

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
9/12/2010, The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
1 Timothy 1:12-17, Luke 15:1-10

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

If I met someone who knew nothing at all about the Christian faith, who was simply a babe in the woods when it came to the Gospel, I would love for that person to be in church with us this morning to hear the divine testimony of St. Paul. Especially if that friend is troubled by memories of sin, I believe he or she would find comfort and a Master worth living for in these words of the apostle:

The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save *sinner*s. And I am the foremost of sinners; (1 Timothy 1:15, RSV)

One of the old preachers on this text posed an interesting thought experiment about Paul's words here.¹ Imagine that we had never heard this text before, indeed, that we had never heard tell of Jesus at all. We knew nothing of the Saviour, but all too much about our sins and our heavy hearts and about how frail and vulnerable life can be. But someone had urged us to come to church and promised that the apostle would tell us the principle that determines our fate!

So, we hasten off to church. There stands the apostle. He is a saintly-looking man, a celibate, perhaps an ascetic. Rumor has it that he has suffered much in this world, that he had known shipwreck, stoning, whipping, imprisonment, opposition and disappointment.² He is weary with worry for the young churches, but he is a man with great affection for others. His is a seasoned soul.

¹ Charles Spurgeon, "The Glorious Gospel," delivered on March 21, 1858. He mentioned his idea briefly. I am running with it a bit in this sermon.

² ²³"Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool) I am more; in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. ²⁴Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. ²⁵Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; ²⁶In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; ²⁷In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. ²⁸Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches." (2 Corinthians 11:23-28, KJV)

There stands the man who is going to tell me my fate. I strain forward to catch every word. He is speaking of Christ, whom he loves. He tells us that Christ is a Savior, that he has come to this old earth of ours to save. To save *whom*? Aye, that is the question. Whom did the Saviour come to save?

So I listen carefully to the preaching of the apostle. Let us fill in the blank:

The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save ...

Is the answer “Saints”? “Celibates”? “Ascetics”?

I cast around anxiously, hoping that the apostle will speak of some category into which I might fit. I am afraid that if the category is too elevated, I will be left out. Alas, raise the standard fairly high, and I will probably be left out! Did Christ come to save the well-to-do, the well-educated, the influential, the important, the virtuous? When the Lord sent the great flood, he saved Noah and his family, because they were righteous. Is that what Christ has come for, to save the righteous?

But wait! Praise God! Listen to how the apostle actually finishes his sentence:

The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save *sinners*!

I am awfully glad of that answer, for that is a category into which I fit. I have fumbled many things in my life, but I don't think I can fail that category, for I am a sinner.

Ponder too that this is Paul who is preaching. It turns out that this saintly old preacher is troubled by his past, as many of us are troubled by our past. In fact, he declares himself to be the “chief of sinners.” This is quite a thought. As far as I can see, Paul grieves for deeds he did in bound conscience. When he was young and zealous for the Word of God, he felt it right to persecute the Church and to blaspheme Christ. Now, looking back on those days, he is appalled by what he did. He says that what he did, he did “ignorantly in unbelief,” yet, whether done in ignorance or no, the deeds of his youth he now considers to be sin, indeed, to render him the “chief of sinners.”

And so it has been with some of us too. Looking back on our past, we can see that we sometimes went wrong. Our sins were not deliberate, but done in ignorance. We felt at the time that we were on the right track, that we were doing what many other people were doing too, that we *needed* to do such things in order to fit into our group. This is especially a temptation for young people heading off to college or anywhere facing independence for the first time. If they are not thoughtful and ready to stand up for what they believe, they might end up committing sins of ignorance that years later will trouble them. They were done in ignorance, yes, but they can still trouble the conscience.

So it was with Paul. You might remember the wondrous story of his conversion. He was not a sinner who was conscious of his sin and troubled thereby. No. He was mid-stride, persecuting the church, in a determined way. It could not be said of Paul that Christ saved a “repentant sinner,” but rather, a plain old-fashioned sinner right in the midst of his sin. The Lord struck him down, brought him to his senses, and raised him up a new man.

That is, the Lord dealt with Paul like the shepherd in this morning’s Gospel story -- the one who left the ninety-and-nine and went out and found that one lost sheep, picked it up and brought it home. Didn’t negotiate with the sheep, just picked it up and brought it home. Christ is the one who found fishermen along the side of the sea, bid them follow him, and made saints of them.

There is something sovereign about Jesus. If he wants Paul, he claims him, and it does not matter that Paul is conscientiously at work persecuting the church. Jesus took hold of the sinner and made him a saint.

One day, you and I are going to have an earnest pastoral conversation with Jesus. There is no way to avoid it. He is risen, and he is the One with whom we have to do. If we have been engaged in sins of ignorance, he is going to set us straight. And that is good. It is just that it would be even better if we could forsake those sins now and use the years remaining to us to live a life that is better suited to Jesus.

