

Luke 15:1-8

Luke 15:1 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Luke 15:3 So he told them this parable: 4 “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? 5 When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. 6 And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ 7 Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

Luke 15:8 “Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?”

1 Timothy 1:12-17

1Tim. 1:12 I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, 13 even

though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, 14 and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 15 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. 16 But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. 17 To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

THE WORST PERSON IN THE WORLD

I occasionally watch Countdown on MSNBC. Keith Olbermann is the host and the show features political commentary and satire. Each night they have a segment called “The Worst Person in the World.” This segment is preceded by the ominous sounds of Bach’s Toccata and Fugue in D minor.

Keith then gives his nominees for the “award.” The first person is “worse.” The second person is “worsen.” And the third person is the “worst” person

in the world because they have said or done something really stupid.

Of course since Keith is an avowed liberal most of the worst people in the world are often conservative commentators from a rival news network!

All of us, regardless of our religious or political leanings play this game on an informal level. We are always talking about the terrible things that someone else has done.

Did you hear the story about the mother who left her child in a hot car? They should put her in jail. Did you hear what that crazy pastor in Gainesville is doing? What gives him the right to call himself a Christian minister? He must be the worst pastor in the world.

The names may change according to what is in the news on any particular day, but we all have our own nominees for the worst person in the world.

It may have happened, but I can never remember Keith nominating himself for the worst person in the world award. And I suspect that when we play this game on an informal level we don't nominate ourselves for this title either.

When we use the word sinner it often is in reference to someone else. That other person who did the terrible, newsworthy stuff is the worst sinner in the world.

PAUL, THE WORST SINNER

And that's what makes our lesson for today so interesting. The Apostle Paul takes a different approach.

Let me briefly review the background for this letter.

Paul is in prison. He knows that he will soon be martyred for his faith. And his protégé, Timothy will soon be taking over for Paul.

As might be expected Paul is thinking back over his life and choosing his words carefully. What can he tell Timothy as he seeks to lead this fledgling church in a hostile world?

Given his circumstances you might think that Paul would take this time to rake his enemies over the coals. He might have said something like;

“These guys who put me in prison are going to be punished. They are going to get what’s coming to them. They are God’s enemies, and we’re on God’s side.”

But, that’s not what Paul says. Instead, Paul, as he looks over what has happened in his life, says that he is humbled by the fact that God has chosen him. He is grateful that God has given him the strength to be of service in the cause of Christ.

Why is Paul so modest in his self-evaluation?

Paul admits that before the call of Christ he was in many ways the “worst” person in the world. He was a blasphemer. He was a persecutor. He was a man of violence.

Those of you who know the story of Paul know that this was no exaggeration. Paul stood by and approved of the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. When Paul had his conversion experience on the road to Damascus, he was on his way to arrest Christians.

Listen to how he is described in the ninth chapter of Acts,

“Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.”

Paul was indeed a self-righteous and violent man. The Christian community was rightly afraid of him.

But, then God struck him blind on the road to Damascus and the voice of the risen Christ called him to discipleship. God broke the cycle of violence with an act of pure grace.

Why would God do something like this?

Why did God choose Paul to play such an important role in the birth of the church?

Paul gives two answers.

ACTING OUT OF IGNORANCE

First, God realized that Paul acted out of ignorance and unbelief. (13)

Paul thought that he was doing God’s will by persecuting those early Christians.

In that regard, Paul was just like those who crucified Jesus. Those who called for the crucifixion of Jesus didn't think that that they were opposing God. They thought that they were preserving peace and true religion.

And Jesus recognizes this as he dies on the cross. He says, "Father forgive them for they don't know what they are doing."

In the same way Paul didn't know what he was doing. And God was merciful to him, a sinner. Paul wrote that God's mercy "overflowed" in his life. Paul was baptized in the blood of the Lamb. He was blinded so that he could see.

Many people have asked me my opinion concerning the pastor in Gainesville who has threatened to burn the Quran. (By the time I preach this we will know if he has gone through with his threat. I hope not.)

But, regardless of what happens, what should our attitude be toward this man whose actions can cause so many problems?

Father, forgive him because he doesn't know what he is doing. In the name of Christ he is threatening to

incite violence. It almost sounds like the Apostle Paul who persecuted Christians in the name of true religion.

I believe that God is merciful toward the ignorant. And I pray that God will save this man from his own ignorance.

God still hears the plea of his Son from the cross, “Father forgive them. They don’t know what they are doing.”

Now we might not be the worst sinner in the world, but we are bad enough! We have said it many times, almost every week. The Bible tells us that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. That word “all” includes each and every one of us.

But, God still hears the plea of his Son from the cross, “Father forgive them. They don’t know what they are doing.”

THE HISTORICAL CONSEQUENCES OF SIN

Now don’t misunderstand. Just because God has forgiven us doesn’t mean that we get off “Scott free.”

Our sins have historical consequences. Each and every one of us lives with regret about the wrongs we have committed and the good things that we have left undone. Paul was no exception. Paul was well aware of his past sins. They haunted him and humbled him.

In his letter to the Romans Paul talked about his sinful past and seems to cry out in anguish, “Who will deliver me?”

And then he seems to remember the answer mid-sentence. He shouts, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ Our Lord ... There is ... no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 7:21-25;8:1)

In other words there is a kind of interplay in our life between guilt and forgiveness. As we talked about last week, God takes the sin in our lives and “recycles” it for good. God takes the guilt and the shame and the disappointment in our lives and transforms it.

Just as the cross, that “emblem of suffering of shame” was transformed into a symbol of salvation for the world, so our sinful lives are transformed by the power of God’s forgiveness.

Our old sins don't go away. Our old sins are ever before us; they just appear in a whole new light, the light of God's mercy.

