

**God's Spirit Poured Out:
Yes, even on tax collectors**

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna C. Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, October 24, 2010.

Joel 2:23-32; Psalm 65; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14

I must admit that when I was considering coming here to Cincinnati five years ago, one of the things that really attracted me to this place was when I heard that Cincinnati had hosted the seventeen-year swarming cicada event the year before. It sounded so exciting to be part of something so totally biblical! I heard that six billion creatures rose from the ground in 2004 to grace Cincinnati with their presence—about the same as the whole human population on this earth. There's something about being met with six billion little things that, separately, are fine though maybe a little creepy, but all together are totally overwhelming. It must have been a little hard to concentrate and do much thinking, to dream dreams or see visions or get much of anything done at all. And you're helpless—you just have to go with the flow, or the swarm. And then they disappear, as fast as they first appeared—leaving a lot of little wings and exoskeletons and other body parts for fertilizer. When they're gone, you probably breathed a sigh of relief and went on to business as usual, but I hear that the crops and flowers were especially abundant the next year.

In the meantime, everybody gets locusts—rich and poor, male and female, saints and sinners, you and me. And then everybody receives the abundance of life and spirit afterwards. God's spirit is poured out upon all flesh, and all people—even, Joel says, female and male slaves—can once again dream dreams and see visions and make things happen.

All except, maybe, the Pharisee. The Pharisee doesn't know about God's abundance causing dreams and visions and miracles to happen. Because the Pharisee in Jesus' parable somehow forgot that, just because he didn't get as many locusts landing on his dinner plate as the other guy, it doesn't mean that he is better than everybody else. He doesn't know that God pours out the locusts and the rest of life's gifts and frustrations to everybody, including him. So because he doesn't know about the locusts, he doesn't know about the dreams, and the visions, and he doesn't know about the spirit poured upon all flesh, which means him, and the tax collector next to him.

In the world of business, in school, and other places, it makes sense to add up your achievements and measure yourself and your abilities against other people. That's how success is measured, and that's how you get ahead. I deserve a better position because I am a better worker. I'm honest. At least I don't fall asleep at work. Thank you, God, that I'm not like my co-worker, who cheats on his time card.

But as soon as you go into the world of God—which the Pharisee does as soon as he enters the Temple to pray—it's a different measurement. It's not about success or

getting ahead or being better at all. It's not even about being good, really. In fact, in prayer it may be that the tax collector has the only true prayer that we all can pray in common: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." Everybody in Israel got locusts—the good and the bad, the rich and the poor, the saints and sinners, the Pharisees and tax collectors.

And Mr. Pharisee is one of the good ones. And actually, if these were real people and not caricatures in a parable, the tax collector might have been Zacchaeus, the one who climbed a tree to see Jesus and then promised to give half his money to the poor. So how good Mr. Pharisee is, is not the point. The trouble is, Jesus says, is that when you compare your goodness against someone else's, you build a wall between yourself and others. And the wall that you put up between yourself and others is the same wall that you put up between you and God, who makes no such comparisons. It's a wall of self-defense and self-justification and it not only keeps out the locusts and the tax collectors but it also keeps out the dreams and the spirit of God.

Ironically, what Mr. Pharisee doesn't know is that the Pharisee nowadays often has the same bad reputation as the tax collector in those days. Mr. Pharisee says, "Thank you, God, that I'm not like that tax collector." But little does he know that today, to be called a Pharisee is not a compliment. Nowadays we say, or think, "Thank God I'm not like a Pharisee." But watch out! Who knows how far this comparison can go! It might be that in the future, you'll hear someone say, "Thank God I'm not like Joanna!"

But we don't need to wall ourselves off from each other in order to win God's love. We don't have to recite our resumes in church to be accepted by God. We don't have to put up a wall of self-flattery or self-importance or self-righteousness in order to get the answer to our real question, "God, do you love me? Do you forgive my imperfections?"

God promises the spirit upon all flesh. God promises it to all those who have ever felt helpless, abandoned, besieged, ashamed, humiliated, or beaten down.

God promises it to all those who have ever done wrong, or been wronged, or made mistakes, or failed in geometry, or cheated on their taxes, or been arrogant like the Pharisee.

God promises it for all those who are good, who think they are doing right, and who try to do right but can never live up to the standards of perfection.

In other words, God promises God's spirit of love and compassion and mercy and forgiveness, poured upon all flesh. That should make all of us tax collectors happy, and should give all of us Pharisees pause. Because when we break down the wall that divides us from our fellow fallible human beings and from God, we can open our eyes, and then we find that God grants us new dreams. If that isn't the Good News of God in Christ, I don't know what is. God has mercy on us all, sinners. Amen.