

Standing in the Rain

by Linda Rex

October 23, 2022, Proper 25—Several years ago, I took a brief trip to the community of Cherokee, North Carolina. My kids and I stayed at a cabin back in a beautiful glen in the Smoky Mountains. One morning I woke up to the sound of rain on the roof. I wrapped a blanket around myself and went to sit in a rocker on the porch.

There is something uniquely comforting and soothing about the sound of a gentle rain. The glen looked as though a cloud had descended, wrapping wreathes of wispy cotton candy around each tree and bush. The silence was almost sacred, as though the whole world had paused to take a breath. Soon everything was dripping with water, including the cattle in the field nearby, who were contentedly chewing their cuds.

One of the Psalms for this Sunday describes this gift from God (Psalm 65:9–11) and reminds us that God prepares the soil, softens it with rain, and prepares it so that it can begin to produce abundantly when the season comes for tilling and growing. And we rejoice when the result of God's generous provision is an overwhelming harvest of good things.

Another passage for this Sunday, Joel 2:23–32, begins by describing how God would again provide the early and latter rains, making an abundant harvest possible. And then the prophet said that God would “pour out” his Spirit upon all mankind. He reiterated about the pouring out of God's Spirit, affirming that all people of every status would be given this gift.

Where we are now on the Christian calendar, which is post-Pentecost, we are reminded of the gift we have been given of God's indwelling presence by the Holy Spirit. Everyone of us has been included in Christ's life, death, resurrection, and ascension, and by faith participates in Christ's own relationship with his Father in the Spirit. The gift of the Spirit poured out for each and every person, flows down, in and around us alike a flood.

Jesus, in the passages prior to our gospel passage for today, Luke 18:9–14, told his disciples about his upcoming rejection and suffering. Then he told them that the day of the Son of man would be like the days of Noah. We find that Noah and his family survived because of God's mercy, while everyone else was drowned in the flood waters. In a similar way, our flesh, with its accompanying evil, sin, and death, was drowned in the flood waters of Jesus' death, and given new life in the dry land of his resurrection.

Jesus also used the example of Lot and his wife having to leave Sodom and Gomorrah. Like evil, sin, and death, these cities were consumed by the fire and brimstone sent by God. In the same way our old life was consumed by the fire of God's love through Jesus' sacrificial self-offering. Jesus said, “Whoever seeks to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it” (Luke 17:33 NASB). We do not want to look back to try to find our real life, but to move forward into the new life God created for us through his Son and by the Spirit.

In the gospel story for today, Jesus tells of a Pharisee and a publican. The Pharisee came to the temple to pray. He took up the appropriate stance, with hands up and eyes lifted to heaven, and began to enumerate to God all the reasons he was just in God's sight. He thanked God for this, of course, but to emphasize how just he was in comparison, he pointed out the sinful publican.

The publican, on the other hand, stood at a distance, humbly and earnestly praying, asking God for mercy. He could not even lift his eyes up in the normal stance of a Jew—he didn't feel worthy. The astonishing turn of events in this story is that this man, the publican who was doing everything “wrong” in his life, was the one who went home justified in the eyes of God.

Robert Capon, in his book *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment*, pointedly asks what God would do when the publican showed up the next week (Capon, 337ff.). What if he hadn't changed at all, continuing in his selfish, greedy, and sinful lifestyle—would God forgive him again? Or is there a limit on what God would do? What if the publican suddenly changed everything and started living like the Pharisee—would that mean that he would not be justified before God as Jesus said the Pharisee wasn't?

Shortly after this parable, Luke includes the story of the children coming to Jesus to be blessed. The Lord had to stop the disciples from preventing their approach, telling them that in order to inherit the kingdom of God, the disciples needed to become like little children. We like to keep things simple—he's bad, she's good, they're not important, I am, I'm saved, he's not. But that's not the simplicity Jesus is looking for.

Then Jesus told a ruler who came to ask Jesus what he needed to do to inherit eternal life to sell all that he owned and to give it to the poor and needy, and to follow him. This man could not make that commitment, and so, walked away. When it came to keeping the law and following the demands of the synagogue and scripture, this ruler thought he had it made. But Jesus showed him this wasn't enough. Apparently, Jesus set the bar so high, this ruler, and the disciples, couldn't see any way over it. Jesus' disciples asked Jesus how, then, anyone could possibly be saved. Jesus told them, "The things that are impossible with people are possible with God" (Luke 18:27 NASB). Then Jesus went back to preparing his disciples for his upcoming crucifixion and death, and subsequent resurrection.

Jesus' death and resurrection are the interpretive key for this whole section of scripture. He wanted his disciples to understand that being justified before God is not something they could achieve by flawless performance or faithful adherence to pious practices. Jesus would pour himself out as a libation or poured out offering before God on our behalf, because of our rejection of him and our crucifixion of him. But Jesus did not remain in the grave—death had no hold on him. He rose and ascended, keeping his promise to send the Spirit, enabling us by faith to share in his own life in union and communion with the Father in the Spirit.

Jesus sent the Spirit, not so we could justify ourselves or do a better job of being Christians, but so that we may participate in his own life, his own death and resurrection. It is Christ's life poured out so generously and freely into us by the Spirit who enables us to pour out freely and generously into others.

The apostle Paul described his life in service to God as being a poured-out libation, or liquid offering to God (2 Timothy 4:6–8). Like the man who was told to sell all he had and give it to the poor and needy, we each have some way in which Jesus has told us how to participate with him in death and resurrection, for the sake of others. This is almost always some way of laying down our lives which goes far beyond observing religious rules and rituals.

We don't do this to justify ourselves or to make ourselves right with God, but simply as a participation in Christ's own life in the Spirit. Christ lives in us by the Spirit, and leads us where he wants us to go. In Christ, we have died to our old life, and have been brought into Jesus' own life in union and communion with his Father in the Spirit. What is Jesus doing in our world? How does he want us to join in? What does that look like for us?

This moves us way beyond the Pharisee and the publican in the temple praying, seeking their justification, each in their own way. Jesus brings both of them to the same place—at the foot of the cross—where they each are brought down into the reality of the consequences of evil and sin, which is death, and up into the consequences of Jesus' poured out self-offering, which is eternal life, an undeserved but much-needed gift given to all humanity in the Spirit. This is a rain-enriched abundant harvest well worth celebrating.

Our loving Lord, thank you for sending us the early and latter rains, the abundant showers of your presence in the Spirit. Lord Jesus, flood us with your life and love; flow freely through us and from us, pouring yourself out into the lives of those around us, for the glory of the Father. Amen.

"He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.'" Luke 18:9–14 NASB