

"Mercy, Mercy"
Text: Psalm 51:1-17; I Timothy 1:12-17
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The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the foremost. I Timothy 1:15

What is most interesting to me about Paul the apostle is not his contribution to Christian theology, which is unparalleled; neither is it his stunning success at spreading the gospel throughout Asia Minor during the first century of the Common Era. No, what is fascinating to me about Paul is the fact that he was able to do either of those things in the first place. Consider who he had been before his famous fall-down in the middle of the road to Damascus. Hear his own description of his pre-conversion self: "I was a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence."

I should tell you that some scholars question whether Paul himself wrote the letter that is our New Testament lesson to his young co-worker Timothy. Some scholars call it a pseudonymous writing. If it was, it was written after Paul's lifetime by someone "entrusted with the responsibility of transmitting his legacy accurately and with care".(1) We are going to assume that Paul wrote the letter today, and it is Paul who is saying, "I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence." He had been raised in the city of Tarsus; he was a Roman citizen from a religiously orthodox Jewish family. He was brought up according to strict adherence to the law. As an adult, he acted as an international envoy on behalf of the Jewish authorities, and he took it upon himself as a personal mission to persecute the Christian church. (2)That is what he lived for. He was in fact, on his way to Damascus to work on the Christians there, when, suddenly, and utterly unexpectedly, he experienced a vision of the risen Christ. Pretty quickly, he was transformed from a man who had persecuted proponents

of the gospel into one of the premier proclaimers of the gospel, perhaps the greatest the world has ever known.

We will want to make note this Sunday, as our Jewish friends are in the midst of their High Holiday period, that Paul did not convert from Judaism to Christianity. At the time of Paul's conversion, Christianity and Judaism were not two separate religions. They were two sects within one religion. What Paul really did was switch from being a Pharisaic Jew to being a Christian Jew. (3) He, as did Jesus himself, considered himself Jewish until the day he died.

But it was quite a switch for Paul. Whatever Paul did, there was no half-way about it. If Paul had a thorn in his flesh, you are going to hear about it! If he was peeved with the church leaders in Corinth, they were going to get a letter, or two, or three. And if he was going to be transformed, it would have to be the most dazzling and dramatic transformation for the foremost sinner, as he calls himself, in the history of the human race.

I love a story I came across recently from a Jewish magazine, as a matter of fact. It was Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement. The lawyer, the doctor and the banker were all sitting in the front row of the synagogue. As was the custom in those days, each was beating his breast and declaring his unworthiness. "I am unworthy; I am unworthy; I am unworthy." Just then, the lowly janitor walked in and observed the scene and walked up to the front. He too began crying out, "I am unworthy; I am unworthy..."

At which point, the lawyer turned to the banker and said, "So NOW look who thinks he's unworthy!"

Humility was not Paul's strong point. No matter what was going on with him, it was the biggest and most important, and if he was going to be humble, he was going to be more humble than anyone else. He had been the foremost among

sinners, and now he was the foremost recipient of the grace of God in the company of those who had been forgiven and redeemed.

How do we account for such a stunning reversal? Paul attributed it to divine mercy. “I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord who has strengthened me, because he has judged me faithful and appointed me to his service.”

“Even though I was a mess in just about every way, I received mercy and the grace of the Lord overflowed for me.”

Here’s the thing about Paul’s conversion. He did not have a personality transplant. Paul did not stop being Paul. What was different was his whole orientation to his God and to his life. Knowing himself to be loved and accepted unconditionally, he could now love himself and other people without having that zealous need to change them. (4) After he was able to relax and accept his acceptability by God (What does Paul Tillich say? “The courage to be is the courage to accept oneself as accepted in spite of being unacceptable?”), he was able to live in a posture of gratitude, grounded in the assurance of divine grace. Paradoxically, he was then able to change the hearts and minds of more people than we can imagine. Paul is still converting people to Christianity 2000 years later, through his brilliant writings in the New Testament. To put it more accurately, **God** changes people, and through Paul’s allowing himself to be a vessel of the Spirit of the living God, transformation for millions has occurred.

“This saying is true and worthy of acceptance: that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost”. Paul makes no claim to sainthood. The only status he feels justified in claiming is that of being a sinner saved by grace.

I want to say a word today about sins and strategies for dealing with them. (I know this is your favorite subject. Mine too!), and then I want to think with you briefly about one particular sin that made it onto Paul's top three list.

First, how to deal with the truly dark places in our histories and in our characters. Many choose the strategy of denial. *I didn't do it.* And if that doesn't work – *Even if I did it, it t was because of something that was done to me first.* I know a family in which one person's meanness to everybody else in the family is blamed on the meanness of somebody else, who had been in the family, but has been dead for over 30 years. Flip Wilson used to say, "The devil made me do it!" A lot of people blame other people in one way or another. You probably know the story about the two kids who got in a fight on the playground. When they were pulled apart by the teacher, one explained, "It all started when he hit me back!" (5)

We blame. We deny. We try to cover up what has been done. Leon Jaworski, the Watergate Special Prosecutor and a Presbyterian elder, once watched Richard Nixon being ushered down the aisle of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC. Jaworski, just that week, had been listening to the Nixon tapes and knew that President Nixon could be indicted any time for criminal activity. Jaworski fantasized that when the time came for the confession of sin in that worship service, the President would stand and make a full confession and "ask for forgiveness from God and from the American people." Jaworski fantasized that, had Nixon done that that day, the congregation would have surrounded the President with love and encouraged him to do the right thing. (6) The course of American history might have been changed. It takes the grace of God and the courage of a repentant individual to say, "Here's what I did, and I am sorry, and I want to move down the road to redemption."

