

11.02.25 ~ Pentecost 21

“The Courage to Grow”

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Joel 3:11-16 ^{ESV}

¹¹ Hasten and come,
all you surrounding nations,
and gather yourselves there.
Bring down your warriors, O Lord.
¹² Let the nations stir themselves up
and come up to the Valley of Jehoshaphat;
for there I will sit to judge
all the surrounding nations.
¹³ Put in the sickle,
for the harvest is ripe.
Go in, tread,
for the winepress is full.
The vats overflow,
for their evil is great.
¹⁴ Multitudes, multitudes,
in the valley of decision!
For the day of the Lord is near
in the valley of decision.
¹⁵ The sun and the moon are darkened,
and the stars withdraw their shining.
¹⁶ The Lord roars from Zion,
and utters his voice from Jerusalem,
and the heavens and the earth quake.
But the Lord is a refuge to his people,
a stronghold to the people of Israel.

Leader: These Are the Hopeful Words of God.

People: Thanks be to God!

Matthew 9:35-38 ^{NKJV}

The Compassion of Jesus

³⁵ Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people. ³⁶ But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd. ³⁷ Then He said to His disciples, “The harvest truly *is* plentiful, but the laborers *are* few. ³⁸ Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.”

Leader: These Are Jesus’ Encouraging Words.

All: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Loving Lord, we thank you for bringing us back together for worship and communion today. We feel your presence and direction in the Scripture, music, and prayer. We have been praying and remembering your vision of spiritual growth and flourishing, so we invite you to guide us and embolden us to prepare for growth. Give us courage and a desire to welcome new people into this church family, so that they can experience salvation and blessing, all leading to eternal life. Lord, help us to invite others who don't know you, and help us to pray daily alone and together seeking divine spiritual and numerical growth. May you speak through this message and messenger to focus our minds and hearts. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Happy November! Can you believe it is here already and Thanksgiving and Christmas are next?! I say it every year and even though we have been planning since September, October just flew by. I am blessed to be back after a quick vacation to Kennett Square and Chadd's Ford, Pennsylvania where the leaves were beautiful, temps cooler, and people were so friendly! It was a lovely four days of good food, cute shops, chrysanthemum displays, stunning artwork, a 10,010-pipe organ exhibit, and lots of rest, writing, and reading at The Bookhouse Hotel. I am recharged and refueled. I hope you got that extra hour of sleep last night too!

If you read other translations of our first passage in Joel, the theme is about a future battle of sinners vs. believers. While that is true and a bit what provoked my selection of the passage, I found a more relevant word-for-word 2001 translation in the English Standard Version. The words I read have a broader interpretation of today's battle of church vs. culture or prayer vs. distraction. The prophecy of Joel affirmed that no matter how barren the locust-like army had made their fields, the people would be renewed and replenished if they believed in the Lord. Today's headlines of empty food pantry shelves and cancelled SNAP benefits may

be our version of ravaged fields, so keep following the metaphors as I speak of the harvest in both passages.

Joel forecasts that Jerusalem would become a refuge for survivors. The returning exile remnant would have a place to live in the holy city of Jerusalem. Yes, they will be judged for any offenses or shortcomings, but God's people will rise above their enemies. The agricultural language of harvest, grapevines, sickle, winepress, and God's prophetic language of the last days were helpful to the people's understanding, even if they confuse us a little. We are no longer strictly an agricultural economy even though we rely on the industrial agricultural complex to feed ourselves and others. The season of harvest was on my mind, yet with current affairs and the government shutdown, both passages are even more relevant today because so many are in a battle for survival and we must counter growing fears with faith.

