

“The Biggest One of All”
1 Timothy 1.1-2, 12-19
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First Presbyterian Church of Spruce Pine

This morning we turn to the book of 1 Timothy, the first of three short letters called the Pastoral Epistles. They are 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy and Titus. Unlike the other letters of Paul which were written to entire congregations, the Pastoral letters are written to individual co-workers of Paul - Timothy who was serving as pastor to the church in Ephesus, and to Titus who was working with the church on the island of Crete. Paul was a mentor to these young pastors, and when problems came up in the churches they served, Paul wanted to provide support and instruction to the leaders there.

Let's turn to the opening chapter of 1 Timothy, selected verses found in your bulletin insert. I invite you to join me, as you read the parts that are in bold. Let us listen now for God's Word.

1 Timothy 1.1-2, 12-19 *Common English Bible*

From Paul, who is an apostle of Jesus Christ by the command of God our savior and of Christ Jesus our hope.

To Timothy, my true child in the faith.

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and from Christ Jesus our Lord.

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength because he considered me faithful. So he appointed me to ministry even though I used to speak against him, attack his people, and I was proud. But I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and without faith. Our Lord's favor poured all over me along with the faithfulness and love that are in Christ Jesus.

This saying is reliable and deserves full acceptance: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners”—and I’m the biggest sinner of all. But this is why I was shown mercy, so that Christ Jesus could show his endless patience to me first of all. So I’m an example for those who are going to believe in him for eternal life. Now to the king of the ages, to the immortal, invisible, and only God, may honor and glory be given to him forever and always! Amen.

Timothy, my child, I'm giving you these instructions based on the prophecies that were once made about you. So if you follow them, you can wage a good war because you have faith and a good conscience.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

As some of you may know, our Joyful Choir has been practicing a fun song that goes through all 27 books of the New Testament. It's a fun way to learn all the books in order, and I am grateful that Ms. Laura and Ms. Marisa are taking the time to do this with the kids. I hope that they will share that song with us soon.

Did you know that out of the 27 books in the New Testament, almost ½ of them (13) are attributed to the Apostle Paul? That's a big deal, and that is why when it comes to understanding the message of the New Testament the Apostle Paul is a big deal! With the help of the Holy Spirit, Paul is the one primarily responsible for taking the message of Jesus and spreading it across the ancient world. Paul's story is detailed in the Acts of the Apostles, and as the first Christian missionary it would be safe to say that none of us would be here today if it were not for Paul's work. He traveled as far as Rome, spreading the good news of Jesus Christ to many non-Jewish people called Gentiles. Though he was born a Jew and became a leader of the Pharisees, Paul is known as the missionary to the Gentiles - he proclaimed the radical good news that in Jesus Christ everyone (Jews and Gentiles alike) were included by grace in God's family. Non-Jewish believers did not have to convert to Judaism first - no, through the amazing grace and love of God they were already a part of God's family.

But Paul had a credibility problem. Though he was a highly respected rabbi in Jerusalem (Acts 5.34), he was not part of the original 12 disciples who followed Jesus throughout his earthly ministry - and that meant he did not know Jesus personally. He wasn't even in the crowds of women and men who followed Jesus from place to place during his ministry. Paul was not part of the group that heard the good news brought by the women on Easter morning, that Jesus was alive and that death no longer had victory. Paul was not part of the group who gathered in the upper room on the day of Pentecost, the time when the Holy Spirit fell on the apostles and the Good News began to be spoken in various languages. No, Paul had none of those things to put on his resume. Instead, what he had was a track record of persecuting the early Christians (Galatians 1.13, 23; Philippians 3.6)! And in Acts chapter 7 we read how Paul, who was then called Saul, witnesses the brutal execution of the apostle Stephen (Acts 7:57-8:1). Those who took part in stoning Stephen placed their coats at the feet of Saul for safe keeping, and just to make sure we know that he wasn't just an innocent bystander, we are told in the opening verse of Acts chapter 8, "Saul was in full agreement with Stephen's murder."

But Saul's story does not end here. On his way to Damascus to arrest more followers of Jesus (Acts 9:2) Saul is struck by a bright light, falls to the ground and has a vision of Jesus that changes not only his name but his whole life. Paul's "Damascus Road" conversion becomes the thing that turns the prideful man who attacked Christians into the humble apostle who will eventually die in a prison in Rome for his faith. Instead of a resume of achievements Paul only has this story of being a sinner who has experienced the grace of forgiveness. That's why he begins this letter to Timothy with thanksgiving: "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength because he considered me faithful..." Though Peter and James and the other apostles have a personal ministry with Jesus when he walked the earth, Paul's only claim is his encounter with the Risen Lord in a vision. Even though he used to speak against him & attack his people, Paul has been shown mercy! He puts it like this: "Our Lord's favor was poured all over me, along with the faithfulness and love that are in Christ Jesus."

