

1 Timothy 1: 12-17
Luke 15: 1-10
September 12, 2010
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

This morning's anthem asks a provocative question, "what are we to give to give to those beyond these walls?" It is all the more provocative on the day where we gather to begin the church program year. The words of the anthem are deepened and expanded by the words of scripture.

In his first letter to Timothy the apostle Paul presents himself as one who at one time *was* outside of the walls of the Christian community. Paul describes himself as so outside of the Christian faith that he persecuted anyone who was within. He was blinded by the belief that he was within the *true faith* of the Judaism of the Pharisees.

From Paul we realize that believing we are safe within walls of "true" faith while others are "out" in delusion and error is dangerous spiritual territory. Such a belief blinds us to the profound limitations of our faith and our perception of God.

It is also from Paul that we are presented with a healthy and powerful dynamic of faith. In the passage we heard Paul writes:

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

From this I want you to notice three things. First, Paul does *not* begin with what a miserable sinner he was and, in his mind still is. He begins with the truth that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. There is absolutely no way to understate the

importance of this—not for Paul, not for you and me. It is fundamental to Christian faith that God’s love in Jesus Christ *precedes everything!* In his letter to the Romans Paul states that “while we were yet sinners, Christ died for the ungodly.” This means that when we were lost in life and even unaware that there was a God, God in Jesus Christ was looking for us.

This indeed is the sense of the parables of the lost coin and the lost sheep. The Bible teaches us that every human being is lost. We may not use the word sinner; but I think we can all relate to the deep down experience of being lost.

Singer songwriter Don Mc Lean captures this experience in a little known song:

You know, I’ve heard about people like me; but I never made the connection:
They walk the road to set them free, but find they’ve gone the wrong direction.

Yet the Good News of the gospel is that even if we are heading in precisely the wrong direction, God in Jesus Christ is seeking us. Indeed we are in his sight. We may not see Jesus *but Jesus sees us. He has always seen us.* Indeed, such is the grace of God in Jesus Christ that while we may feel lost, alone and afraid, in Jesus Christ we are not lost. We are found in his love. In Christ we are destined—you might even say *pre-destined*—for mercy, forgiveness and eternal peace. When we accept that in Christ there is no wrong direction and that in him we are *found*, then there is no such thing as a wrong direction all paths lead to the love of God.

Friends, if you get nothing else from this message please get this: The first and best thing we can do for those beyond the walls of this sanctuary is to claim before we had anything to say about it, God in Jesus Christ came looking for us, found us and joined us to God’s family. We had nothing to do with it. Why is this important?

This leads to the second thought that comes from Paul to Timothy: even though we are found by and in the grace of God in Jesus Christ we do not pretend that we are all perfect. Not only do we remember what it was like to be walking in the wrong direction with no idea of where to go. *We still go off the path.* I love the prayer that goes something like this:

Lord, I am completely at peace, I have not angry thoughts, I have not said or done anything stupid or hurtful. But I am about to get out of bed to begin my day and so I ask that you will be with me for the time that I am awake and help me. Amen.

The quality here is humility. We who gather here are literally no different than those who are beyond these walls. Indeed, lest we get too puffed up, it is my experience that many people who do not go to church and may not even be Presbyterian have a better record of being on a godly path than I do. In short, there is no room “within” these walls for judgment or feelings of superiority. We are here because we have been led here by a love that found us when we were lost and which continues, patiently and persistently, continually to reach out and find us.

And so the next thing we can do for those beyond these walls is simply to be who we are—no more and, this is important, no *less*. We are called to be people who are authentic and who freely and thankfully point beyond ourselves to the all surpassing love of God in Jesus Christ.

The third idea we get from Paul’s letter to Timothy is that this grace has a larger purpose. Paul states that God in Christ Jesus did not save him for his own sake alone. Indeed Paul sees this wonderful gift as God’s way of making God’s grace in Jesus Christ visible to people who are, in the words of Don McLean, looking for freedom but “walking in the wrong direction.”

Notice how Paul believes this will happen: "...I received mercy so that in me...Jesus Christ might display *the utmost patience*, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life." No miracle healings. No majestic visions. No dynamic sermons. Paul says that the whole point boils down to the witness that God has been and continues to be *patient* with him. The King James Version translates the Greek word here as "longsuffering." There are times when the KJV gets it right.

Modern technology has given us a wonderful illustration of God's patience and indeed God's long suffering. It is called the GPS. If you do not own one, a GPS is a computerized satellite guide for travel. You simply type in the address where you want to go and the GPS tells you how to get there. Our GPS has a voice which faithfully announces what to do and when to turn. But on occasion, whether by confusion or because I think I know better, I take a different turn from the one Garmin (as I fondly call her) has planned. When this happens, Garmin does not yell at me. She calmly and patiently says, "recalculating" and charts a course from the point of my departure from the true path. Call me crazy, but there are times when I detect a note of longsuffering entering Garmin's computerized tone.

Friends, we are—individually and collectively—people for who God is continually recalculating. Our mission to the world is to be, in Paul's words, an example. Again, the King James offers a helpful rendering—that of a *pattern*: what one might call a way of life which points beyond ourselves to the grace of God in Jesus Christ which is always taking us where we are and pointing us back to the path. Our witness is no more and no less to this. And our yearning is for all of God's children to discover the wonderful news that God seeks all of his children every day all the time.

By our faith in this truth; by our experience of being lost and being found; and by our continual witness to the God who in Christ is always recalculating our errant steps and pointing us back and the way of life that comes from this pattern, we pray to become a place and a people where those who outside these walls may say, "I am home." Amen.