The prophet Joel was trying to strengthen his hearers to prepare for “the day of the Lord” in the Valley of Decision. Warrior language and imagery were also used because of familiarity among the people. The verse just before ours is confusing because we know the Isaiah 2:4 ^{ESV} passage of peace: “He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” But in Joel's prophecy, of a later date, he uses those same words to build a fighting spirit for the Lord's battle: “Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears; let the weak say, ‘I am a warrior.’” That is what we are experiencing in our culture now—a battle for souls and consciences, a battle for the Christian church's autonomy

and independence. Exercising your right to vote on Tuesday is your current weapon, so **whatever** your position, I ask you to pray and cast your vote if you haven't already!

Some in the church are fervent and strong in their faith and participation: volunteering, tithing, caring for people, attending regularly, and being engaged. Your choices regarding church **do** influence others. Do your neighbors see you heading off on Sundays? Can you remind them where you are going, not out of weakness, but out of God's strength? That is a form of invitation, letting people know how important your faith has been and still is in your life. In our second passage from Matthew 9, we read of the miracles and teachings of Jesus; we see the skeptics and the believers coming to faith.

In Matthew, Chapter 10, Jesus sent out his disciples boldly on their own mission of teaching and healing because the crowds were growing and he could not possibly do it all himself. He used his own example to model for the disciples how they could help others; Jesus' extraordinary compassion was his motivator. Obedience, for the disciples, was their main motivation. Do you think the disciples felt competent to minister to the crowds? Not at all! Do you have to be competent to serve others? No. Our power of evangelism, serving, and caring all come from the Lord.

Commentator William Barclay reminds us that Jesus was moved to compassion by the world's pain, sickness, sorrow, hunger, loneliness, and rejection. Now, doesn't that sound like our current world today? I would add violence and anger to the list. The Pharisees saw these conditions as sin to be abolished and punished, whereas Jesus saw these conditions as redeemable and salvageable. What about you? Are the reports on our

world's conditions more than you can process? Of course! That is why we need to be part of God's divine intervention of healing and teaching; we believers know the power that can save this world if we show similar compassion. The lost sheep need a shepherd; that may be the simplest explanation for church even though people don't like to admit they feel lost or hopeless. So, prayer is our starting point, but action, courage, and a willingness to grow are part of our needed obedience. Did you know that you must sow more than you grow? One study from Iowa State University proved that if you wanted to get 100,000 plants per acre, you must plant between 125,000 and 140,000 seeds. 29% more! What does that mean for invitations, marketing, and worship?

As I said last week, over recent years, we have prepared ourselves mentally, spiritually, and physically to build up this church, and the time is now. We cannot do it on our own efforts because we need God's divine intervention to embolden our own actions of invitation, hospitality, and outreach. Isn't our mission to introduce Jesus, our Savior to as many people as we can? Through Christ, there is eternal hope for the world, and all people need hope right now. Not all are called to teach or preach, but all believers are called to share their faith with others. And many of you are gifted and called to be shepherds/pastors, caring for others in challenging situations. Just look at our prayer list; reach out if you can.

As we've heard in the Scriptures, hymns, and prayers, we are called to be the church, a sacred refuge for believers or seekers to find God and relationship with Jesus. Some of those seeking God will be sinners like us and not like us, so we may need courage to grow and meet them where they are in life. This week as we pray at noon, and now as we remember

Jesus' sacrifice on the cross for our own sin through Communion, let us ask for more courage to grow and be a beacon of hope in this region and neighborhood on Sundays, throughout the week, and beyond these walls as we go on our way. "I will build you and plant you; you shall take root again, and be the new foundation . . ." Amen? Amen! ||

Pray with me now: Dear Lord, we pray for ourselves today; give us strength and discipline to come to you daily at noon to listen and ask for church growth. Help us to invite and share our faith stories with others. Help us to steward our huge building and to fill this sanctuary with those seeking you and your presence in their lives. Give us courage through prayer to be uncomfortable, bold, and hospitable. Be with us in the elements as we remember your sacrifice through Communion. After worship, please be with the Membership as they meet to discuss and accept the 2026 Budget guidelines. We thank you for all you provide. In the name of Jesus, we pray, Amen.