

Pentecost-16-c2007

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First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC
Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost
September 16, 2007

1 Timothy 1.12-17
Luke 15.1-10

A Gathering Of Sinners

“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.” –1 Timothy 1.15

Let us pray: In all that we say and do, may the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen. (Congregation is seated.)

September has snuck-up on me this year. It is hard for me to fathom that it is even here, and yet when I look at my calendar, it is half gone! The temptation at the beginning of the church program year is always to jump right in and get to work. The New Testament letters to Timothy invite us to pause before we jump in; they invite us to think together intentionally about what kind of a people we are called by God

to be. It seems to me that this is an invitation we would be wise to accept.

The biblical books of first and second Timothy are among those books that send most of us scrambling if we are asked to find them in the Bible. They are not, like the gospels—or, say, Romans—among the staples of the average Protestant biblical diet. Because of this, a bit of background on these letters is probably in order.

First and second Timothy, along with the letter to Titus, are usually grouped together and labeled as the “Pastoral Epistles.” The three letters received this name because they are preoccupied with issues of church order and with positions of leadership within the community of God’s people. They have been seen as especially important letters for people involved in leading, or “pastoring” churches. Thus, they are known as the Pastoral Epistles.

They are even addressed to people—Timothy and Titus—who were something like what we would call pastors. Timothy had been a co-worker with the Apostle Paul in establishing Christian congregations in the region of Macedonia, along the coast of the Aegean Sea. The

biblical books of first and second Timothy represent themselves as letters of advice from Paul (the seasoned missionary) to Timothy (the young parson).

The modern scholarly discussion of the Pastoral Epistles, since at least the early 1800's, has been dominated by questions regarding the genuineness of the letters. Scholars have been vexed by differences of both style and content between the Pastoral Epistles and the other New Testament letters of Paul. These inconsistencies have led some scholars to dismiss the letters as later, unauthentic writings. Other scholars, with equal vigor have insisted that they are simply the work of an older Paul, a man who wrote and thought differently. Still other scholars have postulated that the letters were written by Paul's personal secretary or perhaps by some of Paul's younger associates after his death.

We would not get far by entering in upon this scholarly debate. Whether or not the letters are the genuine work of Paul, they do play an important part within the final shape of the New Testament as it has been handed down to us today. The Pastoral Epistles extend the authority and the thought of the Apostle into a later period when the first

generation leaders were dying and when Christians had to think more carefully about just what it was they were doing in their life together. Since we are in a similar position, we can read these letters with great profit, whether or not they flow directly from Paul's pen. One of my teachers, Brevard Childs, put it well when he said:

Critical scholarship can indeed clarify a text's interpretation. Yet theologically the community of faith confesses that it has already been provided with a sufficient guide for understanding the Pastorals as sacred scripture. (*The New Testament as Canon*, page 395)

So we read these letters as advice from the Apostle Paul to Timothy, a church leader of the next generation. But really the letters are more than advice to Timothy, the pastor. They are advice to the whole church, to *all* Christians who struggle to live faithful lives in the midst of a sometimes hostile world. Paul wants them to think carefully about what it means to be a church, and he doesn't suggest such thinking as a luxury—for Paul it is the most *urgent* of tasks. In the third chapter of the first letter, Paul indicates this urgency to Timothy. He writes:

I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these instructions to you so that, if I am delayed, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God,

which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth. (3.14-15)

What Paul had to say to Timothy and his church was so important that he couldn't risk waiting for his planned visit, lest somehow the message be lost. We too, then, are to read these letters with a sense of urgency. For if we forget what it means to be the church—or as Paul says, “how one ought to behave in the household of God”—if we forget this, then this place is nothing but a historical landmark, a museum of past faith.

That's the background. Now let's look at just exactly what it is Paul has to say to young Pastor Timothy and his congregation in Macedonia. The first thing Paul wants to do in the letter is to establish his authority to speak as an Apostle of God. Paul sure has an odd way of doing this. We might expect him to write of his academic credentials, “I have a Yale degree,” he might say. We might expect him to write of his official position in the church, “I'm a duly ordained minister according to the faith and order of the United Church of Christ,” or something like that might carry weight. We might even expect Paul to appeal to non-Christians for his authority, “I'm a respected member of

the Chamber of Commerce,” he might say. But Paul says none of these things. What he says instead is really rather shocking:

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. (1.15)

Now, Paul is not merely attempting to ingratiate himself by enlisting the aid of false modesty. When it comes to backing up his claim to be “the foremost of sinners,” Paul has impeccable credentials. Before he was a Christian, Paul—or Saul as he was known back then—had been one of the regions most celebrated persecutors of the followers of Jesus Christ. He had sought out Christians to have them silenced, and if possible, put to death. Speaking of the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, the book of Acts concludes the story by saying, “And Saul approved of their killing them.” (Acts 8.1) Writing to Timothy, Paul admits that he had “formerly blasphemed and persecuted and insulted” Christ. He was a sinner indeed.

It is noteworthy that Paul should bring this information into his letter so early. It is almost as if he is saying that the recognition of sin is the very first task of the Christian church. The church, the household of

God, begins its work, not with the drafting of by-laws, not with the electing of officers, but rather with the communal recognition that its members are in dire need of help and that “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.”

The Christian church is, first and foremost, a gathering of sinners. I know that I don't have to look very far into my life to see that this must be the case. Just adding up my sins of omission, the things I should have done but didn't, is enough to drop me to my knees. And, to be truthful, one doesn't have to look very far into the communal life of this (or any) congregation to see that we are a gathering of sinners. When was the last time you remember us bickering when we should have been praising God? When was the last time you remember us fretting about our building when we should have been looking outward? When was the last time you remember us gossiping when we should have been extending compassion? We are a gathering of sinners.

That fact isn't something to celebrate in and of itself. No, far from it. But *recognition* of that fact *is* something to celebrate. When we recognize that we are under the sway of sin, we begin to recognize that

we need help. Writing in the 1500's, John Calvin said this about the gathering of sinners suggested by 1 Timothy 1:

In the doctrine of our religion, this indeed is the chief point, that we who are lost in ourselves should come to Christ to gain salvation from Him. (*Commentary*)

But for Paul, this fact does not constitute the end of his letter to Timothy, it constitutes the beginning. For Timothy and his congregation and for us, the fact of sin does not constitute the end of our Christian journey, but rather its launch point. When Paul said that he was the “foremost of sinners,” he didn't stop there. He continued:

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. (1.15-16)

The driving force in Paul's ministry, and in his understanding of the church, was the recognition that he was a forgiven sinner. He was a recipient of the mercy of God. And mercy isn't something you keep quiet—you shout about it, and you sing about it! It is quite simply, good news, or what Christians call “Gospel.”

The household of God is built upon the foundation of the Gospel-truth that we are a gathering of forgiven sinners. That is the starting

point from which everything else we say about the church must stem.

This theological perspective positions us in a constant posture of gratitude. Or, more accurately perhaps, this theology prompts us to constantly *return* to a posture of gratitude, for we easily slouch out of it.

When we realize that we are a gathering of forgiven sinners, the first order of business is no longer intellectual, or even moral. The first order of business is to sing out in praises to God, just as Paul does in the final verse of today's reading: "To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen."

(1.17)

Let us pray. We come to you, Lord, seeking mercy. We know we are sinners. Your love does not disappoint us. Your mercy bathes us with grace and fills our hearts with gratitude. Amen.