

Epworth Chapel on the Green
September 15, 2013
Pentecost 17
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Exodus 32:1-14
Psalm 51:1-11
I Timothy 1:12-17
Luke 15:1-10

When Connie and I were younger, the tradition of which we were part had an important component of public worship known as the “testimony.” During many services, persons would be given the opportunity to stand to their feet and to publicly give thanks to God for His grace in their lives.

On rare occasions, this practice was counter-productive, because some folks simply could not resist an “open mic,” and, once they had the floor, the concepts of brevity and staying on point flew out the window like a brisk April breeze.

For the most part, though, hearing the testimonies of others was a positive and uplifting experience. This was especially true with those who always seemed to be able to discern the good and positive ways God was at work in their lives, even in their challenges and struggles.

Our epistle lesson this morning is a classic example of a first-rate testimony. It comes to us from the Apostle Paul. It has all of the characteristic features of a good testimony: it is brief; it is focused God and God’s grace; and it cites something specific that has the potential to inspire others.

Paul says here: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, and I was the worst of them all.”

Paul may be exaggerating a bit, but we should not forget his former life as Saul of Tarsus. He mentions it briefly here. If you read the account of the early church in the Book of Acts, you’ll come to chapter 8 where Stephen, one of the early Christian leaders, is dragged outside of Jerusalem and stoned to death. Luke is careful to observe that a man named Saul is there, encouraging and giving approval to this brutal murder.

Luke goes on to say that Saul then travels from house to house looking for Christians, and when he finds them, he takes them into custody and hauls them off to prison.

Here is a man who genuinely thought he was doing God a favor by killing and imprisoning followers of Jesus.

“But,” says Paul, “God had mercy on me, so that Christ could use me as an example of his great *patience* with even the worst sinners” (v. 16).

Now, come with me for a moment to our Old Testament lesson. Moses is up on Mt. Sinai receiving the Commandments, but he is delayed in coming down. So the people make a golden calf and begin worshiping it and sacrificing to it.

God is so angry with the people that He is ready to wipe them out. But Moses pleads with God to be merciful to the people and spare them. “Remember

your covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” Moses pleads. And God spares the fickle and rebellious people.

Now, come with me for a moment to our Gospel lesson. Jesus attracts a lot of marginal folks like tax collectors, and it bothers the Pharisees and religious leaders that Jesus associates with these people.

So Jesus tells them a story about leaving 99 sheep and going into the wilderness to search for one sheep that was lost. He follows that by telling of a woman who has ten valuable coins and loses one. She lights a lamp and looks in every nook and cranny of the house until she finds that coin. And, like the shepherd who finds the lost sheep, she calls her friends and neighbors together when she finds the lost coin, and they celebrate together.

If you consider all of today’s Scripture lessons – Moses and the rebellious children of Israel; the Apostle Paul’s former life as Saul the murderer and persecutor of the church; the Pharisees and religious types who don’t like Jesus’ social circle, and the shepherd and the woman who search for what has been lost – one powerful reality rises to the surface. And that reality is: *God is infinitely patient with people.*

People like you and me. People like the stiff-necked children of Israel. Self-righteous people like the Pharisees, and self-loathers like tax collectors and prostitutes and housewives and students, those who are unemployed and those who

were told as children that they were worthless and would never amount to anything.

God is patient with men like David, who killed another man in order to have that man's wife. God is patient with women like Gomer, Hosea's wife, who turned her back on the blessings of home and family in order to live her life in bars and brothels.

God is patient with men like Peter, who under great stress denied that he knew Jesus. God is patient with lost sinners, and God is patient with His prodigal sons and daughters who leave home and wander into the far country. And God is patient with men like the Apostle Paul, who in his blind zeal went off half cocked and tried to drive a stake through the heart of the early church.

Which brings us back to Paul's testimony. Paul says to Timothy, "God had mercy on me, so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst of sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life."

Why would Paul say this?

Here's what I think. I think that today, in this small gathering, there are folks here who have had a stressful and difficult week. There are people in this small gathering who are grappling with issues that would make the rest of us drop our teeth to the ground.

There might be someone here this morning who wonders what you're even doing here, because you feel like you've made a mess of things, and you wonder how God can still love you and care about your life.

And here is what I think the Spirit wants to say to you this morning: "If God was patient with Paul and had mercy on Paul and did not give up on Paul, **then God isn't finished with you just yet, either.**"

God, in His mercy, is infinitely patient with us. As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, I invite you to come with faith, as I always do. Come based not on how you *feel*, but come with faith in God's vast and infinite love for you. Come as a child who wants to please your Father. He will meet you here. He will feed you with His grace and strength. He will help you get back on your feet and get back in the race. Then with Paul, you too will say: "Glory and honor to God forever and ever.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.