Most Sunday's (like today) I walk down to the baptism font and I pour some water into it, as part of our assurance of pardon, the forgiveness of sins. There's nothing magical about the water - it's just tap water from the kitchen sink - but the important thing is what the water symbolizes. Paul claims that God's favor, the faithfulness and love that are in Jesus Christ, this favor was poured all over him, just as the waters are poured on us when we are baptized. It's one thing to read about God's forgiveness as we do in our prayer of confession each week. Or to hear the words spoken in the assurance, that in the waters of baptism we are forgiven. But reading and hearing about forgiveness are not always enough. John Calvin believed that the good news of God's gracious love, the love that names us and claims us as beloved children of God - this good news is almost too good to be true, so it has to be seen in tangible ways. Whether it's in the communion bread we eat, the shared cup we drink, or the water that splashes in the font, these visible reminders communicate the truth of the Gospel, that we belong to a God who is full of steadfast love and mercy, a God who forgives us and set us free to be instruments of reconciliation in the world.

After Paul briefly shares his conversion story, he then goes on to make this surprising claim: **This saying is reliable and deserves full acceptance: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"—and I'm the biggest sinner of all.** The great apostle Paul claims he's the biggest sinner of all time! What a thing to brag about! Didn't he know that God would use his writings to bring the gospel to millions and millions of people over the centuries? Didn't he know that his words on love written in 1 Corinthians 13 would be read at millions of weddings? Or that his words in Philippians that in Christ we can do all things (4.13) would bring encouragement to people throughout the centuries?

The biggest sinner of all. How would you like that to be on your tombstone? John or Jane Doe, born in this year, died in that year, then underneath that, “The biggest sinner of all!” While some may speculate that Paul was exaggerating to make a point about the power of God’s grace to forgive a sinner like him, I want to invite us this morning to think a little bit more about sin. I bet no one woke up this morning and said while preparing to go to church, “I sure hope the preacher tells us more about sin!” I get it, the topic of sin has been used and abused by many who have the privilege of the pulpit, so the first thing I want to admit is the failure of many in the institutional church when it comes to the topic of sin. Too often those of us who are in the church can cast judgement on others, to label those who look or behave or believe differently than us as being the “real” sinners. We can throw shade on the sinners “out there” because we are good at being self-righteous. We know all the right Bible verses, we sing the hymns that should be sung, we teach our kids right from wrong, we wear the right clothes... you get it, we can use our status as church goers as a way to separate us from others. But the message throughout the scriptures, both the Old and New Testaments, is that we are all sinners. In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul writes how all of us fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3.23). All of us miss the mark - we are not able to love God with all our hearts, strength and might. And we all fail to love our neighbors as ourselves.

A beloved seminary professor and mentor of mine Shirley Guthrie had a good way of explaining the Presbyterian understanding of sin known as total depravity. Total depravity does not mean we are totally sinful people who can do no good, or that we are all equally morally corrupt persons. You see, all people, whether Christian or not, are capable of doing much good in the world. We can do justice, act kindly and take steps toward healing and love and reconciliation in big and small ways. But according to Guthrie, *“Total depravity, correctly understood, means that although... [we] can do much good, nothing we do is free from the corruption of sinful self-interest”* (Guthrie, [Christian Doctrine, Revised Edition](#), p. 225). For example, say you spend a week on a mission trip helping others in Raleigh or Charleston, or you bake a casserole to take to a neighbor who needs help - even when we are doing these things that are really good things, even when we are helping others in real ways, the temptation is always there for us to think we perhaps are better than others. You see, our best deeds are never free from the corruption of pride and self-interest, the corruption that makes us believe we are somehow better than others. So when Paul says he’s the biggest sinner, I think he’s modeling for us a humility that we all need. None of us are without sin, and what a difference the world would be if there were less judging and more loving across all the divides that seek to separate us.

The last thing I want to say about sin this morning is that while we should take it seriously, we should not take it too seriously. Again, the insights of Shirley Guthrie are

helpful. When it comes down to it, the fundamental truth is this - that to be a human means to be created in the image of God. That is the fundamental truth of who we are. We are God's beloved children. Period. Yes, sin is a problem, people choose to do evil things, and we are all complicit in the fractures of our world - but sinfulness is NOT the basic truth about who we are. "The basic truth is... that we are human beings created in God's image. Sin distorts, twists, corrupts and contradicts this truth, but it does not change us into something other than what God created us to be" . This week as our nation witnessed another political assassination, many people on all sides of the spectrum agreed that violence is never the answer, and that even if we are opposed to a controversial person like Charlie Kirk, we must remember that they, too, are a human being created in the image of God. Instead of declaring war on those whom we disagree with politically, we are to remember that as God's children we are all in need of grace - we are all in need of forgiveness. It should come as no surprise that our passage ends with praise, a doxology of sorts, giving thanks to God for the abundant mercy we have come to know in Jesus Christ. Indeed, the good news that Paul brings to Timothy is the overflowing and gracious love of God that has claimed Paul and can claim each one of us, too.

Now to the immortal, invisible, and God only wise, may honor and glory be given, forever and always. Amen.