

Joel 2: 23-32
Ephesians 2: 1-10
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
October 24, 2010

Before considering the passage Bill Morris selected for this Sunday let me begin with the passage Betty read from the prophet Joel who pleads with God's people to turn away from their worldly ways. Like many people in our world, they say "In God we trust" and then behave as if God does not exist. They say they believe in the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Moses and David; but in fact they live by the values of the world, relying on wealth, security, social position. They even worship other gods which they have made with their own hands; and yet throughout all this they believe that God, like a doting and permissive parent will protect them and love them no matter how faithless and self serving their behavior is. Well, isn't that the point of God? To love us despite our behavior? To be the God who always welcomes us home with no questions asked? Who has no expectations or rules? This at any

rate was the prevailing belief among the leaders and the people. And it was the role of the prophets to preach the unpopular message that God is not the ultimate permissive parent. Yes, God loves Israel; but God is hurt and angry and tired of being taken for granted. Thus Joel speaks of a terrible future for God's people if they do not wake up and recognize just how far from God they have strayed. And yet, as this morning's passage reveals, God's heart of love still beats. God does not want to visit destruction on his people. He would much rather bless them with joy and prosperity; that his Spirit would so move among his people that all people old and young would be inspired by visions of God and God's purpose. Indeed whether or not the people repent God *still* intends this blessing. It is all a matter of choice. Will Israel repent now and receive the blessing? Or will they suffer the devastation of war and exile first?

As the mechanic in the old Fram Oil filter ad observed, "You can pay me now or pay me later." Among the many things the Bible teaches us is this: human beings are stubbornly and

humiliatingly “pay me later” people. And so despite all the warnings and promises the people of Israel went on their merry way and suffered the consequences.

But the promise remained and it still remains.

In the passage we heard from the letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul adopts a different approach. He refers to the people’s rebellious and God-less behavior in the past tense. “You *were* dead in your sins in which you *once* lived following the course (read “the values”) of this world...and we *were* by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.”

Paul here wants to awaken in the people the experience of living according to the principles of the world. He wants them to recall what it was like to strive day in and day out to live up to the expectations of the world. He wants them to call into their present the experience of a past time when they were anxious, fearful and angry. He wants them to feel again what it was like to compare themselves with the standards of success and either judge themselves and feel failure and jealousy or judge others and feel

contempt, jealousy and self pity. He wants them to experience that great Old Testament word “wrath;” which is not the hot breath of an angry God, but the simple outcome of the law of cause and effect. Remember when you followed the false values of the world and were filled with anger, resentment, jealousy, self pity and fear? That was wrath!

Paul hopes that by evoking this experience in his hearers that they will encounter once again the pain of being hopelessly entangled in this terrible and miserable experience of life so that they are ready for the next remembrance.

He asks the Ephesians to bring into their present that wonderful day when they realized that there was more to life than this painful and pointless striving after false values, lifestyles and standards which produce little else but frustration, worry and sorrow. He wants them to experience again that wonderful feeling of release and freedom which came from getting off the conveyor belt of what the book of Ecclesiastes so aptly calls, “striving after the wind.” The sheer freedom of knowing that peace and

contentment are available to people who simply accept life as a gift and trust God to provide all things.

The key part of this calling into the present is the fact that the Ephesians had nothing to do with this transformation. They did not suddenly decide to radically change their lives. God intervened and rescued them from this way of life. God awakened in them an awareness of the pain of their worldly experience which led them to pray for release and relief. .

And so Paul concludes with the words selected by Bill Morris: “We are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”

I propose that Paul is a wily guy. He does not believe that the Ephesians were totally lost before and totally found now. He recognizes that like all human beings we are on a journey from the old way of life to the new way of life. Paul recognizes that we will probably never be free of the pull of worldly values. We will always feel fear and anxiety and seek the security of money and the protection it promises. We don't like the values created by

seeking to make it according to the world's standards. And every week we come aware that we are not pure and free from all attachments. And we come aware that because of this we suffer and cause others to suffer.

But Paul also knows *this*. We are genuinely good people who want to do the right thing and who want to become people who reflect God's desire for humanity. We want to follow in the footsteps of his son, Jesus Christ and be signs of his presence in the world. More than that, Paul wants us to know that, by the grace of God *we are! We are signs of Christ's presence in the world! We do the very good works that God has prepared for us! Individually and as a family of faith the living Spirit of Jesus Christ is alive here!*

Is it because we are perfect? Certainly not! Is because we always live 100% according to the values of our Lord?
Emphatically, no!

I propose the reason we witness to Christ and serve in his ministry is because we recognize the and aspire to the life and

values of the *really* real world of God's kingdom even as we recognize that we are held by the clinging strands of *this* world.

We witness both to the life dulling grasp of worldly values *and* the liberating peace and joy of truly trusting God with the whole of our lives. We witness to the unfolding of God's promise as each year brings a loosening of the gravitational pull of the world and a strengthening of the drawing power of God's love. And the closer we come to that love the more our individual lives will reflect God's vision for the world; and the more magnetic will be God's attraction *through us* to our fellow human beings. Amen.