

"The Worst Sinner"

1 Timothy 1:12-17

September 12, 2010

16th Sunday After Pentecost

On Saturday, February 17, 1992, a man stood in a courtroom before a judge in Milwaukee, Wisconsin to be sentenced. His sentencing was being televised and every eye in the state (including mine for I was serving in Wisconsin at the time) was watching. When asked if he had any last words, he said,

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

The man's name was Jeffrey Dahmer, one of the most notorious serial killers our country has ever seen. Some of you may remember this gruesome case. He confessed to killing 17 young men (including one deaf man), dismembering some of his victims, necrophilia, and cannibalism. And those were the least horrifying things that he did. He did even more shocking things which we can't mention here. And here he was, claiming the mercy of Christ.

This all made for interesting conversation in Bible Class the next day at church. Many people were a bit indignant at Dahmer's use of Scripture. So I asked them, "Does God love all people?" "Yes," they answered. "Does God forgive all who repent and trust in Jesus Christ?" "Yes," they answered again. "Then," I said, "Does God love and forgive Jeffrey Dahmer?" "NO!", they replied. "What if he is truly repentant and trusts in Jesus?". "No" or shrugged shoulders were the two answers given. Even though the Scripture text talks about grace for the worst sinner, Jeffrey Dahmer's sin seemed to be just too bad to be forgiven.

And that's just the problem: we think that some sinners are just too sinful, either in the amount of sin or the magnitude of a particular sin they commit, to be forgiven. Forgiveness should be for

sinner like St. Paul who wrote the text for today or sinners like us, solid, God-fearing, church-going people who always try to do what's right and best.

But what about St. Paul? Do you know why he said that he was the "foremost" or worst of all sinners? He said, "Formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent." It's not just that he started out not believing in Jesus. He slandered God in forcefully rejecting Jesus Christ. It's not just that he was opposed to Christianity. He persecuted the followers of Jesus. And not only did he persecute Christians, he had Christians imprisoned, tortured and killed. Do you think he really deserved forgiveness?

And what about you and me? We'd like to think that we are morally pretty good. We come to church and put on our best front. But what do we do outside of church? What do we do when no one is looking? And what sort of thoughts ferment in our minds which no one can see? Poet Robert Louis Stevenson once said, "We all have thoughts that would shame hell." Do you think you really deserve forgiveness?

But, you might protest, what about other worse sinners? At least we come to church regularly. What about those who don't? What about those inactive members who have fallen away or, worse yet, what about those people who have never belonged to church? Aren't they worse?

We, at least, *try* to live morally good lives. What about those who don't? What about the homosexuals and the child molesters? What about the unwed mothers and those living together who aren't married? What about the drunkards and the divorced? Aren't they all worse?

The silliness of this whole line of thinking is that the categorizing of sins and sinners into better and worse groups is entirely a man-made mode of thinking. God's categorizing of humans is much simpler. He says, "Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy." (Lev. 19:2). You are either holy or not holy. If you are holy, you are saved. If you are not holy, you are condemned.

Our ranking of sinners from better to bad to worst is pointless. It's like trying to jump your bike across the Grand Canyon. Some might be really bad at bike riding and simply fall off the edge of the

canyon to their death below. Others might try really hard and are able to jump three feet out into the canyon – before falling to their death below. And some super athletes who work hard to get into shape might be able to jump ten feet out into the canyon – before falling to their death below. If you've ever seen Grand Canyon, you know that, in the grand scheme of things, no one will be able to jump across it on a bike. No one will even come close. And the difference between the worst and the best is insignificant and inconsequential. All will end up falling to their deaths.

It is the same with our sin. We'd like to change the words to the sermon hymn which we just sang: *Chief of sinners, though I be, I thank God you're worse than me.* But it's not true. Whether we are the chief of sinners or the least of sinners, we are sinners all the same. Even the righteous acts we manage to do are like filthy rags in God's sight, the Scriptures say. All of us without exception are falling to our deaths below in the canyon of sin no matter how far we manage to get out over it. We are all the worst sinners.

But the worst sinners have the best Savior. There is no denying or doubting that. "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." This is what Jesus is all about. He is not a Law giver – a new Moses – who heaps more rules and regulations upon you and requires obedience from you. He is not an angry Judge who condemns you and requires your life from you. He is not merely a friend who sympathizes with you and requires your friendship back again. He is the Savior who loves you with a love you do not deserve called "grace", rescues you from the mess you've gotten yourselves into, and delivers you from the canyon of death into which you will plunge yourself.

"Christ Jesus came into this world..." He came to you. How astounding that is! Jesus does not wait for you to change or do anything at all before He acts. He takes the initiative. He came into this world from heaven because you could not come from this world into heaven. He sought you out because you could not and would not seek Him out because of your sin. He is the shepherd in His own story who leaves behind all that He has in order to find you – the one dumb sheep who

wandered away and got lost. He is the woman in the story who has plenty of money, but, nevertheless, works hard to find the one coin that has been lost.

“Christ Jesus came into this world to save....” Jesus did not come into the world to be a moral example of how to be good or a teacher to instruct us how to live right. He came to save us because we did not know how to live right and have not been good. Saving always comes at a price – a high price. The cost of saving humanity would be very high. It would require Jesus to endure the depths of hell and offer His life as a sacrifice to God’s justice.

“Christ Jesus came into this world to save sinners.” This is the key phrase here. The word order in the original language is significant: “Christ Jesus came into the world *sinners* to save.” Jesus did not come to rescue holy people from an evil world. Such people don’t exist. Jesus did not come to help pretty good people who are trying their best to get over the hump of sin. Such a thing is not possible. Christ Jesus came into this world *sinners* to save. No matter where you fit into our human based hierarchy of sinners – not so bad sinners all the way to the worst sinners – Christ Jesus came to save you. He bore all sin on the cross – from the least to the greatest. He suffered all punishment for all sinners – those judged to be outstanding citizens all the way down to the bottom of the barrel sinners, the dregs of society. He rose from the grave to life again in order to bring salvation – life with God now, life with God through death and the grave, life with God forever in heaven – for all.

As a result of Christ Jesus coming and saving, He is now free to show grace and mercy to all. Paul, the self-styled worst sinner, found this out. He said, ‘But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.’ He was brought to faith in Christ Jesus, received the forgiveness of sins, and experienced His love. That love, that mercy, that forgiveness changed his life. The blasphemer of God became of His most valuable spokesman. The persecutor of the church became the founder of

many churches. The insolent opponent of the Gospel became one of its chief proponents through His preaching, teaching and writing of much of the New Testament.

There is hope for you, no matter who you are or what you have done; a life-long church member or no church member; a respectable citizen in the eyes of the world or a lousy sinner in those same eyes. God has shown mercy on you through the work of His Son, Jesus Christ. He has given His grace to you in the means of grace – some of you first in your baptisms, while others received that same grace by hearing the Word of God, reading the Word of God, or being taught the Word of God in Sunday School and Bible Classes. His love enfolds you, whether you are here in church, at home, at school or work. That love changes your life, too. You are free from fear to have faith in Christ. You are free from guilt to serve Christ wherever He leads you. You are free from death to live forever.

Was Jeffrey Dahmer saved? Only God knows. Dahmer was baptized while in prison and confessed Christ before he was beaten to death by another inmate in prison on November 28, 1994. Rather than debate Dahmer's destiny or be repulsed by the thought that someone like this could be in heaven, rejoice that the mercy of God extends even to someone like this. Be comforted that God's grace and Christ's salvation is for everyone. For if the grace and mercy of our Lord extend to the worst sinner, then we are home free. "To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen."