**St. Paul’s Lutheran Church
Wildwood, Missouri**

**The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**September 15, 2019**

**1 Timothy 1: 12-17**

This morning I want to tell about an event that occurred very early in my ministry which also profoundly impacted me. I had a conversation with a woman who was a member of my first congregation. Although she was not raised Lutheran, shed did grow up in the church. In fact, her father was even a pastor for a while. Well, we were talking after church one day and she told me that she had, over the course of her life, jumped around from one church to another and had never even heard the words *“grace”* and *“mercy.”* She told me that she had grown up not even knowing what they meant. Church for her was all about what she had to do to improve herself and so the pastors she heard, including her father, always preached about ways to avoid sin, how to quit drinking or smoking or how to avoid backsliding or whatever.

I found what she had to say both sad and unbelievable. This was a woman in her thirties. How can you attend a Christian church for all your life and never hear about God’s grace and mercy? Moreover, how could her dad be a pastor in a Christian church and she never hear it?

When I saw our text for this morning from Timothy, it reminded me of that event and so that then led to another conversation with a fellow pastor. As I shared my story, he told me one of his own. He has served his present congregation for more than twenty-seven years, but he recalled an event that occurred during his second year as a pastor which changed his ministry. One Saturday evening, he met a man who had been a member of his congregation for years, but left before he became pastor to attend another church. When asked why he left, the man answered, *“Because I sat in the pews all those years and never once heard the Gospel preached.”*

As a relatively new pastor, he was so shaken by the man’s comment, that he went home and threw away the sermon he had already prepared for Sunday morning, which, I can guarantee you, a pastor is not apt to do. The next morning, when he stepped in the pulpit, he told his people about his conversation. He then went on to say, *“No one will leave this church today without hearing the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”* He then proceeded to preach on John 3:16, *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”*

After both of those conversations, I realized that although people may come week after week, that does not guarantee that they are either hearing or understanding the Gospel. And, even though a pastor may use the words, “*grace,” “mercy”* and *“Gospel,”* it doesn’t necessarily follow that the people sitting in the pew actually have a clear grasp of what they mean. Sometimes that is the fault of the pastor for not being clear in his sermon. Other times, if we are to be honest, it is the fault of the person sitting in the pew who may simply be too preoccupied with other things to pay attention.

Regardless, I realized that as a pastor who has been called to do exactly one thing . . . that is preach the Gospel, I have to make sure that when I preach, I actually preach *“the Gospel.”* The reason should be fairly obvious: only the Gospel saves. So, we can never preach it enough. We can never proclaim it enough. For the sake of every one sitting in the pews, we can (if you’ll pardon the double negative) never not preach it. As a pastor, I have to make sure that I speak clearly of the grace and mercy found in Jesus Christ, and him alone, so that no parishioner fifteen years down the road comes and says, *“I never once heard the Gospel,”* or, even worse, they die never hearing the Gospel*.*

So, to quote my friend*, “No one is going to leave here today without hearing the gospel!”* That is why I am so thankful for passages like our Epistle lesson from 1 Timothy. St. Paul clearly explains the Gospel to us in this text and, in fact, it all boils down to what he says in verse 15, *“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners — of whom I am worst.”*

Now, in the larger context of this chapter, this passage seems somewhat out of place, as if Paul has lost his train of thought or has completely jumped to another topic. But that is not what is going on. You see, Paul wrote this letter to Timothy, a young pastor, in order to provide a model to all pastors of what they were to teach and how they were to pastor their flocks. Of utmost concern to Paul was that Timothy stick to the true teaching of the Gospel. Apparently, some false teachers had infiltrated the ranks of the church and were stirring up trouble by teaching things which were a rejection of the Gospel. They became so concerned with what Paul called *“myths and endless genealogies,”* that the Gospel was at best relegated to the back burner. Some of these false teachers, according to Paul, had shipwrecked their faith and so he handed them over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme.

So Paul, warns Timothy to stop these false teachers for the sake of the Gospel. And just to be sure Timothy was clear about what the Gospel is, Paul tells him. Paul uses his own testimony to demonstrate the power of God’s grace. After all, if anyone was the recipient of our Lord’s wonderful grace was it not Paul? He was a recipient of God’s mercy even though he was, by his own admission, a blasphemer, a persecutor and a violent man.

