

“Intervention, Interference, Integrity”—Joel 2:12-14

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, “Intervention, Interference, Integrity”, is Joel 2:12-14 → *“Yet even now,” declares the LORD, “return to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.” Return to the LORD, your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and He relents over disaster. Who knows whether He will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind Him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD your God? This is the text.*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

*Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord* (cf. 1Timothy 1:2). Amen.

Jack had a rather eery feeling as he walked into his house with all the cars parked outside. As he stepped into the living room he encountered his wife along with their three children and a couple of other people whom he did not recognize. “What’s happening?” he thought to himself. “Did somebody die or have a serious accident of some sort?”

As thoughts filled his mind his wife met him and asked him to sit

down on the sofa. She began the conversation. “Jack, we’re here together because we want to talk with you about a problem which involves all of us. We believe you have a drinking problem and we want to help you.”

Jack was completely stunned that this meeting was about him and their perception of him having a drinking problem. “A drinking problem?” Jack asked, taking offense at such an accusation while trying to remain calm in front of his family and the strangers. “I don’t have a drinking problem! Sure, I have a drink now and then but I’m not a drunk!”

How do you think the rest of this conversation unfolded? Such intervention in an effort to help a person whose addictive behavior is destroying his relationships, his health, and his job security—not to mention maybe even his relationship with the LORD—is very difficult indeed. Striving to help someone who doesn’t think s/he has a problem and needs help involves much emotion, energy, commitment in the midst of resistance and a proper focus. It is many times met with rebellious, abrasive and abusive words and actions which cut to the core of the love one has for that person. While that love may view this scenario as necessary intervention for healing that person may view it as interference and react with a statement such as, “Mind your own business!”

I wonder if this isn’t much the same way in which God’s rebellious

people thought about the prophets whom He sent to them. However, according to Jesus they didn't simply tell them to "quit sticking their nose where it doesn't belong." He said in Matthew 23:37 → *O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!* The stubborn sinful heart is hard to break and refuses to recognize its destructive course heading to eternal damnation and suffering in hell.

Our text records the LORD sending the prophet Joel to intervene into the lives of His people as he called them to repent of their sins and turn back to Him. In his "intervention proclamation" Joel spoke of Yahweh sending an intervention of a physical nature with an army of locusts which would completely devastate their land and literally make them pay attention to the LORD (cf. Joel 1:4). Imagine how quickly the complete devastation of vegetation would interfere with your standard of living, especially if you were a farmer. If the locust plague was a picture of the Assyrian army which overthrew Israel almost a century later (722 BC), taking possession of their land and forcing them into slavery (cf. Joel 1:6-7,12), the ways in which such judgment interfered with their life was phenomenal. Joel predicted a way that God would intervene into their lives physically as judgment upon His rebellious people continuing to live securely in their sin, with the absence of true repentance. The integrity

of the heart is compromised by clinging to sin.

Psalm 34:18 says: *The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.* When Yahweh interferes in your affairs with the intervening proclamation of judgment upon your sinful heart, the Holy Spirit strives to break your sin-hardened heart (cf. John 16:8-11) so you turn to Him, *crushed in spirit*. Thus the LORD's command to you in verses 12-13 of our text: *Even now . . . return to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.* It is actually an intervention into our hearts, intended to produce something deeper than simply going through some outward repentant motions, such as tearing the *garments*, in order to alleviate pain, discomfort or misfortunate circumstances. The Holy Spirit wants you to *return to the LORD in faith with **all your heart***.

But why? Why return to God with all your heart? Everything is going great! You basically get to make your own decisions in life and live the way you want. You get to enjoy your freedom as your "inalienable right." True. However, what life in this present world offers is not that for which you are destined. God has better things in store for humanity with the desire for all to experience in "the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come" (Nicene Creed). Not only does He desire you all to experience it but He has provided the way to do so.

Verse 13 of our text goes on to say: *Return to the LORD, your God,*

for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and He relents over disaster. It is the LORD's nature and desire to forgive. He says in Isaiah 43:25 → *I, I am He Who blots out your transgressions **for My own sake**, and I will not remember your sins.* He forgives on His terms and in His way according to His *steadfast love*. Thus, He forgives because of Who He is, not in exchange for our actions or repentance.

When God's judging intervention happens in our lives, producing a true turn around of our hearts, it actually does interfere with our lives. However, it does so in such a manner that it produces integrity in a life of service to Him. Even Joel's description in verse 14 of the possible outcome of such a turn of heart in light of the complete devastation of "the good life" is interesting. He says: *Who knows whether He will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind Him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD your God? The blessing is a grain offering and a drink offering for Yahweh? Wait . . . wouldn't it make more sense that the blessing would be more affluence for me to enjoy my life more?*

The focus of true repentance is not what I can get out of it. The prophet Malachi had to deal with this attitude when intervening on the LORD's behalf some four centuries later. He said in Malachi 3:14-15 → *You have said, "It is vain to serve God. What is the profit of our keeping his charge or of walking as in mourning before the LORD of hosts? And*

*now we call the arrogant blessed. Evildoers not only prosper but they put God to the test and they escape.”* This is the attitude which is thought or spoken when the emphasis of repentance is placed only on going through outward motions (i.e. tearing the *garments*) rather than returning *to* the LORD in faith *with **all your heart***. God intervened into our lives in the Person & Work of Jesus to deal with our sinful hearts.

When you experience God’s complete and total forgiveness of sins through the Person & Work of Jesus, the Holy Spirit “interferes” into your life in a good way. He gives you a new heart of integrity which desires to live ***for the LORD your God*** (cf. Psalm 51:10-12; Ezekiel 36:26-27; Psalm 37:4). It looks at your physical blessings and sees opportunities to use them as an offering to the LORD and serve His purpose. It functions with a new integrity, willing to confess your sins when made aware of them, viewing His intervening law not as an interference in your life but as an intervention of His love for you in Christ Jesus.

True to His integrity, God brought about His ultimate intervention into our lives with the sending of His Son Jesus Christ to take all our sin upon Himself so that we can now live in a right relationship with Him and others. 1 Peter 2:24 says: *He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed.* God intervened into the lives of sinners in Christ, Who interfered into their lives to deal with their sin-sick hearts, restoring

us by faith to a relationship of integrity in His righteousness now and for eternity. Amen.

## OFFERTORY

*Psalm 51:10-12*



Cre - ate in me a clean heart, O God, and re -  
new a right spir - it with - in me. Cast me not a -  
way from Thy pres - ence, and take not Thy Ho - ly Spir - it  
from me. Re - store un - to me the joy of Thy sal - va -  
tion, and up - hold me with Thy free spir-it. A - men.

(page 192 in Lutheran Service Book)

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