

The Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost

September 8, 2013

Amazing Grace Lutheran Church – Pastor Chip Wilke

1Timothy 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.

I walked into the 7th and 8th grade classroom at Beautiful Savior this week to teach and was a bit surprised to hear the topic of conversation. Several of the kids were talking about Ariel Castro, the kidnapper from Cleveland who was sentenced to a life-time in prison but took his own life this week. I heard them talking about how he should have had to be locked up for much longer. I heard him called a weak coward. I heard them talking about what this guy deserved. I even added to the comments saying a lifetime in prison is better than where he now mostly likely is at in hell.

Please understand in what I am about to say I am in no way defending the unspeakable things this kidnapper did. I like many have thoughts of anger, even some just anger, over his evil actions. Like the rest, I can't imagine the horror of it being one of our children taken. But this conversation before school also got me thinking about these words from Paul to Timothy – words which talk about grace, mercy, and unlimited patience for - even the worst of sinners. How far does God's grace really extend? On whom does He have mercy? For what kind of people is this love called grace? The truth of God's Word I pray we meditate on as we enjoy this day in this outdoor service is this: **God's Grace leaves us asking important questions. Who am I? Who did Jesus Christ come to save?**

If we ask the question "who am I" for Paul we would probably think of things like missionary or apostle. We might even answer the man whom God used to write much of the New Testament. Paul writes: *"I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service."* Paul was a very faithful servant for Jesus. But Paul reminds us it was not always this way for him. *"I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man."* Remember Saul before the Lord Jesus turned him into the apostle Paul? He forced people to deny their faith in Jesus. He made murderous threats against Christ's church throwing some Christians in prison and having others killed. So who is Paul?

Listen to Paul speak for himself as he writes to pastor Timothy. He says: “*I am a sinner!*” More than this, Paul writes about all sinners and then adds “*of whom I am the worst.*” Literally, the Greek says “*of whom I am first.*” If you place all the sinners in a line Paul admits he should be placed in the very front of the line. He calls himself “*the worst of sinners.*” It is also important to note that Paul is not saying this is what he once was but is no longer. He does not say I was the worst of sinners. He says, “***I am the worst.***” Who am I? Paul would answer - a poor miserable sinner.

How would you answer the same question? Who am I? Dear friends, I can't emphasize enough how important it is for God to bring us to the very same conclusion as the apostle Paul. We can stand in the corner with the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttering about other “sinners,” we can talk about what evil people like Castro really deserve, or we can get in line with Paul and confess: “*I am a sinner!*” We might even say: “*no Paul I should be first in line for I am the worst of sinners.*” What other conclusion can we possibly come to when we honestly evaluate ourselves under God's law? When we see that our lust and hate makes us murderers and adulterers, when we hear that our every lie is devil-talk, when we understand how often and how many our sins are and what an offence each and every single one is to a holy God, the only thing we can really see when we look in the mirror each day is the worst of sinners.

By God's grace we recognize the same thing as Paul, and answer the question “*who am I?*” by confessing: “*I am a sinner.*” While I know we admitted it once already this morning I want to hear it again (and make sure you are still with me). So please respond with me saying “*I am a sinner*” out loud after I ask the question “*who am I?*” Who am I? Good! For “***here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.***” Who did Jesus Christ come to save? Jesus came to this earth for sinners. Jesus lived a perfect life for sinners. Jesus went to the cross for sinners. Jesus suffered the furious hell of God's wrath on the cross for sinners. Jesus lived, died, and rose triumphant from his grave to provide eternal life for sinners.

This is the glorious gospel truth upon which God puts His stamp of approval: Christ Jesus came into this world to save sinners – even the worst of sinners – even me. Why would Jesus love me and save me – the worst of sinners? Why would Jesus love you and save you – the worst of sinners? In a word, which was understandably Paul's favorite – grace. God's undeserved love for Paul, for us, pours off the page here to Timothy. These words of grace are beautiful.

Yet I wonder how I would feel if Stephen was my son. You know Stephen, the first Christian martyr who was dragged out of the city and killed. As angry men picked up these large stones to drop on Stephen until he was dead they laid their cloaks at the feet of Paul, formerly known as Saul who stood there giving his approval. If I was Stephen's dad (or brother or friend) I wonder how I'd feel about Paul writing “***the grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.***” My prayer is I would feel the same way I do about God's grace today. I love it. I pray the Lord would have opened my eyes to see the beautiful truth of how God was merciful to Paul so that as Paul writes: “***Christ***

Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.” I pray I would love the way God treated Paul for, like Paul, I need the mercy, and grace, and unlimited patience of my God and Savior every day and so do you. We are sinners, but by grace I’m glad we understand we are because that is exactly who Jesus came to save.

For our closing hymn we will be using the familiar words we love to sing – the words of Amazing Grace. Don’t forget what we mean when we sing of this amazing grace. It is a love no one deserves. It is love which is truly for the worst of sinners. It is a love that has even reached down and saved you and me! It is a love that moves us to love and forgive others – even if they are the worst of sinners. It is a love that makes us break out with Paul into doxology. ***“Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.”***