Christianity. It's a significant section that contains images that link the reading from Joel, Paul and Luke together with the Psalm.

The images from scripture were the basis of faith in the Hebrew tradition. Joel and the other Hebrew prophets showed in their words that their experience with God was an intimate one. They believed that God was close by, not separated from creation by an insurmountable distance. Joel and the other prophets used images

from our natural world to help describe how God participates in our world. In the reading from this morning, Joel says, “for (God) has given the early rain for your vindication, he has poured down for you abundant rain.... praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you.” Later in that same passage, Joel portrays God’s gift of the Holy Spirit as pouring down. He speaks for God, which is what a prophet does, saying, “I will pour out my spirit on all flesh.” If you think that sounds a lot like Pentecost, when the spirit comes rushing in like a violent wind on the assembly of the faithful, you are right. This passage is quoted by the apostle Peter in Acts 2 to describe the in-breaking of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the church.

The image of pouring out is referenced in the Psalm for today, too. It says of God, “You visit the earth and water it abundantly; you make it very plenteous; the river of God is full of water.” Can’t you picture exactly what Joel and the psalmist had in mind? Like water falling out from the heavens, God’s Holy Spirit pours down for *all of creation* to receive; including you and me! Even when the skies are dark, in the earth’s atmosphere and in our spirits, God is there pouring down his Spirit so that we might have abundant life. God’s Spirit was pouring out at the temple in Jerusalem when the Pharisee and the tax collector ventured in for prayer.

Here’s how the scripture portrays it, “Jesus told a parable to some who trusted themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and one a tax collector.”” Let’s take a look at all the information that is packed into that one sentence. First, we notice that there are two people who enter the temple. These were two people who could not be further apart in terms of their social status. The Pharisee was one who would have

been recognized in the first century as highly respected for his sense of duty and sense of piety. This was someone who fastidiously kept to the ten commandments as well as all of the hundreds of other laws that the Hebrew culture had prescribed for themselves. He kept himself very busy maintaining his religious purity AND he looked askance at anyone who did otherwise. The Pharisee thought very highly of himself and his reputation as righteous.

The tax collector was one of *those* people who for whatever reason did not maintain a high degree of piety. He was one made his living by serving the the Roman empire, the oppressor of the Hebrew people. He collected taxes from his fellow Jews and paid them to the Roman government, often he took more than the government demanded in order to enhance his own take home pay. By extorting his own people and working for the benefit of the Romans, the tax collector was viewed with disdain in his social world.

Both of these men in the parable went up to the temple to pray. We can assume that the Pharisee went to pray because that is what he did on a regular basis. It was a common practice for him. For a devout Jew such as the Pharisee, the temple would have been a place of pure devotion; a place where people who had kept to the law came together to offer prayers of thanksgiving and to bring oblations for God.

For the tax collector, the temple would have been a place where he was forbidden to enter. He was considered unclean. He realized that he was in great need of repentance and would not be welcome there. Yet the temple represented something to him *so valuable* that he was inspired to take a social risk and enter. Beating his breast, he looked up to heaven and prayed, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

Do you recall the words of the Pharisee? He began his prayer by gloating. He said, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.” But really, how is he different from them? Is he not a sinner for refusing to accept this tax collector’s humanity? Jesus tells his audience, and we can hear his words, that the tax collector is the one embraced by God and made righteous. God’s grace poured down on the tax collector that day and that tax collector was open to receiving it and so he was justified.

Let’s recall the image of the Bible as a tapestry. In this section of the tapestry the image that runs through it is God’s grace pouring out. We have seen that image in the Hebrew scriptures in the prophet Joel. It shows up in the Psalms. Now we have inferred that same image in the parable from Luke. But what about Paul and his letter to Timothy? In the portion of Paul’s letter we read today, Paul says he is himself poured out as a libation for the sake of others and for Christ’s sake. **He** is *poured* out! Paul used Joel’s image of pouring because he was convinced that God is in the business of pouring himself out. Paul believed that God had poured himself into the world in the person of Jesus. And Paul was just as convinced that all of us who believe in Christ are called to pour ourselves out on behalf of God. Are we ready to pour ourselves out for others for the sake of God’s kingdom?

We can see in the tapestry of our own life together at St. John’s, that this image of God’s grace pouring out carries forward into our worship. God’s Holy Spirit is poured out for you in the bread and the cup so that you might live abundantly and so that others in our midst might live abundantly, too.