

LIVING AS THE CHILDREN OF GOD

Thanksgiving Sunday 2012 – Joel 2:21-27; Matthew 6:25-33

Somewhere between 400 and 350 years before Jesus was born, there were plagues of locusts in Israel that wiped out virtually all the crops. Both the people and their animals went hungry. It was a time of extreme hardship, suffering, and trauma which included drought and wild fires: several consecutive harvests were destroyed; famine resulted and, of course, despair as each new growing season brought the fear of yet another disaster.

Joel, a prophet writing during this time of struggle, saw that the people of Israel were beset by another plague which he understood to be even more serious than the locusts: a plague of fear and loss of faith in the gracious and providential God who had, so many times in their history, saved those Joel quite intentionally calls the “children of Zion” in the portion of his prophecy we heard as this morning’s First Reading. Taking inspiration from his predecessor prophets, he frames the plagues and famine as God’s judgement upon the people for living unto themselves, and, consequently, calls them to liturgies of repentance and prayer.

He prophesies that such contrition will be a reaffirmation of the covenant and that God will again restore both land and people. And so, in today’s reading, he prophesies to the soil, the animals of the field, and to the “children of Zion” not to fear, but rather be glad. The God of Israel has turned the page of suffering, drought, famine, and fire to herald the dawn of a new era of plenty. There will be abundant rain for each harvest, spring and autumn; the threshing floors will be full of grain, and the vats will overflow with wine and oil.

It is into this tradition that people of faith continue to interpret the bountiful harvests we enjoy. Our songs and prayers of thanksgiving, the harvest feasts that fill our tables this weekend are, above all else, liturgies of praise to our Creator who blesses us with the fruits of the earth. At this crowning glory of the year, we set aside time to enjoy the season, gather friends and family, and count our blessings as the children of God. Our “thanksgiving” is thanksgiving to God who so wonderfully blesses us – not supplies us, but “blesses” us – with abundance, variety, and richness. Think of the wonderful smells and tastes we experience as we gather around the dining room table today or tomorrow: they are the smells and tastes of blessing. We are doubly blessed when faith leads us to understand such things as signs of God’s steadfast love, presence, faithfulness, and care. As Marlene Epp (our preacher on September 23) would say, it is more than just food; it is peace and happiness and contentment and hope – all of those things lost by the people to whom Joel prophesied during the years of famine; all of those things in jeopardy whenever people in our world are hungry and uncertain about the future. And in today’s Gospel, Jesus sees such worry overtaking his own disciples and drawing them away from the living relationship with God that he proclaims. What is essential, he teaches, is the reign of God and the righteousness of God; and everything else will follow.

We can hear Jesus’ lesson in one of two ways. The traditional Christian interpretation relates to spirituality, being good and remaining faithful – no small order, if we’re honest with ourselves. But a more challenging interpretation is to unpack the word “righteousness” so that it includes the justice required for everyone in our community and in our world to know the peace and happiness and contentment and hope most of us will experience in our homes this weekend as we gather with family and friends. This second interpretation of righteousness is the more true to the gospel of Jesus Christ because it calls us to put leaves in our Thanksgiving table and drag in extra chairs; it calls us to buy more food for those who are not in our immediate circle; and it changes our conversation during the meal into a discussion of what does it mean to live as the children of God. What does it mean to *be* God’s righteousness for those whose lives are at risk and, consequently (as we see in both Marlene Epp’s presentation of two weeks ago and Joel’s prophecy in today’s First Reading) for those whose faith is at risk. When the children of God do not share their peace and happiness and contentment and hope with those whose lives and faith are at risk, it is very clearly a righteousness issue – so much so that we might conceivably be among those who Jesus condemned in last week’s Gospel as placing stumbling blocks before others.

We are so fortunate in this community and in this country to have agencies that do the heavy lifting when we choose to respond. The Food Bank of Waterloo Region blesses those in our community who have to choose between food and shelter. Our participation in this mission is essential to justice being done in

our community; to the proclamation of the gospel. And the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, started not so many years ago when I was in seminary with the sponsorship of our federal government, saves lives in the parts of our world that are as ravaged by famine and drought as they were in Joel's day. In the Sahel area of Niger in Africa, the region just south of the Sahara Desert, 18 million people are suffering because of a long drought that has put their lives at risk. The Canadian Foodgrains Bank, acting on behalf 32 Christian denominations in Canada and 15 member agencies, including Canadian Lutheran World Relief, have brought \$10 million worth of food projects into the region, benefitting over 288,000 people.

Here is a story from the Sahel provided by the Canadian Foodgrains Bank.

"On a good day, Yapoa Lale, a mother of four, eats three meals. Her children eat more often. But this is not a good day – there is no grain left at Yapoa's house. 'The storage is finished, there is nothing left,' she says shifting her baby from her back onto her lap. Before this period of drought, Yapoa's family, like many in her village in southwest Niger, had a few goats. But now they have all been sold to earn money to buy food – all of which has already been eaten. 'Hunger is the biggest sickness you can have,' she says pointing at her body. 'My body is not supposed to look like this. Hunger means you cannot work or produce anything,' she adds. 'My body has no power.'

In addition to the physical signs of hunger, Yapoa says she is also suffering from the mental anguish of not being able to feed her children. When asked how hunger is affecting her children, Yapoa lifts up her shirt to show her small breasts that her baby daughter, Martine, is trying to nurse from. 'She sucks, but there is no milk,' she says.

The situation in Niger – and all across Africa's Sahel region – is extremely serious. Many people, like Yapoa and her family, already live close to the margins in a good year. A drought like the one they experienced this year pushes them over the edge. Thankfully, food is on the way for Yapoa and her village. Canadian Foodgrains Bank member agencies are supporting food projects that will reach over 288,000 people."

But, of course, there are 18 million people suffering. And so, the Christian community, and quite frankly the government of Canada can do more: the government has financial resources set aside especially for this kind of relief work, but they need to hear from us for the people of the Sahel to receive aid. We are part of the process and can help our federal government send more aid, simply by writing a letter or sending a postcard. I'll order them so that we can follow up on this.

And we can do the same locally. Our provincial and regional governments need our encouragement to address the problem of poverty in our province and in our region. There is no shortage of money, but there is a shortage of advocacy on behalf of those who struggle. Righteousness, Jesus teaches, means being in solidarity with those who suffer, and leading change.

Living as the children of God is a high calling. It has us look at how we are blessed and loved and sustained and cared for, and then becoming passionate about extending that blessing, love, sustenance and care for everyone. Living as the children of God prepares the way for everyone to have a happy Thanksgiving.