

14th Sunday after Pentecost
September 11, 2022
“Abundant Grace and Mercy for the Chief of Sinners”
(1 Timothy 1:13-16)
By Rev. Ed Weber

“Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, today’s text for this 14th Sunday after Pentecost is from 1 Timothy 1:13-16

“13 although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. 14 And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. 15 This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. 16 However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life. 17 Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.”

Chief. That’s a word that we normally associate with the best and highest ranking. In the Air Force, the Chief Master Sergeant is the highest enlisted rank. The Chief of police is the head of the police department. The Fire Chief is the head of the fire department. There’s the Chief of Staff, Chief Petty officer, chief of a tribe and so on...And of course, there were the chief priests, leaders of the temple worship and viewed by the people as righteous men. We normally associate a chief with someone who is good, honorable and deserving of the highest respect.

But Paul pulls a fast one on us, doesn’t he? He surprises us because he turns the word around and uses it to describe the worst person there is in the world – himself – chief of sinners. He puts himself at the top of the list of sinners. He’s worse than the worst serial killers in history. In first Corinthians 15:8, Paul calls himself the least of the apostles, and one born out of due time.

The word that Paul uses to describe himself in Greek as the chief of sinners is the word “first” (Protos). We get the word prototype from that -the first model of something.

Paul before he was called Paul was called Saul, a persecutor of the Christ's church. Acts 9 describes him this way: **“Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.”**

But on his way to Damascus, we know that God had new plans for Saul – plans of abundant grace and mercy! Saul was stopped in his tracks, blinded by Jesus' light and was converted. He was led to Damascus where he waited three days for Ananias to come. While he waited, he prayed and fasted. He repented and was baptized by Ananias for the forgiveness of his sins.

God had sought out and found His lost sheep who had strayed. And as we heard in the Gospel reading in Luke 15, there was rejoicing in heaven!

“I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance.”

The ninety-nine sheep, who were they? Well, Jesus was talking specifically to the Pharisees and Scribes who were criticizing Him of eating with sinners. They Pharisees and Scribes showed no mercy to the lost, for they did not know mercy. They criticized Jesus for healing people on the Sabbath, believing they were made just by a strict observance of the Sabbath rather than show mercy to another. Dr. Paul Kretzmann in his Popular Lutheran Commentary on the Bible says, “The ninety and nine just persons that need no repentance are evidently people like the Pharisees and scribes, who in their own opinion are not in need of a Savior.”

Yes, they believed they were righteous in themselves. In the Greek, Jesus says that they literally in their own eyes “have no need of repentance.” Is there any person in this world that has no need of repentance?

In Matthew 9, Jesus said this of the Pharisees who spoke badly of Him for eating with the tax collectors and sinners.

“12 When Jesus heard that, He said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. 13 But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice.’ For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.”

All people need a physician for the sickness of their sins. Paul admitted it. He even says that he “is” chief of sinners, not was. For we daily repent of our sins and daily receive God's abundant mercy in Jesus Christ.

Sadly, the Pharisees who believed they were righteous and needed no physician were the 99 left in the wilderness. In the wilderness they are alone and abandoned by their rejection of Jesus.

But, God doesn't want anyone to be lost. He came to His own people who rejected Him, but He also sent Paul to the Gentiles – to you and me. So, Paul says in Romans 1:

“16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “The just shall live by faith.”

We were not first to hear the Good News of Jesus, but the last will be first. So we hear in Hebrews 3:

“7 Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: “Today, if you will hear His voice, 8 Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, In the day of trial in the wilderness, 9 Where your fathers tested Me, tried Me, And saw My works forty years.”

Let each of us humble ourselves daily before God, see the sickness of our sins, and say in our own hearts, “I am chief of sinners”. And then receive as Paul did the abundant mercy and grace that covers all your sins! Through faith in Jesus you are justified and righteous in His eyes!

Paul's life was dedicated to getting this message out. He says in 1 Corinthians 15.

“3 For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.”

First of all! The chief teaching of the whole Bible is the Gospel message of forgiveness of all sinners. **“This is a faithful saying”**, Paul says in our text. We can absolutely trust God's Word.

“and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am chief.”

For 2000 years God has been holding up the example of Paul's conversion before mankind. Anyone who says: "I've sinned too great or too much to be saved" need only look at the example of St. Paul and be comforted.

He who was a blasphemer, a persecutor, an insolent man received mercy. **“for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life.”**

God used Paul as a “first” example for all of us. If God could do this for Paul, certainly he can do it for you and me! For with God nothing is impossible.

God shows all long-suffering for you and me. He patiently calls us and fervently seeks us out when we stray. He calls us to repentance that there would be rejoicing daily in heaven over you a lost and found sheep. God doesn't give up. He looks until He finds. Like a woman looking for the lost coin, He sweeps the house.

Romans 5:8 tells us **“But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”**

This is what God shows to all people, tax collectors, sinners – lost sheep. He shows us Jesus His Son the Savior of the world. So that all who believe on Him receive everlasting life!

Jesus was the first fruits of those risen from the dead. He conquered sin, death and the devil by His death and resurrection on the first day of the week. When John saw Jesus in his vision in Revelation, he was overcome with fear in the presence of God.

“And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me, "Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last.” (Rev. 1:17)

We need not fear, ever! For Jesus is our First and Last for all of us who are the first, the chief of sinners! For through Jesus, our Chief Cornerstone, He has made us part of His holy Christian Church. The church of the Firstborn, whose names are registered in heaven! (Hebrews 12:23) So, we who are last, are first in His eyes!

“To the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honor and glory forever and ever.” Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your heart and minds through Christ Jesus.” Amen. (Philippians 4:7)