

The prophet Joel brings up two things in this reading: # an invitation to repent and a prophetic promise. The first the invitation to repent. # We often think of Lent as a time of repentance and indeed we use this reading from Joel on Ash Wednesday, but Advent is also a time of repentance, an opening ourselves to God. Advent is a time of turning and returning to God; a time of preparation for God's coming again in our lives and in our world. Joel says, "Return to the Lord with all your heart... Rend or tear open, your hearts not your clothing. The word heart is repeated—this is an intimate invitation. When we rend or open our hearts there is a vulnerability to that. The Lord says, "Come to me with weeping and mourning" because when we open our hearts we expose all that we have, all of our lives are opened to God and doing this requires us to be vulnerable—it makes us susceptible, it opens us to emotional harm—but vulnerability is also the birthplace of things like creativity and generosity. #Acknowledging our sin, repenting, opening our hearts to God comes from a place of generosity and it leads to generosity. The things that keep us from being open to God are the very things that keep us from experiencing and living generously. Fear and feelings of scarcity are what make generosity so hard even when generosity is so clearly in our best interest.

In October I did a Senior Pastor Build with Twin Cities Habitat for Humanity and Thrivent. While hanging drywall I met Pastor Will Healy of Park Avenue Methodist. In this months Thrivent Magazine Will called this scenario where fear inhibits generosity, "falling into the sin of forgetting." He said, "It happens when we forget how fortunate we are, or how privileged we are, or how indebted we are."

And doing this, "holds us back, keeps us from being who God created and called us to be, it gets in the way of relationships, it gets in the way of our ability to receive grace, for seeing beyond ourselves." Preparing our hearts for Christmas is being honest about our inability to do it all and to get it all right. Preparing our hearts for Christmas is about re-memembering our sin—putting back together a clear and real picture of ourselves. It's not about self-depreciation but opening ourselves to a true picture of ourselves, allowing us to see both our inability and our ability accurately.

Repentance, being open to God, requires us to show ourselves. We are fearful that being fully seen will render us unworthy of love and acceptance and in fear we only see scarcity. **It is at this point, where in scripture and in life, love breaks through...not in the form of superheroes but in people who open themselves to God: Abraham and Sarah, Ruth, Mary and Joseph.** In being vulnerable, in having the courage to repent and be true, we expose not only our faults but the light and love, the generosity and creativity, the abundant giftedness that God created in us and called us to in our baptism. We are freed to live generously.

#Our ability to be vulnerable and acknowledging our sin, not only leads to generosity but our ability to be vulnerable also comes from a place of generosity. That's what Joel is saying, "God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." God's generosity, God's graciousness, mercy and faithfulness is the life giving artesian well making our vulnerability and generosity possible. We can see how this works in a

story that Brene Brown tells in her book we read last Lent, Daring Greatly. Here is a video clip where Brene tells that story.#

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6442YcvEUH8>

“You share the hard stuff with friends that over time you have filled up their marble jar, they’ve done thing after thing where you’re like, ‘I know I can share this with this person.’” We can open our hearts to God because in our lives and through out the history of God’s relationship with God’s people God has been faithful—we have fill God’s marble jar—God is trustworthy. That’s what scripture is... it is story after story of God being faithful, of God showing God’s people trustworthiness and faithfulness. Yes, God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. It is God’s generosity that allows us to open our hearts to God and in opening our hearts to God we are able to be the person that God created and called us to be. God’s generosity empowers our vulnerability, empowering us to be generous.

The prophet Joel also brings a prophetic promise. God says, “I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; all people old and young, male and female, rich and poor. I used the word prophetic and that word can have two meanings. It can mean that a prophet said it and that is true, but it can also mean accurately describing what will happen in the future—also true. On the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit is poured out on the people, Peter quotes this verse from Joel to begin his sermon and that same Holy Spirit is alive and well and moving amongst us today, empowering us to dream big dream and to dare greatly about the future of this congregation and our mission in

this community. Moving forward with a partnership with Bloom Early Learning and Childcare takes faith. At the same time that we are working to outline all the details we don’t know all the answers, we need faith, we need the Holy Spirit to empower our generosity and empower us to believe in things unseen—to have faith.

Since the beginning of September we have been reading from the Old Testament and next week we move into the New Testament experiencing the Christmas story told in a contemporary way in the Pageant. In the Christmas story we see person after person being moved by the Holy Spirit to believe, to have faith, to be generous time after time: a poor rural priest and his wife, Zacharia and Elisabeth; a scared young women and her husband, Mary and Joseph; those who are looked down upon and foreigners, the shepherds and the magi. This is a story of faithfulness. People believe in the unseen because of the promise of a faithful God. A God that is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and God that pours out the Holy Spirit upon all flesh—rich and poor, male and female, old and young—giving us all the ability to dream dreams and see visions. Amen.