A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

“*Even Me*”

1 Timothy 1.12-19, Luke 15

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At the heart of Christianity is the claim made in our reading this morning: Christ Jesus came to save sinners. It was a saying that 1st century Christians would know well, as possibly they confessed this regularly in their worship. It’s not hard to imagine a congregation prompted by their leader to confess together, “Christ Jesus came to save sinners.” If they did that, and it seems they did since 1 Timothy calls is a trustworthy saying, then it’s a confession of faith worth remembering. This is good news.

It is good news grounded in another truth: sinners need saving.

Sinners need saving. 1 Timothy deals early on with false teachers offering their versions of what people need the most. Some said that people at the root are thinkers who need to gain access to secret knowledge; others said people are cauldrons of emotional potential who need to unlock spiritual ecstasy; and still others taught ‘myths and endless genealogies’ whatever those were. People find all sorts of creative ways to make things more complicated than they need to be. When we do that, we lose sight of what is most important. What is most important is: whatever else we are, we are sinners who need saving.

People often have a strong reaction to being told you’re a sinner who needs saving. For some, it’s offensive, an unwelcome verdict from old time religion shoved in their face; for others it’s received as a breath of fresh air; the liberating truth of my need and God’s good grace. How people hear the message may depend on how it’s delivered.

I was in downtown Seattle recently shopping in a bookstore, standing in line at the original Starbucks, looking across the bay at the Olympic Mountains in one direction, and across the city skyline at Mt. Rainer towering in the other. It was a glorious Saturday summer morning. Fish throwers were doing their thing at the Public Market. It was a beautiful day to be alive. About mid-morning though, a megaphone fired up. A man showed up on the street corner with his friends holding posters on poles that read, “You’re all going to hell. Death to sinners. You’re damned.” You don’t even know me, I thought. I’m just standing here in line, minding my own business, trying to get a souvenir cup from a nationally-known provender of slightly burst-roast coffee. That didn’t slow them down. Their spoken words were even harsher, more specific about what sins they thought we were guilty of, and how we were all going to be burnt-roasted. He yelled in the microphone. They marched up and down the street telling us all our wrong doings and what we were gonna get because of it. They were generally just unpleasant people; or at least they were people choosing to be as unpleasant as possible. If they were hoping to be ignored, they did well; if they were hoping to genuinely inspire people to come to Jesus for salvation, I’m not sure that was happening.

I’m not saying people in Seattle don’t need to be invited to change their lives or to come to faith in Jesus. I don’t even know them, but I think that’s probably true everywhere. But while everyone just walked on by, ducking their heads from these guys yelling at them about all their sins, I think people might have actually listened if what they heard instead was a message like, “Friends, children of God, I have good news to share with you. You may be a nice person, nice and pleasant as a Saturday morning, but I wasn’t. I was a terrible person. I’ve done bad things that I regret. I’ve hurt people and hurt myself. I’ve lived as if I had no purpose in life. But I’ve been changed, and I want to share with you good news, which I’ve experienced myself and want so much for you to know, too. Christ Jesus came to save sinners—and I’m the first among all of them. The grace of our Lord overflows with faith and love. Christ has shown me mercy and has mercy overflowing for you as well.” What if the people on the street that day had heard that message? It’s not just a kinder, gentler form of public evangelism. It’s the way another public evangelist, the Apostle Paul saw himself and the world. In Paul, there’s someone who sees so clearly his own sins, that he can feel so profoundly God’s grace, that he can’t help but try to help the world experience it as well. When you’ve found something so good, how can you help but share it with people you love?

We all need the message. We all need salvation. Jesus came for just this purpose, and people flocked to him. All kinds of people, sinful people, came to Jesus. He gave people hope. They came to him so much, that Pharisees got very uncomfortable with the situation. They complained about it, “This man welcomes sinners and even eats with them.” So, Jesus tells a story to try to help them see the world the way he sees it. It’s a story about a shepherd responsible for 100 sheep. Realizing one of them is lost, he leaves the 99 other sheep to go find the one that is lost. He searches for the lost sheep until he finds it. When he has found it, this is a tender image: he lays the sheep on his shoulders and carries it home. Then he calls together everyone to celebrate, “I have found my sheep that was lost.”

It’s a beautiful story about God’s love for the wayward, the lost, those who have wandered off and are in danger. Just so, “I tell you,” Jesus promises, “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance.” So, in God’s economy, if you stack up 99 righteous against 1 lost sinner, The Good Shepherd seeks and saves the lost. That’s a beautiful story, but it leaves a certain question in my mind to pose gently to Jesus. It’s something like this: Jesus, the ratio in your story: 99 righteous vs 1 lost sheep . . .do you really understand what you’re getting into down here? That’s not the way things work down here. The lost sheep is not the 1% exception. We’re all lost down here. We all drift away. We’re all prone to wander, prone to leave the God we love. We all have things in our past we are ashamed of. We have habits and tendencies we would like to overcome. We have wayward thoughts, mean thoughts, idolatrous thoughts; we all fall short of the glory of God. Please don’t tell us you really think 99 of 100 don’t need you. If that’s so, we’re without hope. When you come down here, you’re not looking for 1 lost sheep among 100, you’re looking for each of 100 lost sheep all lost in their own ways. We all need you. We may resist you; we may run from you; we may mock, deny, and crucify you, but we need you. We all need you.

