

Grace and Mercy — Rev. Denise Stone

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH BIG FLATS NY, 9-15-19

The sermons for the last couple of weeks have served to remind us of the call to do good and the cost of being a disciple of Jesus Christ. These types of sermons, sermons that remind us what it takes to be an authentic follower of Jesus, are necessary because we can at times become complacent in our Christianity. We need the reminder of what we are called to do and be.

This week's sermon brings about a bit of a change of focus. We are being reminded in today's letter to Timothy that the reason for the things we do in Jesus name are ALL because of the Grace and Mercy of God. The example from the life of Paul is the illustration of the power of change in our lives as the direct result of God's Grace and Mercy.

In case you are not familiar with Paul's background, let me give you a thumbnail version. Paul, who had been called Saul, was one of the finest examples you could find of a Pharisee. Pharisees were the religious elites. They studied the Torah and observed religious rules and holidays with great zeal. And Paul was one of the best. So zealous for his Jewish faith that when Christianity first emerged as a movement after the death and resurrection of Jesus, Paul was given

authority by the religious authorities to persecute the followers of Jesus. He was even present at the stoning of Stephen as recorded in the book of Acts. While Paul was on his way to Damascus, he encountered Jesus in a blinding fashion. You can find the full story of Paul's conversion in Acts chapter 9 and following. The important thing to note for today's text is that Paul goes from being a chief persecutor of the church to being one of the most important evangelists for Jesus Christ.

Paul's story is recounted here in I Timothy as a word of encouragement for both the young Timothy and for us. Verses 12-14 remind us of Paul's journey of faith,

¹²I 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.ⁱ

Far too often people think they are not good enough or that they have lived a life that prevents them from becoming a Christian. Paul tells us that kind of thinking is wrong.

Verses 15 and 16 tell us,

¹⁵The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. ¹⁶But 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.

Paul is reminding Timothy that if anyone did not deserve God's grace and mercy, it would have been Paul. Paul received God's mercy – not being punished as Paul's sins required and Paul received God's grace – the free love and salvation available only through faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul is so grateful for the grace and mercy he received that he praises God in verse 17 – “¹⁷To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.”

It is quite appropriate that we observed the Sacrament of Baptism today. The Christian practice of Baptism is completely about mercy and grace. In baptism we recognize that everyone is in need of God's protection and salvation. We extend baptism to infants and children for precisely this reason. We

believe that baptism is a symbol of the protection of God over the lives of those so young and a commitment from the family and the church to raise these young ones in faith, so that when the time is right, they will claim faith in Jesus Christ for themselves.

Having grown up as a Baptist, I did not understand the practice of infant or child baptism. We were taught that baptism was for believers of Jesus only. We missed the picture and reality of God's grace and mercy. If you were to have asked me twenty or thirty years ago, I would have told you that God would not hold a child responsible for their sins until they reached an age of accountability. I would not have seen the need for the symbol of baptism for infants and children.

There is one thing about baptism that I do value from my time as a Baptist and that is the imagery provided. In baptism by immersion the one being baptized is put under the water with the description of dying to sin through Christ and then as coming up out of the water, that we are raised to walk with Christ in newness of life. That is a beautiful picture.

It is this picture that I see when I read today's text. Paul's life is a picture of the change that takes place when we encounter Jesus. Paul went from a person

who did not believe in Jesus, who was hostile to and even approving of the murder those who did believe, to a person whose life was completely transformed by his encounter with Jesus.

None of us here today deserve God's mercy and yet it is extended to us and from the gift of God's grace we have Salvation through Jesus Christ.

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