And Paul was all these things and more. When Scripture first introduces us to Paul, we find him overseeing the stoning to death of Stephen, the first martyr of the church. Breathing murderous threats against the church, Paul sought the extermination of both Christianity and Christians. He hated the Lord Jesus Christ and his followers so much that he made it his life’s ambition to persecute the church. In other words, Paul was completely and utterly undeserving of God’s favor. What he deserved was God’s wrath. However, what he received was mercy and grace. Completely undeserved.

But, that is what grace is. God does not show us grace because we deserve it. Grace is not earned. By definition, grace is God’s love shown to those who do not deserve it. Grace is God’s unmerited love, freely given to sinners on account of Jesus Christ. Here is the way Luther puts it, *“Grace is freely given to the most undeserving and unworthy and is not obtained by any strenuous efforts, endeavors, or works, either small or great, not even by the best efforts of the best and most honorable men . . .”*

That is how grace is. It is the almighty, all powerful, omnipotent, all holy Lord of the universe looking upon us sinners and taking pity on us, and loving us despite our sinful condition. It is the almighty, all powerful, omnipotent, all holy Lord of the universe looking upon you sinners and taking pity on you, and loving you despite your sinful condition. It is the almighty, all powerful, omnipotent, all holy Lord of the universe looking upon me a sinner and taking pity on me, and loving me despite my sinful condition. It is God, who, out of love which we do not deserve, sent his son Jesus into the trash heap of this sinful world to seek out sinners, to seek out you and me, who are as worthless as worthless can be. Yet, despite our worthlessness, Jesus stepped into this sinful world and into our sinful lives and searched for us. He searched for what by all rights should just be discarded, meaning us, and he took us to be with him. He washed us and cleansed us in the waters of Baptism, making us presentable to his Father in heaven. Out of undeserved love, he valued the valueless.

This is the sort of grace which was shown to Paul. What Paul came to realize by the grace of God, is that grace is all God’s doing and not ours. Paul was forgiven all of his sins by grace through faith. And, we should never think that the grace Paul received was something unusual. No, on the contrary. Paul tells us, *“Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners ---- of whom I am worst.”* The mission of Jesus our Lord was to save sinners. He had no other purpose in coming. His goal was to seek and to save the lost. He did not come to save those who were only little sinners, or those who were really not so bad . . . he came to save the worst of sinners. And when I say that, I don’t mean Paul, I mean all of us, you and me.

My dear friends in Christ, we are all the worst of sinners. Notice that Paul say, *“This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance.”* In other words, it applies to all of us. Paul, as bad as he was, was no worse than any of us and we are certainly no better than Paul. Each of us is the chief of sinners, who has been shown mercy and grace by a merciful and gracious Lord who died in our place. He took what we deserved, death on the cross, and he gave us what we don’t deserve, life and salvation.

We all sin. We all sin much. By the day. By the hour. By the minute. By what we have done and by what we have left undone. Each of us could, and should, stand along with Paul and claim to be the worst of sinners. In fact, we should be knocking each other out of the way to get to the head of the line. We are all, like Paul, undeserving of God’s grace. But, that does not disqualify you for Jesus’ salvation. On the contrary, it is exactly that which qualifies you. Remember, Jesus came to save sinners. He came to save you and me.

My dear friends in Christ, hear the Gospel of the Lord! It does not matter what you have done in you past. If you think it does, just look at Paul, a murderer, a blasphemer and an enemy of Jesus. But, Paul knew that our Lord Jesus wanted to use him as an example. He wanted to use him as an example so that those who would eventually come to believe would see the unlimited patience of our God. In essence, what Paul is saying is, *“If Jesus can save me, he can save anyone.”*  Paul was arguably the greatest enemy of the church and yet, the blood of Christ Jesus shed on the cross was sufficient to hide even his sins. And it is sufficient to hide yours.

Think for a moment of our crucified Lord. Picture him hanging on that tree and ask him, *“What have I done in my life that your blood, O Christ, has not paid for?* What sin have I committed that you, O Lord, hold against me? What evil, immoral and sinful thing have I done for which you, dear Jesus, did not die?” There is none; not even one because Jesus came into the world to save sinners and he did so marvelously. He paid the penalty; he took all of God’s anger for sin upon himself as he died on that cross. Because of Jesus, God holds no anger against Paul, me or you. That is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

So, have you never heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ in church? I promise you this: that will not be in this congregation. I guarantee that you will hear it over and over and over again. The cross of Jesus will continuously be held up before your eyes because it is the power of God unto salvation.

*“Now, to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever.”* In Jesus’ name. Amen.