Sermon of October 21, 2001
Dr. Jim Standiford, Senior Pastor

“KNOW YOUR BANK BALANCE”

Joel 2:23-29
Acts 2:1-4, 14-18

Eternal God, pour out your Spirit upon us that we might be sensitive to your presence in our midst, that we might be attentive to your Word, and that we might be faithful always to your way, through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

The Old Testament prophet Joel could easily be called “the bugged prophet.” Every prophet of every age acts like they have a burr under their saddle. For some there is a situation of life that draws them on the prophetic journey. For others there is an issue about which they are passionate, and they will not relent. It focuses their whole life, consumes their whole energy. For Joel, literally, he was bugged. The situation was that there were hordes of locusts of all kinds that continually came upon Jerusalem and Judah during Joel’s time. This was around the year 400 B.C., the period of Israel’s history called The Persian Period. Roughly 130 years before this time, Cyrus the Persian had conquered all that part of the world, including Babylonia. He had freed the people of Israel from the Babylonian Exile and allowed them to come back to the Holy Land. Over that 130 year period they had very slowly begun to rebuild the city, rebuild the Temple, rebuild the walls around the city, and settle down once again in the land.

It had been a fairly prosperous time, a fairly calm and peaceful time. What happened to them is what happens to all people of affluence. Affluence breeds amnesia. In the relaxed atmosphere of their day, they forgot about God. They had not turned violently away from God. They had not pursued other gods. They just didn’t focus their lives upon God. When the waves of locusts came upon them, Joel saw that as God’s judgment on the people, and he called the people to repentance. Repentance is always a turning, a turning away from whatever it is that we are focused upon, even if it is nothing, and a turning towards God.

That’s what Joel does. Joel’s call to repentance is in the first chapter and chapter two of his book, up to verse 17. But beginning at verse 18 of chapter 2, there is a different mood about the Book of Joel. It is a mood of affirmation of what God is doing. Evidently, although it is not reported, the people repent between chapter 2, verse 17, and chapter 2, verse 18, because there is a whole mood swing in Joel’s prophecy. No longer is he talking about a day of judgment, a day of the Lord, a day of doom, but now he is talking about a day of salvation, a day in which God will bring rains upon the land. The land will be fruitful and bountiful. There will be grain in such abundance that the threshing floors will be full. The wine vats will be full. The oil vats will be full. Creation will blossom and grow in such a way that there will be this abundance of food and drink for the people.
Joel also reports that God says, “I will be in the midst of Israel.” Not only will creation be changed, but also God will come and be a part of their lives. Then there is one other thing that is stated. God says, “I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female servants, I will pour out my spirit.”

Now an honest reading of Joel, some 400 years before Christ, would probably understand that Joel heard “all flesh” as being all the people of Israel. It would probably be expecting too much for Joel to think of all humanity around the world. However, Joel’s understanding probably would have included those who were faithful and those who were not, and the strangers in their midst.

What is interesting is that Peter, in Acts, chapter 2, in describing the Day of Pentecost, goes back to this passage and quotes it. Remember what happens on the Day of Pentecost. There are representatives from all the nations of the world who have gathered in Jerusalem for the celebration. That is why all those people are listed in the account so that you, knowing your geography, will say, “Aha! People from all over the world are present.” The Spirit is given to the disciples, this little band of nobodies, and they speak in the languages of all the people of the world so that they each hear the good news in their own language. The Spirit is poured out on all flesh that day, on male and female, young and old, slave and free, of every nation.

Another way of stating this point is that our spiritual bank accounts are full, because you and I are included in that representation. All of God’s spirit has been given to you and to me as well. God’s spirit has been poured out in its fullness into each of our lives. We have that spirit now. It is ours.

Do you know your bank balance? Well you might want to pull out your checkbook and look at it quickly. But you do know your spiritual bank balance. Your spiritual bank balance is in the black. Your spiritual bank balance is full. Your spiritual resources have not been frozen. The spiritual stock market is not in a down turn. It is always climbing higher, because God is always pouring out the fullness of God’s spirit on all humanity. Not just to some, but to all.

Over the last several weeks we have been talking about several guidelines for growth in the spiritual life. These guidelines are appropriate for anytime, but they are especially appropriate for a time of need, a time of crisis, a disjointed time like we are in now. The first of these guidelines to grow in our faith is we need to get an attitude, an attitude that says we want to grow, an attitude that is open and receptive to God.

The second of the guidelines for growth is that we need to lengthen our prayer list. When we go to God, we need to take others with us in our prayers. We take our enemies with us as well as our loved ones. We take those who are ill with us as well as those who have been blessed. Whenever we as Christian people go to God, we do not go alone. We must go with others. It is Christ’s way. If we are to grow in our faith, if we are to be better Christians, we must take others with us in that process.

Today the third guideline is know your bank balance. Know that your spiritual bank account is full to overflowing. God has poured out God’s spirit on you in great abundance.

Charles Sorenson is a pastoral psychotherapist. He writes about human needs and human desires or wants. Human needs are the things that we need in order to live. The desires and wants are the things that we would like to have but are not essential for life. Sorenson follows Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, if you remember those from your college psychology classes. The Hierarchy of Needs includes physiological needs: air, water, food, and shelter. Sorenson assumes those, and says those are animal needs. All of the animal kingdom needs those kinds of things. He says the distinctly human needs are two in nature: the need for security and the need for significance.

