

**Joel 2:12-14**

Tonight I would like to take a closer look at our scripture reading from Joel. It is a simple couple of verses. And often times, like so many things, we tend to read it and go right by. Moving on to the next reading - or the next hymn. And so, I would like to just take a few minutes and sit with this text.

Our reading from Joel begins, "Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing."

In the Biblical times, when a priest or someone else would hear blasphemy - the priest would signify their outrage by tearing their robe open. They would rend their clothing as an expression, of their righteous indignation, at what someone else had done or said.

But in our scripture reading, the Lord says, "Rend your hearts, not your clothing. Return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning." The Lord is not looking for you or me to stand in righteous judgment of someone else. The Lord is looking for you to take a closer look at yourself - your own heart - your own words and desires and actions.

During this church season of Lent, people often give up something that they enjoy - in order to feel a pinch in their routines. In order to sacrifice in some small way, to help you remember how Jesus sacrificed for you.

But this is not what these verses today are talking about. This is not about doing some small sacrifice in order to turn to the Lord. No, when the Lord is talking about returning to Him with fasting and with weeping and with mourning.... He is talking about looking deeply at yourself - so deeply that it hurts. So deeply that it hurts to acknowledge what you find there. So deeply that it makes you cry to see what you love ... to see what you fear and even what you hate.

When the Bible talks about the heart - it is talking about the place where all of your passion comes from. The heart is the place where you feel things the deepest. The things that you love so deeply. But the heart is also those things that you are passionately about, negatively. The heart is also the source for your passion towards those things that you hate - and even those things you fear.

So, lets start with this question: "What are the things that you love passionately?" Most people say that they love their children passionately. So, in the interest of looking deeply into your heart.... How much do you love

your children? Do you love them so much that you want to keep them from feeling pain? Do you love your adult children so much that you want to prevent them from making any mistakes? Do you love your children so much that you want to control all of their decisions - and essentially direct their life for them?

And if this is the case - has your love and fear for their future, turned into manipulation and an attempt to control?..... This is where your heart begins to break. If you take this word from the Lord seriously.

How hard would it be, to pull back. To stop voicing your opinions. To let them make their own mistakes - or to let them make their own way in the world? How hard, to just step back, and trust, that God will guide them? Or, that God will use their mistakes to mold them.

"Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing."

Another thing that we love, is our phones and our distractions. Just for a moment, picture this scene.... Two friends are having lunch together. They haven't seen each other in several weeks. And they are having a delightful conversation - but then, someone's phone rings.

And they reach down, to pick up the phone. They terminate a rare, face to face conversation - to take care of some minor detail in life - that could have just as easily been left on the voice mail.

Now, ask yourself, what just happened. Who just demonstrated how important that they are? Look at this, the world is trying to get ahold of me. Or, who just demonstrated how powerless they are? Look at this, I can't turn this phone off. I don't have control over any part of my life - because this thing is on, all the time?

Or, on the other hand, maybe what has just happened, is that the person with the phone has created an illusion that they are in absolute control of their world and their life. They say, in their heart, "I am the master of my world. See, I control it all through this device. I control my children, my spouse, my job, my calendar, my life - through this phone."

What is it that you love? That you need? And why? Examine your heart. Examine your life. Is it movies? Is it Facebook? Is it snapchat or Twitter? Is it pornography? Is it food? Or money? Or clothes? Or alcohol?

Just examine your heart. Recognize your brokenness and your need for God's love and mercy - in every moment of

every day. This is what it means to turn to the Lord with all your heart.

Sometimes people will tell you that you ought to fix all of these vices. That you ought to make yourself into a better person. That is not what I am saying here. You don't have to become perfect in order to turn to God. You don't have to cleanse yourself or your life of all of your sin. In fact, I don't believe that you can.

But during this Lenten season, look deeply at your heart - and realize the wonder of God's grace and mercy in your life. Then, and only then, will you be able to have true compassion for others - and show God's grace and mercy to them. In the name of Jesus Christ.

Amen