Every time I sing the hymn *Amazing Grace* I think of the story of the writer of its words, John Newton, and how in the midst of a storm at sea, he began to pray for God's mercy, even though he was a dealer in human flesh, a slave trader. I

know that it took the Apostle Paul no time to become a transformed individual, but I take comfort in the fact that it took John Newton 30 more years to get to the heart of fully realizing what a terrible thing it had been to live his life the way he had. On his tombstone is written this epitaph: "John Newton – once an infidel and Libertine, a Servant of Slaves in Africa, was by the Mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Preserved, Restored, Pardoned and appointed to Preach the faith he had so long labored to destroy." Before his death, he had become an Anglican priest.

What to do about sin? Confess it, trusting that God, who is full of mercy, will hear your confession and begin the process of redemption in your soul.

The sin that crowned Paul's list was the sin of violence. "I once was a man of violence," he said. His was not violence in general, but violence induced by religious zeal. In the 21st century we have seen a return to fundamentalism in many of the world's religions. Absolutism is getting an upper hand, even in the Body of Christ, where different camps breathe fire against one another and see those who disagree with them as the enemies of the one true God who must be defended at all costs. The zealots have forgotten that God has been God since before the earth was formed, and God will be God beyond the end of time. Church fights will not harm "the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God," world without end. That is not to say that God's heart will not be hurt, but God does not ask us to do violence to other members of the church family or the human family in God's name. On the road to Damascus, Paul was released from that kind of violence. God is one and whenever we get far away from God, the world becomes "broken and scattered," to use John Calvin's words, divided and violent. (8)

One reason I do not preach every Sunday against the war in Iraq is that I understand how divisive that war is and how divided our congregation and our entire nation are over whether we should have entered into the war in the first

place and what in the world are we going to do now? I do not want to do violence in order to end violence. I do not want to contribute to the further polarization of American society and politics. As a follower of Christ, I believe that the answer is not to destroy our enemies but to put down our weapons, rhetorical and otherwise, and together find the way to peace. I believe our nation needs a conversion experience, lest we all go to the mats and just HATE one another forever and feel superior to one another, world without end. The way ahead is to work respectfully even with those with whom we disagree for a solution, for an end to the war. Could we move from a "Win/Lose" Congress to a "We the People" Congress? I remember the Sunday, how it was after 9/11, Trent Lott and Barbara Mikulski stood on the steps of the Capitol side by side. Together, they and their colleagues sang *God Bless America*.

"Even though I was a man of violence," Paul wrote, "I received mercy," and through God's mercy, he moved to higher ground. This is the most hopeful thing to me about the Apostle Paul. Hearing his story makes me hope that there is mercy still, for all who will receive it, for all who need to follow a better way.

Believe it or not, several years ago in a military manual, David Petraeus wrote these words: "Sometimes doing nothing is the best reaction. . . The more successful the counterinsurgency is, the less force can be used and the more risk must be accepted, because the soldiers will have to accept the risk to maintain involvement with the people."

In other words, as Roger Gench, pastor of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington has put it, "Don't shoot. Take risks. Get involved." This is a profoundly Christian approach. (9)

"Formerly, I was a man of violence," Paul wrote, "but through the grace of God, I am living my life a different way. For the gift of this higher ground, I am eternally

grateful.” Gratitude became Paul’s outlook on life. He didn’t feel entitled to the grace of God, just profoundly grateful for it.

I want you to consider today, that if God’s grace overflowed for Paul, it can overflow for you. Perhaps it has already happened for you, but you were too closed up to receive it. Abundant grace, mercy piled up upon mercy. Has it occurred to you the reason you might have made it thus far in your life, with all the “dangers, toils and snares” that are an inevitable part of our earthly journey, is that the Lord has strengthened you day by day and has brought you to where you are today? For that, you too can be very grateful.

What is mercy? It is redemption with the added ingredients of solace and support. It is the balm of forgiveness laced with the possibility of new life. (10)

OK, so this won’t be the most sophisticated story you’ve ever heard me tell, but I will close with it anyway. Some years ago, an ad appeared in a Midwestern newspaper in the Lost and Found Section. It read, “Lost dog, brown. Some of its fur missing due to mange. Blind in one eye. Partially deaf. Limps due to being hit by a car. Answers to the name “Lucky.”

Mess that he was, somebody wanted him back. (11)

Messes that we are, Somebody wants us back. “This saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance: ‘Christ came into the world to save sinners.’” How lucky can we get?

(1) Notes in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*.

(2) *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Doubleday, 1992.

(3) Ibid.

(4) Eugene C. Bay, "There by the Grace of God, Go I" 1/28/2001.

(5) Gary L. Carver, as quoted in *Lectionary Homiletics*, August/September, 2007.

(6) Ibid.

(7) Ibid.

(8) Commentary on the Gospel of John.

(9) *Lectionary Homiletics*, August/September, 2007.

(10) "The Quality of Mercy," Ralph Crawshaw, MD, Portland Oregon, JAMA, 8/7/91.

(11) Carver.