Let us then examine ourselves from time to time as to whether we are really walking according to the Word of God. Our conscience might be clean so far, and yet it bears some investigation as to whether we are committing the kinds of sins of ignorance that led Paul later to call himself the chief of sinners!

So, that is one kind of sin -- sins of ignorance. Jesus had mercy on Paul, who sinned in ignorance, and we can trust that he will have mercy on each of who sins in ignorance

But what of *deliberate* sins? When Paul preaches that Christ came to save *sinners*, did he mean deliberate sinners too? Did Christ come to save sinners who knew, even as they were doing the deed, that they were sinning?

This brings us to the very important introduction to this morning’s Gospel Lesson. There we read the scandalous nature of Jesus to dine with “tax collectors and sinners.” These were the kinds of folks about whom the Pharisees grumbled:

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

Let us not despise the Pharisees. They were pious folks. They exercised self-discipline, they practiced virtue, sought purity, and cared about the souls of the people. They were terribly troubled about Jesus because he was sharing fellowship with a group of sinners who certainly *should have known better*. It is one thing to be kind to people who have sinned in ignorance, but Jesus was being kind to

notorious sinners. To be a tax collector was a renowned disloyalty to Israel, since you were collecting taxes for the conquering empire. And the other folks there were notorious too. They were the kind of folks the Pharisees felt should be avoided, not welcomed! Yet Jesus welcomed them.

This whole story is akin to the story of the adulterous woman. She would have been stoned except that Jesus interceded for her. It was not that she sinned in ignorance. She had simply sinned. She had broken the Lord's commandment. She had committed a grave trespass. But just as Jesus showed mercy on Paul and his sins of ignorance, so he showed mercy on the deliberate sinner. He protected her. He showed kindness to her.

There is one thing that unites these two cases of Christ and his mercy on the sinner: in both cases -- in sins of ignorance and in deliberate sins -- Christ saves for a *purpose*: that the sinner should "go and sin no more."

Such was the instruction in one of my favorite Gospel stories -- the story of the poor man who lay on his pallet by the Sheep Gate pool, hoping for healing for thirty-eight years. Jesus asked him whether he would be made well:

When Jesus saw him lie, and knew that he had been now a long time in that case, he saith unto him, Wilt thou be made whole? (John 5:6, KJV)

It is a sad but legitimate question, since some people become so accustomed to suffering that they hesitate to become well. But this man was willing, and so Jesus healed him. The man took up his bed and walked.

Later, Jesus found the man and commissioned him to fight against sin:

Afterward, Jesus found him in the temple, and said to him, "See, you are well! *Sin no more*, that nothing worse befall you." (John 5:14, RSV)

Likewise with the woman caught in adultery. She was about to be stoned, but Jesus saved her. In a gentle, soul-searching way, Jesus saved her:

¹⁰When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee? ¹¹She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: *go, and sin no more*. (John 8:10-11, KJV)

In this morning's Epistle text, Paul is able to point to the same thing. Christ saved him for a purpose. Right after Paul's great confession that he is the "chief of sinners," he goes on to say this:

¹⁶but I received mercy *for this reason*, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience for an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. (1 Timothy 1:16, RSV)

Paul, then, honored Christ's purpose for the rest of his life. He kept it in his mind and in his heart that he had been saved for a purpose, and he turned his immense talents to that purpose, to the great benefit of the Church.

Imagine someone who, at great cost of exhaustion and danger, manages to pull someone out of the deadly quicksand. Can such a savior be content to watch the rescued one step right back into the sinking sand? No, it is most natural that Jesus would both save and send us forth to seek holiness of life.

Christ saved Paul that the man might be an apostle and founder of congregations throughout the Mediterranean world. But Christ did not save Paul just for this, just for the use Christ could make of Paul. In the end, Christ is this world's Saviour, even if all of us should fail and disappoint him. God is strong. He can get by even without Paul. It is as the Lord declared in Psalm 50 long ago:

¹⁰For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills. ¹¹I know all the fowls of the mountains: and the wild beasts of the field are mine. ¹²If I were hungry, I would not tell thee: for the world is mine, and the fulness thereof. (Psalm 50:10-12, KJV)

In the end, Christ has saved you, called you into his discipleship through baptism, and asked you to conform your life to his not because he needs your goodness, but because *you* do. And he who loves you cannot be content for you to drift back into the misery of sin.

Jesus Christ is the One with whom we have to do. That is good news for us sinners, full of hope, both for our eternal destiny and our character. He is the kind of Saviour who came to save sinners, to befriend them with that most excellent form of friendship: the friendship that makes us better people. To him be the glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.