It's been quite a weekend for me — a full day at Synod with our lay delegates, followed by a delicious roast beef dinner at St. Luke's. At both events we prayed & enjoyed a meal together, sharing stories & other talk, & sharing excitement about the Jays on Friday night.

It was a busy day, but in the best sense — full of good company, good conversation, and that quiet sense that God's Spirit was right there among us, working through us — doing ordinary things, in the name of Christ.

Every time we speak a word of love, every prayer we offer for someone else, every small kindness that's not about us — that's the Holy Spirit at work in us & through us. And what comes from the Spirit doesn't fade away.

So whatever we do that honours God — however small it might seem in the big scheme of things — that's the widow's mite that counts for all in God's Kingdom — & that's what we contribute to with our time, our talents & our treasures: our Lord *takes shape here and now, before our very eyes*. If this sounds far-fetched, then I'd suggest you get running to catch up. For surely Jesus means it when he says, "You fed me when I was hungry, you gave me a drink when I was thirsty." *Our Lord takes shape here & now, each time we live in a way that's Christ-like. Every time we take God at his word.*

That's what I saw at Synod. That's what I saw at St. Luke's. And honestly, that's what I see every time we gather here: the Body of Christ showing up, worshipping, and simply being together in His name. Even that — showing up — is an act of love and faith. It's one more way we say, "Lord, here I am. I want to be part of what you're up to here. Let me express your will in my life. Not perfectly. Not without stumbling. But let me keep expressing your purpose for me here, let me be your eyes & ears to bear witness, & your hands & feet to act. And let my lips strengthen others the way you strengthen me." You put a bunch of people in a room who believe that, & the feeling is electric. That is the Spirit of God with us.

Turning to our readings — at first, they couldn't seem more different. But each one reminds us that the way forward in life & faith isn't by *proving ourselves* but rather by *simply receiving mercy*.

Joel speaks to a people in survival mode, whose crops have been wiped out by locusts. They're not thriving; they're barely hanging on. But then God speaks: "I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten… I will pour out my Spirit on all people."

That's not just a promise of better days to come — it's a promise of God's presence right here & now. Always abiding. His Spirit, given freely to the poor, to the overlooked, to the ordinary, & to the hurting. God's word is not, "Now, come on & pull yourself together" or "pray harder." It's simply, "Turn to me. I will restore you. I will pour out my Spirit on you."

Do you believe that? God is full of grace. The mercy of God meets us right where we are.

Turning to Paul's letter to Timothy. Paul is near the end of his life — in prison, mostly alone. But he writes: "I have fought the good fight, I've finished the race, I've kept the faith… The Lord stood by me and will bring me safely to His kingdom." Paul is not comfortable or successful by worldly standards. He's writing after being abandoned & beaten. But Paul had learned the same truth Joel's people were learning: what matters most isn't our strength, but God's faithfulness.

Paul isn't boasting. He's not saying, "Look what I did." He's saying, "Even when everyone else walked away, God stayed with me, & carried me through. And I am confident that he always will."

It's an incredibly simple faith: not *our* perfect performance but simply *trusting in the perfectness of our Saviour to be with us & for us*.

And then we come to the Gospel. Two men go to the temple to pray. The first one — a Pharisee — stands tall and says, "Thank you, God, that I'm not like other people."

Now, to be fair, he's probably not lying. He fasts, he gives sacrificially, he's what we would call a good, upstanding citizen. And obviously there's nothing wrong with that. Quite the opposite. He's doing everything he should be doing. But the problem is, the man trusts in himself — falls into the trap of thinking that true religion is measured by his own achievements.

The other man — a tax collector — can barely lift his eyes. He's done shameful things. And so he simply prays, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

And Jesus says it plain: "That man — not the other — went home justified."

God accepts the sinner, *not the righteous man*, not because he'd done everything right, but because he came honestly, knowing his need, & trusting in God's mercy.

So what do Joel's people, Paul, & the tax collector all have in common?

Joel's people had nothing left, and God promised to restore them.

Paul was abandoned, and God stood by him.

The tax collector was empty-handed, and God forgave him.

In every story, God meets people in humility, not pride, & in weakness, not achievement. He lifts up the lowly and listens to the honest heart.

And let's be honest: most of us aren't the "Pharisee" type anyway. Most of us have had seasons where we feel more like that tax collector — hanging on by a thread, hoping God's listening. The

good news is: God *is* listening. And his answer is always mercy, peace & love.

So wherever you find yourself today —

If life's chewed you up & spit you out like it did Joel's people, God will restore you.

If you're weary like Paul, God will stand by you.

And if all you can manage is a quiet, "Lord, have mercy," He hears you.

You don't need to have it all together. You don't need to impress anyone.You just need to come honestly to Jesus. Because mercy is for the honest. And Jesus says, "Everyone who humbles themselves will be lifted up." And so, let us prepare our hearts to come to the Supper at the Lord's Table, & feast on love, so that when we go back into the mission field that is the world, we do so with fresh peace & strength to serve. Thanks be to God. Amen.