

*The Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost*

October 25, 2015

Amazing Grace Lutheran Church – Pastor Chip Wilke

1 Timothy 1:12-17

***I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.***

Over the years I have witnessed something - yes from the youngest among us to the eldest I have found this to be true. That is no one, and I mean nobody, wants to be the worst. Who wants to be at the end of the line or the only one left who hasn't been picked? We don't like to be last, to be at the very bottom, to be looking up at everyone else. It's not good to know that everyone is better than you, and that you are better than no one! We don't want to be the worst at anything. That's why if you would have to guess I would say that these words "*I am the worst*" rarely, if ever, come out of your mouth. Even if you find yourself in a situation where everyone does better, if you are anything like me, you find plenty of excuses of why it went bad this time. If you are anything like me you quickly find and point to someone even worse than you.

Perhaps this is why these words have always gotten my attention. This is why it is so eye-opening to hear the apostle of Jesus named Paul say: "***I am the worst.***" Paul openly admits that if you lined up all sinners - he would have to be the first in line! He confesses that he is better than no one, and that everyone is better than him. He proclaims to be the worst of sinners. Was he really? After all, Paul did persecute Christians. He made some deny their faith, threw others in prison, and breathed out murderous threats to those who followed Jesus. He gave his approval to Stephen being unjustly crushed and killed with stones. Yes, he was a blasphemer and a violent man! We might gladly point our finger at Paul and say that he really was the worst.

But did we listen carefully to what Paul says here? Paul is not talking about what he was but what he still is – "***I am the worst of sinners.***" Then we recognize this isn't Saul, the murderer, anymore, but Paul, the preacher, talking. This is God's faithful servant, and apostle, and missionary, and author of Scripture confessing this. As I listen to his confession I realize I have much to learn from him. That's because I don't always see myself as the worst – especially not the worst of sinners. How about you? Have you ever sat here and listened to God's Word and thought to yourself "*I sure hope that so and so is listening closely because they really need to hear this!*" I wonder how many times our Savior has seen us gathered with the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttering about other "sinners." I don't want to really hear how I tend to head over, even slightly, to the corner of the Pharisee where I'm thankful that I'm not like other men. Too often I've stayed away from the other corner and from joining the other man, the tax collector, from beating his breast, shying away from looking up to heaven, and humbly pleading for God's mercy. Again, have you been there with me?

Then I pray you join me at looking intently into God's law. There we see how lust makes us adulterers and hate makes us murderers. There we see even our little white lie is devil-talk, and our one slip up is a breaking of all of it. There we see who we really are, poor miserable sinners, and what we really deserve, punishment and death eternal. God's holy law knocks us off of our high horses. God's holy law exposes the Pharisee inside of us. Then we see clearly what the apostle Paul saw as he looked at himself – that we are the worst. This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance - ***“I am the worst of sinners.”***

When you and I come to see this and accept this and confess this it is actually a very good thing. For ***“here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst.”*** You and I are then the exact reason Jesus came into the world! You and I are the reason God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under the law. You and I are the sick whom Jesus came to heal. You and I were the rescue mission Jesus came to carry out. You and I are the reason Jesus who had no sin stood before His Father and said ***“make me the worst.”*** You and I are the reason that on the cross, for us and for our salvation, Jesus became the worst of sinners. Jesus was punished and crushed and killed for every blasphemy, and murder, and lie, and crime, and sin. For such sins Jesus made sure every single last penny was paid. For Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners! That this is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance could not have been made any clearer than when Jesus rose again on the third day!

It's not surprising then that scattered in these verses are two of Paul's favorite words – grace and mercy. These are also two words we hear a lot at church. These are two words we sing a lot about here at church. These are two words that we spend much time discussing and two words we include in many of our prayers. In fact, we use them so often that we might start to throw them around without really thinking about them. So my prayer today is we think about not just what they mean but about what they mean for us, for me – the worst of sinners. That is what Paul did. That's why he loved these two words and used them so much. He knew what God's grace did his life. He knew the road he was on if it were not for God's mercy. Now God's grace and mercy defined who Paul was and they motivated everything he did. It's what gave Paul such love for other sinners. It's why Paul was never ashamed of the gospel because he knew from experience it was the power of God – the power for God for the salvation of everyone who believes. (Romans 1:16) Paul understood that God was using him so that: ***“Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.”***

Consider how things will also change for us when we realize we are the worst of sinners. How will our attitudes and actions be different when we recognize we are better than no one, and everyone is better than us? Doesn't this change how you look at other sinners? Won't that change how you speak and act toward other sinners? If God's grace is for me, then it is for them too! Since God's abundant mercy in Christ was poured out on you – don't you want to see God have mercy on others? If Jesus is the Savior for you and me then He is the Savior for all. His love extends even to the worst of sinners – to us. Now do you see why Paul was such a good imitator of Jesus, the servant of all? When we see ourselves the same way we realize it isn't so bad to be the worst as long as we are first into Jesus' forgiving arms. It's not bad being worst when it means being first to have Jesus' blood purify us from every sin.

There is one truth I want you to walk home with today. It is a truth God calls faithful or trustworthy. It is a truth, like all of God's truths, that is reliable and one you will always be able to depend on. It is a truth I pray the Spirit has opened our hearts to receive with full acceptance!

This is it: ***“Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst.”*** Knowing this we will always want to be first in singing this hymn of praise: ***“Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.”***