

September 19, 2010
Pentecost 17

"Grace to the Chief of Sinners"

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. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-- of whom I am the worst. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, That saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, But now am found, Was blind but now I see." These familiar words were written by a man who deeply appreciated how God's amazing grace had rescued him from a wretched life. John Newton had a Christian mother who taught him to love the name of Jesus. She died when he was about seven years old. At about the age of ten he ran away from military school and took a position aboard a ship as a cabin boy. He absorbed the rough and godless life of sailors. He became such a wretched and worthless fellow that even the captain debated if he was worth saving when he fell overboard. But then it happened. One day in storm, when he faced the possibility of dying, God's grace took him back to what he had learned from his mother in childhood. He started reading the Bible, went on to study to be a pastor, and preached to thousands, even the queen of England.

Before us this morning we have the words of another man who was once a wretched sinner, a man who despised the name of Jesus and did everything to persecute Christians and put to death. You know that man well. His name was Paul. Every day he stood in awe and amazement at the grace of God that had been poured out abundantly in his life. He says of his life, "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance; Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst."

If God's grace could save a man like Paul or a man like John Newton, God's abundant grace and mercy can surely save a wretch like me. Have you ever thought to yourself, "How could God even love a person like me?" Remember the time you made your mother cry? I do. Remember evil thoughts you have had of other people, unloving thoughts. Remember that low time in your life when the blessings of God seemed so far away from you because you had moved away from these blessings? Then God's grace, God's amazing grace, brought you back.

God's grace reaches out to the worst of sinners

Paul was so thankful for the grace of God that rescued him. He writes to a young pastor

named Timothy, "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service." Paul was thankful for everyday of life on this earth. He saw life on this earth as opportunity to serve the Lord who had rescued him. I know there are tremendous blessings waiting for us when the Lord calls us home to heaven. We look forward to Jesus returning in glory on the last day to take us home. But we also look forward to each day of life on this earth, each heartbeat of time, as an opportunity to live for Jesus and serve him. How amazing that the Lord who rescues us from sin with his amazing grace, also allows us to serve him in his kingdom.

Martin Luther summed up this joy that is ours every day when he wrote in his Small Catechism. "Christ has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death. All this he did that I should be his own, and live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness." Paul was so thankful for being able to serve the Lord and Savior who had rescued him.

Paul never forgot where he had come from. He thought of God's amazing grace that took someone who hated the name of Jesus and brought him to love that name with a love so deep he was willing to risk his life to share the name of Jesus with others. "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." Paul remembers how he blasphemed the name of Jesus. Can't you hear say awful things about the name of Jesus, much worse than people who use Jesus' name in a bad way today? Paul remembers painfully how he persecuted Christians. In Acts 22 he tells the story of his life with these words, "I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, both men and women and throwing them into prison." His hardened heart was calloused to the screams of little children as their mommies and daddies were being taken away to be put to death. He actually enjoyed hearing the thud of the stones as they hit the body of Stephen as he was being stoned to death. The hatred, zeal and passion of the most violent jihadist cannot compare to zealous hatred Paul once had for Christians.

Then it all changed. "The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." It happened when Paul was traveling on a road from Jerusalem to Damascus. He was on a mission to bring Christians back to Jerusalem where they could be put to death. The Lord had other plans. He was traveling along, and suddenly a blinding light knocked him to the ground and a voice from heaven cried out to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" In fear he cries out, "Who are you Lord?" He calls on the Lord, Jehovah God, the Lord and God of his fathers, the only name for God that he knew. The voice comes back to him and says, "I am Jesus." All the things he knew about Jesus suddenly changed. What he had heard the Christians teach about Jesus was not something to be hated and despised but loved and cherished and trusted for salvation. The man who once believed he was saved by his religious fanaticism was led to believe he was saved by Christ's perfect life and perfect death. Instead of believing Jesus' resurrection from the dead was a hoax and a lie, he believed it was true. In an amazing moment of time, God's grace led him to throw away all his false beliefs and accept what the Christians were teaching about Jesus.

"God's grace was poured out to me abundantly." Isn't that the story of your life and my

life? "God's grace was poured out to me abundantly." The word that is used here in the Greek language has a prefix from which we get the word "hyper." A hyperactive kid is one who runs all over the place. God's grace was poured out all over the place when Jesus died on the cross for our sins. Here are all the shameful things you have done wrong in your life that deserve eternal death and punishment, and they all get put on Jesus, and removed completely by his blood that was shed for you. Listen to how Paul describes this amazing grace in Romans 5, "Where sin increased, grace increased all the more."

Did Paul ever forget the cries of anguish that came from Christians he persecuted, or the sound of the stones hitting the body of Stephen with a dull thud? I don't think he ever completely forgot the shameful things he had done, but he knew that God's grace that had been poured out for him in Jesus meant these sins were forgiven. When we remember the sins of our past life, we cling to the cross of Jesus desperately and remind ourselves with confidence and hope, "The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanses us from all sin."

Because the past is forgiven, and the future is guaranteed, then the present becomes exciting. Every moment of life on this earth becomes an opportunity to glorify God for his saving grace, as Paul did with his life and John Newton did with his life.

God's grace puts meaning and purpose in life

God's amazing grace opens our eyes to see that he wants all people to come a knowledge of the truth. Paul wanted everyone to come to know what God's grace had given to him. That is why he says, "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance, Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-of whom I am the worst." Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. When Jesus visited the home of the tax collector named Zacchaeus Jesus silenced his critics with the words, "For the Son of Man has come to seek and save that which was lost." Jesus told parables or stories about a woman losing her coin and searching for it, and a shepherd searching for a lost sheep to show his fervent desire to reach out with his amazing grace to all people. One of the first verses you ever memorized from the Bible was "God's so loved the world that he gave his only begotten so that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." Jesus even reached out to a thief as he was dying on the cross and said to him, "Today you are going to be with me in Paradise."

How do we help people see that Jesus' death and resurrection is meant for them? How can I be sure that God's love is for me, especially if I have done a lot of bad things in my life? Paul says, "Look at me. If God's grace could rescue me and forgive me, it can also rescue you." "But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life." The great heroes of faith in the Bible with names like Paul, and David, and Peter, and Jacob and Abraham, were not always such great heroes. Their lives were marred by sin, and yet it was God's grace that rescued them. If there is room beneath the cross of Jesus for people like Paul, then there is room beneath the cross of Jesus for people like you and me. This past week I heard of a pastor from Southern California who has this huge church that took over the former home of the Los Angeles Lakers. He has written a book called, "The Champion in You." Can't you see the Apostle Paul jumping up and down and saying, "Don't look for the champion in you? Look for your champion in Jesus. Look at God's amazing grace that has rescued me and also you." Give him the glory as Paul does with these words, "Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever."

In one of the biographies of John Newton's life it says that he had a large scar on his leg, left over

from when the captain rescued him from drowning by sticking a harpoon in his leg. We have the scars from our past life that we carry with us, but more important we have the grace of God that rescued us. We share this song with Paul, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-of whom I am the worst." So we sing, "Chief of sinners tho' be, Jesus shed his blood for me. Died that I might live on high. Lives that I might never die. As the branch is to the vine, I am his and he is mine." Amen.