

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who lived out God's perfect will, Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord, amen.

I don't have many dreams, at least I don't remember many. In this passage from Joel we hear that our old men will dream dreams and our youngsters will have visions. To tell the truth, I'm not real comfortable with all this talk of dreams and visions. I grew up in an era where talk of visions usually meant one of my high school friends had taken a bad trip on something. About the only other time I ever heard of visions was in the Christmas poem *The Night Before Christmas*, where all the Children were snug in their beds while visions of sugar plums danced in their heads. I'm pretty sure, Joel isn't talking about taking illicit drugs or dancing fruit either...

I did read the entire book of Joel to prepare for this sermon and I think Joel is talking about something much more profound. If this text sounds familiar to you it should. On the day of Pentecost, when people from all over the known world gathered in Jerusalem, Peter quoted these very words from the prophet Joel as the Holy Spirit was in fact being poured out on all the people gathered in Jerusalem as the Apostles were speaking in their own languages. On that day of Pentecost, people from every country heard God's Word being spoken to them in their own native languages, probably for the first time. As the Apostles spoke the people heard about the mighty and saving acts of a God, who wasn't full of wrath, but

ready and able to forgive their sin and bless them beyond measure. Was the day of Pentecost the great day of the Lord Joel described in his prophecies? Just one day and it's all over? I think Joel was describing a time when God's Word would be on every tongue and spring forth from every person's lips. It would be a time when God would be present among all people and the Community of God would be the entire Community of every tribe and every nation from all corners of this planet.

Clearly that's not the time we live in right now. With endless wars, political strife, economic woes, not to mention widespread pandemic, it's a sad time we live in right now. People all over the world are divided. People in our own country are divided over racial, political, and economic lines. We've just had a president whose campaign slogan was "Make America Great Again." Rather than uniting Americans we only became further divided.

The times we live in are not much different than the time of the prophet Joel. Most scholars place Joel in the time right after the Hebrew people were allowed to return to Jerusalem after their long exile. They returned to find the place almost totally destroyed. The fields had not only been burned, they were also salted to ensure nothing would grow for years to come. This was done to ensure the conquered people would remain in poverty for a long time. The buildings were destroyed, including their beautiful Temple, which had once been the centerpiece

of the region. The people were even more divided than we are today. The ones who were left behind during the exile had intermarried with foreigners and adopted some of their gods and religious practices, while those returning from captivity had spent 70 or more years trying to keep their faith pure from all outside influences. You can imagine how divided these people were on just their religious beliefs alone. It was time to Make Israel Great Again... How could Joel and the Hebrew people do that in the midst of such devastation? Joel's answer was to repent. Return to the Lord your God with fasting, weeping, and mourning. In the mind of the ancient people these aren't three separate things, they describe one action. It's not about the outer appearance of piety, it's about a change of heart. Fasting, weeping, and mourning are all outer manifestations of the people's inner state of their hearts. When they returned to their once great Jerusalem, they realized how far they had fallen.

How far we have also fallen. I've been reading a book by Shane Claiborne called *Irresistible Revolution*. In that book Claiborne says we've tamed and domesticated Jesus to the point that the early Christians wouldn't even recognize our religion as Christianity. In some ways I think he makes a good point. Most American Christians believe in Jesus, but we seldom follow Jesus, says Claiborne. He says we're a country of believers not followers. Where Jesus lived, ate, and befriended sinners, tax collectors, the poor, and the sick; we instead insulate

ourselves from them by making donations, writing big checks, or serving them from across the divide of the serving line. When was the last time you made a friend of someone who was homeless or an addict, or an outsider? My personal involvement is quite limited to serving them at the FISH Pantry or helping at the Grace Resurrection Soup Kitchen. I know I'm convicted by Claiborne's words. While I help feed "them," I fail to get to know them... I, like most Christians, keep the boundary clear and strong. It's us and them, not just us... Shane Claiborne founded a ministry in north Philadelphia called the Simple Way, where he and his companions share what they have with the poor. They invite them into their house of worship and share meals, help school children with homework after school, and also play with them on the streets of Philadelphia. They make sidewalk art with chalk and open up fire hydrants in the summer to play in the water. They live among the poor and have developed community where everyone is respected and valued.

Our President's campaign slogan was Make America Great Again, but I want us to have a slogan of how we can "Make The Church Great Again." This isn't easy, nor is it safe. Jesus wasn't crucified for helping the poor and needy. He was crucified for lifting them up as the blessed ones of God. Joel's call for repentance is our call today. If you wonder why the Church is dwindling, I will tell you it's not because we've made Christianity too tough or too demanding.

We've made it far too easy. Jesus didn't call his followers to a life of endless happiness. He called us to pick up our cross and follow him. He didn't just help the homeless, Jesus was homeless. He once said the fox has his hole, the birds have their nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head. People in Greenville sleep on the streets while Darke County has no homeless shelter. I wonder why that situation is allowed to exist... Yes, many are addicted to drugs, but does that make them less than human? Maybe when the Church today begins to repent; to return to the Lord our God with fasting, weeping, and mourning God will once again come to His Church and bless it. The Church today isn't great because we've made it too easy. Everyone applauds when donations are raised, but why do we allow the conditions that give rise to such disparity to exist in the first place. Someone much smarter than me once said the earth has enough for everyone's need, but not enough for everyone's greed.

When Jesus returns to earth in His glory, what will be the state of the Church he gave his life to start? Will he find a Church that truly takes care of every need or one where we have insulated ourselves from the poor through our giving, but never got to know the least of these, our brothers and sisters in Christ? The good news is that the Church can still return to Jesus. We can still reread the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus says the blessed are the poor, the hungry, the thirsty, and the grieving and actually believe what Jesus is preaching. Jesus didn't just raise

money to give to the poor, he became poor. Think about what Jesus gave up when He was in heaven with his Father and the Holy Spirit. He gave up all of that to be born a baby in a stinky manger. Just like every one of us, Jesus came into this world with nothing... He didn't just identify with the poor, he became poor so that you might gain God's riches.

It's not too late for the Church to repent. Joel reminds us that God is gracious, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting in punishment. The pouring out of God's Holy Spirit wasn't just a one time event. It happens every time God's people actually follow God's Word, which is of course, Jesus Christ. May you hear these words from the prophet Joel and return to the Lord your God. May we, as part of God's Church start asking why there are homeless people in the richest country that ever existed. May we open our hearts to the true message of Jesus and move from believers to followers. Then we will see for ourselves just how gracious and merciful our God really is. Amen.