Since September 11, we have been well aware of the need for security, haven’t we? We probably would have given intellectual assent to that before September 11, but we have felt the need for security since that day. Since last week’s Anthrax scare, we have been once again reminded of our need for security.

Let me say a word at this point. It is a personal word for at least one of our families. George Mitrovich’s son, Tim, is
a staffer in Senator Tom Daschle’s office. Tim was present when the letter in Daschle’s office was opened with the Anthrax in it. We need to take these issues very seriously. But we cannot panic about them. Panic is not an appropriate response. It solves nothing. If you saw the Joseph Perkins editorial on Friday in the paper, Perkins talks about the only thing we need to fear is fear itself right now. Anthrax comes from a bacterium that is carried by cattle and sheep. If you live in an agricultural area, you have been exposed to Anthrax no doubt. It has been controlled for years in this country, and the initial symptoms of Anthrax are very similar to flu. The assumption is that there are hundreds of cases that are misdiagnosed as flu every year that really are Anthrax based. We just don’t know any better. We have had eight reported cases so far in the last week. This is not something to panic about. It is something to act on, but certainly not panic over.

The reason that we don’t panic over this, or really anything else in life, is because of the source of our security. Our security is not in our medical knowledge, as good and necessary as that is. It is not in our military might, as essential as that is for our nation. It is not in our power or anything else other than the absolute, unconditional love of God. God’s love is the only sure thing in human life. St. Paul has it exactly right at the end of chapter 8 of Romans when he says, “There is nothing that can separate us from the love of God.” The love of God is the only sure thing in human life. Paul says, “Not life, nor death, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all of creation can separate us from God’s love.” It is the only sure thing. Our security is in God. Your spiritual bank account is full to overflowing.

We have a need for significance as well. The need for significance is to feel important, to have some sense of a role that we play, that we have a significant thing to offer to those around us. This need is also met by the love of God. Truly the only significant thing a human being can do is to share the love of God in word, action, and prayer. Jesus said, “Love God, and love your neighbor as yourself.” Being significant is: loving our neighbor, caring for those around us, compassionate acts and words, the deeds that we do, the work that is ours that helps others.

We know that our spiritual bank accounts are full to overflowing. But how do we appropriate that love? How do we learn how to use that love? How do we make it available to ourselves every day?

I have spoken this calendar year about five commitments: to be in worship every Sunday unless you are sick or out of town, to grow in your faith in addition to worship through education or devotion, to give of yourself in Christian service, to give of your finances with a tithe as a minimum goal, and to invite others on the Christian journey. Those five all help us grow in faith and help spread the faith. They all help us know the nature of our spiritual bank account, especially the first two. Worship and education are integral for that.

Several years ago the Church of Australia realized it was losing members. They did a study. It didn’t take the expert long to find out why they were losing members. The Church of Australia, of the Anglican connection, is really a mass of very small congregations. Almost all had one worship experience and one educational hour, and they had them at the same hour for the convenience of the people. Australians like to go out and have fun on Sundays. Do you know what happened? Adults went to worship and children went to education. A whole generation went by, and the children became adults. The children didn’t know the prayers, the creeds, or the hymns. They didn’t know how to worship. When they graduated out of Sunday School, where did they go? They stayed home. They didn’t go to worship because it wasn’t comfortable.

Adults need worship and education. Children need worship and education. We need both of those avenues to fully help us understand the fullness of God’s love for our lives, to appropriate all that God has for us, to know the nature of our spiritual bank account, and to be able to use it for our own growth and the growth of others. Friends, if you know a child that does not go to Sunday School, invite them. If you know an adult that does not go to Sunday School, invite them. Those of you who are parents, bring your children to worship. We need them here for our future as well as theirs. It is vitally important that we are all growing in our faith, and especially in these days, that our children know that their spiritual bank accounts are full. They don’t need to panic either.

Bill and Gloria Gaither are music composers. They came to a point in their life during the Vietnam War where they were trying to decide whether to have a family or not. They wanted to have children, and yet the world condition at
that time was such that they weren’t sure it was right to bring children into the world. They prayed for some time. Out of their prayer life they came to the conclusion that God’s spirit was abundant enough that God would be able to reach children no matter what the circumstance. They made the decision to go ahead and have children.

Out of that prayer time they also wrote the hymn we are going to sing, “Because He Lives.” It is an affirmation of the abundance of God’s love for all of us. It is a statement that God’s spirit is poured out on all people, and that we can grow because our spiritual bank accounts are full.

God sent his Son, they called him Jesus;
He came to love, heal, and forgive;
He lived and died to buy my pardon,
An empty grave is there to prove my Savior lives

How sweet to hold a newborn baby,
And feel the pride and joy he gives;
But greater still the calm assurance,
This child can face uncertain days because he lives.

And then one day I’ll cross the river,
I’ll fight life’s final war with pain;
And then as death gives way to victory,
I’ll see the lights of glory and I’ll know he reigns.

Because he lives, I can face tomorrow;
Because he lives, all fear is gone;
Because I know he holds the future,
And life is worth the living just because he lives.

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