

“Mercy” (I Timothy 1:12-17)
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How often the apostle Paul must have asked himself “What COULD I’ve been thinking?!” We think of Paul as one of the most transformed figures in the Bible. Everything that meant something to him at one time in his life, becomes the opposite of what he later gives his life to and is even executed for. He became a new man when he experienced Christ revealed to him on the road to Damascus; he sees the light; he finds a fundamentally new truth that alters who he is and who the early church becomes.

Like anyone who has received a great unexpected, undeserved blessing, Paul is euphoric in his language and expression. Perhaps the measure of a person’s gratitude is related to the measure of mercy received. Those who’ve known deep poverty remember and are exceedingly grateful when they find economic security. Those who have journeyed the valley of the shadow know a depth of joy beyond the ordinary appreciation of each day. Those who’ve known great loneliness appreciate friendships and faithful relationships more than the popular person who is always surrounded by admirers. So Paul’s discovery that he had been so very wrong; he’d caused such great suffering; and he’d done nothing to deserve this great mercy he’d received makes him effusive in gratitude and dedication to the gospel.

Now we know from careful scholarly research that the letter of I Timothy was not actually penned by Paul but someone in the 2nd century, perhaps a disciple of Pauline schools, and yet a person who had listened and learned Paul’s good news. The writer knew Paul’s teaching and particularly Paul’s gratitude for the mercy he’s received, and he speaks for Paul and in Paul’s name to the church who is the result of Paul’s missionary work. He uses phrases and words that not only reflect Paul’s gratitude for mercy but he uses words that would resonate with the hearers of the church of his day.

If you recall last Sunday, I tried to paint a picture of the world in which Paul and the church of the 1st and 2nd centuries lived. It was a world dominated by the presence of many Greek and Roman gods, and emperors who had themselves declared gods or sons of god and ordinary human beings referred to as saviors. These gods acted willfully and were not very dependable. They could be bribed by sacrifice and manipulated to justify the emperor’s purposes. To this religious backdrop, the writer of this text says, “no.” The writer puts God and Christ within the literary phrases where others might use the names or titles of Apollo, Isis, King, Lord, etc. The writer of I Timothy proclaims (as Paul, himself would have done) Christ (not Caesar) has the power to save, and the adjectives that would have proclaimed Roman deity such as “immortal, invisible” are used to describe the essence of God and Christ as God revelation to the world.

These words are written to people who had waited longer than they ever imagined they’d wait for the *parousia* -- the return of Christ to make the world right. And so their short-term expectation became a long-term waiting and their frame of reference shifted from “how can we make it through another day of persecution because Jesus is coming any day now,” to “how do we live faithfully in the meantime in an unwelcoming and threatening world.” For the writer of I Timothy, who knew the mind of Paul, the answer is gratitude! The saving power of Christ helped the early church to live faithfully in the meantime. Salvation was not just for a life later on, but was a present day salvation that gave life transformed meaning, and it is so wonderful that the liturgy of the church expressed here in I Timothy overflows with enthusiasm and gratitude!

The United Church of Christ's statement of faith says: *God seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.* This aimlessness is the sin of missing the mark of a life consistent with God's purposes, not living fully in the spirit of Christ which is the very essence of God.

Perhaps you've known people who just can't seem to break free from living lives of aimlessness. They have chosen lives stuck in disappointment and regret. They don't want help; they don't believe they need help. To be saved is just too scary and would demand something of them. Jesus once questioned to a man who asked for healing: "*Do you want to be made well?*"

Unfortunately, there are some people who are more comfortable being aimless and blaming others for their condition. I know someone like this. He's had his share of disappointments; he had a difficult childhood; he made some mistakes. But he's also experienced enough good in life and enough success that if he chose to be saved from aimlessness, he could be resurrected to new life. Instead, he hides from life, from his family, and refuses the mercy that could be transforming.

But then there are other people who have chosen life, but life's circumstances have not been kind to them. I remember my first semester in seminary, my professor Frank Rogers, said that we as future pastors needed to always remember the depth of despair and the burdens that some people bring with them to worship. To make his point he played a song. Let's listen to that song, *I Dreamed a Dream*, from Les Miserable.

*I dreamed a dream in time gone by when hope was high and life worth living.
I dreamed that love would never die; I dreamed that God would be forgiving.
Then I was young and unafraid, and dreams were made and used and wasted.
There was no ransom to be paid; no song unsung; no wine untasted.
But the tigers come at night with their voices soft as thunder,
As they tear your hope apart, as they turn your dreams to shame.*

*He slept a summer by my side. He filled my dreams with endless wonder.
He took my childhood in his stride; But he was gone when autumn came.
And still I dream he'd come to me that we would live the years together.
But there are dreams that cannot be, and there are storms we cannot weather.
I had a dream my life would be so different from the hell I'm living
So different now from what it seemed; now life has killed the dream I dreamed.*

This song touches a pain many have felt sometime in their lives. We live in a world that is far from perfect. We know suffering or see the suffering of others. And we may ask why, "Why must it be so?" But we cannot place responsibility for the ills of the world on God. We worship God not because God fulfills our every wish, but we worship God because God is love. God is the good, the true, the essence of all that is worthy of the eternal. Christ's life had its difficult moments; he was lonely; he shed tears; he pleaded, prayed for life to be different. God did not punish him or abandon him even in his darkest hour. And no matter where his future led, Christ knew the mercy and love of God, and he chose to be faithful; he chose life.

It is because God is love; it is because God shows us mercy that we, too, can choose to live from a deep reservoir of gratitude. It is because God is love that we can rise up from the disappointments or despair that the world throws at us. And if life kills our dreams, it is grace and mercy that may enable us to dream new ones. It is because we are loved with a love that knows neither beginning nor end, that each and every day we can choose life.