I suspect Jesus knows fallen human nature better than I give him credit. The story of the lost sheep is the first of three stories in Luke 15 of lost and found. In the three stories the ratio of lost to found keeps changing. 1 sheep of 100 is lost in the first story. In the second, 1 coin out of 10 is lost. So, we’ve gone from 1% to 10%. In the third story, it’s about sons. One of two sons is lost, the prodigal son. So now we’ve gone from 1 to 10 to 50% is lost. And by the end of the prodigal son story, the truth of the three stories is finally fully revealed. Even the older son is lost in his hard heart, too. It’s not just 1 of 100 of us, or just 1 of 10 of us, or even just 1 of 2 of us. It’s all of us. We all need a savior. Have mercy, Lord.

This is where Paul is most profound because this is the hard truth and good news he knows so well. The main point of his letter isn’t that all people are indolent, worthless sinners and they need to be told that over and over from a megaphone. The main point is people are sinners in all kinds of ways, and for the most part they already know it on some level and just don’t know what to do about it. What they need to be told, over and over is what they don’t know: that they are not alone; Christ Jesus came to save sinners, people like you and me. We need to be saved from our sin; we need to be saved from death; we need to be saved from the ways our lives are broken and the ways our lives break others and the world. To be saved is to be made whole, restored to the image of God in whom we are created. We are saved from our selves; we are saved for the good of others; we are saved for a purpose, a divine purpose that has claim on our lives.

Even me, St. Paul confesses, I was a blasphemer against God, a persecutor of Christians, a man of violence against my opponents. I acted ignorantly in unbelief.

My words were wrong.

My attitude was wrong.

My actions were wrong.

I hurt people.

I was ignorant.

I didn’t have faith.

And yet even to me the grace of our Lord overflowed with faith and love. Christ Jesus came to save sinners—of whom I am foremost. I am the foremost example of God’s utmost patience and mercy. Whatever you’ve done, you can’t outdo me; however gone you are, you’re not as lost as I was. You can’t outdo me in sin; so, join me in the joy of God’s grace.

This is the good news that changes everything.

Paul or someone writing faithfully in Paul’s name wrote many of the books in the New Testament teaching about the way of Jesus to individuals and churches, truths and wisdom that have been passed down to us as holy scripture. In those letters, he opens by expressing gratitude for the person or community to whom he is writing. Paul is effusive in his affection for the people to whom he writes.

To the Romans, “I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you because your faith is proclaimed in all the world.”

To the Corinthians, “I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God given you in Christ Jesus.”

To the Ephesians, “I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.”

The thanksgiving in the letter to Timothy is different. Here, even though his affection for Timothy is well known, he writes, I am thankful for me. I am thankful for myself.

It’s not arrogant or self-centered. When Paul looks in a mirror, he has to smile--not because of who he is: a thinker ascendant to the heights of knowledge, a spiritualist in ecstasy, a moralist achieving strict righteousness, or the inheritor of a glorious lineage. When he looks in a mirror, he sees a man whose life is all the evidence he needs for the goodness and mercy of God flowing and overflowing to him and to all the world.

Even who I was God has used for his glory. Even what I did before demonstrates the goodness of God’s grace. Even the broken road God used for his straight purposes. I am not an example of a God who rewards good behavior with a lifetime achievement award. I am not an example of a God who imparts secret knowledge to the select few who have the intellectual capacity to discern it. I am not an example of a God who judges our worthiness on spiritual ecstatic experiences.

I am the foremost example of a God who gives mercy. You too can be forgiven. You too are beloved. It changes the way we see the world. It changes the way we see ourselves.

When I was in the first grade our teacher gave us an assignment to write an essay called, “If I could be anything in the world, I would be…” I remember that I couldn’t wait to write this essay. I thought I was going to write the world’s most amazing essay. Do you remember the scene in the Christmas Story when Ralphie daydreams that his teacher reads his theme, begins to weep and dance at the paper he has written?

Like Ralphie, I think I got no more than a check for my paper. But I remember what I wrote. I wrote what I think a lot of 1st graders would say, “If I could be anything in the world, I would be me. I like myself. My live is good. I have a nice teacher.”

Have we lost this? Would that we could all say this. By God’s mercy, we can. We are restored. The mercy of God restores what we lost in our innocence; by the grace of God flowing and overflowing, may we feel and may we share the good news Jesus makes possible, that we may confess together that Christ Jesus comes to save sinners. And because of that, “I like myself. My life is good. I have a nice teacher.”

To him--the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

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