So, when God called Paul to be an apostle, God understood that Paul was acting out of ignorance, and God choose to use that ignorance for a greater good.

AN EXAMPLE OF GOD'S PATIENCE

That leads us to the second reason God called Paul to be an apostle. Paul was a good example of God's patience. Paul became exhibit A in God's case for the gospel. Paul is a demonstration of God's love and grace.

To put another way, if a rascal like Paul can be saved, just think what God can do with you and me. If God can save the "worst" sinner in the world then maybe God can save us as well.

In our gospel lesson for today Jesus is once again eating with sinners. And the religious leaders think it's a really bad idea. They say, "Don't you know, Jesus, that birds of a feather flock together? Don't you know, Jesus, that one rotten apple spoils the barrel?"

And Jesus said, “I have a different story. A shepherd had a hundred sheep. He lost one. So what did he do? He left the other ninety-nine sheep in order to search for the one that was lost. When the shepherd found that sheep he was overjoyed. And he shared that joy with his friends”

And he continued, “Let me tell you another story. A woman had ten silver coins. She lost one. What do you think she did? She tore the house apart looking for that lost coin. And when she found that coin she was overjoyed. And she shared that joy with her friends.”

Jesus said, “These are God’s stories. Heaven is a place that cheers for the sinner to repent and come home. And our God is a God who seeks and saves the lost.”

Paul said that the same thing in his letter to Timothy when he wrote, “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. “ (15)

One of our Bible study members, a member of the Greek Orthodox Church said that before they take communion they say these words to the Priest. “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 wonder how saying this verse before communion (and before we start every day for that matter) would change our attitude toward others.

BE PATIENT WITH ME

There’s a popular bumper sticker that reads, “Be patient with me. God’s not finished with me yet.” We like that sticker because we want God and other people to be patient with us.

But, if we want God’s patience toward us, shouldn’t we be patient toward others?

Someone asked why we say the Lord’s Prayer each week. One reason might be the fact that we need to be reminded each week to actually put into practice what that prayer teaches. And the most important and perhaps the hardest part of that prayer is when we say, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”

Or, to put it in the language of our passage for today,

“Lord, be patient with me as I am patient with others.”

I like to kid myself about this. I like to think that my impatience with others is justified. I forget that when it comes to sinning sometimes I am at the head of the class.

THE CHALLENGE OF CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

Remember that our lesson for today was a letter written to Timothy. Timothy was a young man that would soon assume a major leadership role in the church. And leaders need to understand more than anything else that God is a patient, forgiving God.

And Leaders must model this patience.

When you assume a role of leadership it is inevitable that you will make some mistakes. You will hurt many people’s feelings. You will ignore some people. You will become angry with others.

There’s nothing like leadership to bring out our tendency to do the wrong thing.

And quite often those of us in leadership will find that the converse is true as well. We will be blamed for things that we did not do. Out of fear emotionally fragile people sometimes do and say things that are hurtful.

From what we know of Timothy, we can surmise that he was a sensitive young man who might have been a bit too timid and cautious. Perhaps his conscience was a bit too developed, and he worried a bit too much about the sin and failure in his life.

Paul recognized that and so he wrote Timothy this letter and in it Paul said in effect, “Look at how great the grace of God is Timothy. Even I, the worst of sinners was saved by God and used in a mighty way. Take heart from my example. Just remember that God has called you to this task, that God loves you and that God forgives you.”

PRAYING FOR CHANGE

When I exercise in the morning, I like to watch another MSNBC show, Morning Joe. This past Friday the pastor of the church that wants to burn the Quran was on the show. And Jon Meachum, the editor of Newsweek and a Christian tried to talk him out of burning the Quran by using theology.

He said that the heart of the gospel was about loving our enemy and doing good to those that persecute us. He quoted Scripture. Some found his theology lecture bizarre and suggested that it was a made for TV melodrama.

But I actually found it touching. I believe that Jon actually wanted this pastor to think about what he believed and act accordingly. He saw him as a lost sheep that needed to find his way back home.

Like everyone else I have been critical Terry Jones, the pastor of that tiny little church in north Florida. I have criticized the media for giving him such an audience. I have criticized his lack of education. Certainly we should be critical of an action that could put the lives of our military at risk.

But, maybe we should do more than criticize. Maybe we should pray for hearts and minds to be changed. We should pray that this man would change his mind. What a wonderful example it would be if this “worst” of sinners would have a Damascus road experience and be blinded by the light of God’s salvation.

I know what you’re thinking. (It’s so handy to have that gift!) You’re thinking that this guy is not serious

about the faith. He just wants the attention. Of course that's true. I'm not trusting in him having a change in heart.

I'm asking God to turn him inside out and upside down.

My example is the Apostle Paul. He was an enemy of every Christian. He was (in his own words) a "blasphemer, a persecutor and a man of violence." But, God saved him. God gave him a new vision. God made him an example of Divine patience and grace.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if God would do that again?

EXAMPLES OF GOD'S PATIENCE

Actually God has done that again and again and again. God has taken evil and ignorance and sin and used them for God's own purposes.

Some of you know exactly what I mean. You're here this morning because God has changed your life in a dramatic way.

And that is certainly why I'm here this morning. God has changed my life. God has blinded me and given me a new vision on more than one occasion.

But, sometimes all of us act as if we have never seen the light or heard that message of grace. We are impatient with each other, and we say some things that are harmful to the kingdom of God. Out of fear we essentially give up on the gospel. We don't trust good news to be good. We don't think that forgiveness and reconciliation is possible, at least when it comes to some people.

I think that God's saving power is not limited by our sin. Paul, the great persecutor of the Christian faith became its greatest evangelist. I wonder what God will do with you and me? When I think about that I can only praise the God of mercy and grace.

Listen to the closing words of the Apostle once again,

“I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.”