

GRATITUDE FOR MERCY

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

About ten days ago Cheryl, our church secretary, stuck her head in the door of my study and said, “Remember, I’m going to be on vacation next week, so I need bulletin information for September 11 and September 18.” What you see in today’s bulletin is what I gave Cheryl without having spent any time working on my sermon based on 1 Timothy 1:12-17.

If I had given Cheryl information **this** week for today’s bulletin, some things would have been different:

* I did text Curt, Karla, and Vera earlier this week about changing our second hymn from “Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed” to “Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound.” In light of the story about Saul’s experience on the Damascus road, think again about the first line of that much beloved hymn: “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.”

* The sermon title in today’s bulletin, “Gratitude for Mercy,” is not particularly original. That is the subject heading above 1 Timothy 1:12-17 in my study Bible. While it’s not a bad title for this sermon, after working through the text this week, I probably would have chosen a title such as “Salvation for Service” or “Saved to Serve.”

* It’s hard to go wrong affirming our faith with the Apostles’ Creed, but considering what Paul writes to Timothy about his own experience of God’s grace and his call to service, I would have used a section from “A Brief Statement of Faith” of our Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) which says, “We trust in God the Holy Spirit, everywhere the giver and renewer of life. The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith, sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor, and binds us together with all believers in the one body of Christ, the Church. In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit, we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks and to live holy and joyful lives, even as we watch for God’s new heaven and new earth, praying, ‘Come, Lord Jesus!’”

Speaking of God’s grace, someone reminded me on Wednesday about the man who died and went to heaven. St. Peter met him at the pearly gates and said, “Here’s how it works. You need 100 points to make it into heaven. You tell me all the good things you’ve done, and I give you a certain number of points for each deed, depending on how good it was. When you reach 100 points, you get in.”

“Okay,” said the man. “I was married to the same woman for 50 years and never cheated on her, even in my heart.” St. Peter said, “That’s wonderful. That’s worth three points.” “Only three points?” asked the man. “Well, I attended church all my life

and supported its ministry with my tithe and service.” “Terrific,” said St. Peter, “that’s certainly worth a point.” “One point!” cried the man. “Okay, how about this? I started a soup kitchen in my city and worked in a shelter for homeless veterans.” “Fantastic,” said St. Peter. “That’s two more points.” “TWO POINTS!” shouted the man. “At this rate, the only way I’m gonna get into heaven is by the grace of God.” St. Peter smiled and said, “Come on in!”

The joke is right — you can’t *earn* your place in heaven. That’s given to you by the grace of God, a pure gift. But the “works” that the flustered man listed for St. Peter are nothing to laugh at. However, it’s important to get the order right. As Ephesians 2:8-10 reminds us, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Jesus Christ for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”

From May 29-31, 1934, thirty-nine ordained ministers, fifty-three church members, and six university professors representing the Lutheran, Reformed, and United churches met in the Gemarke Church, Barmen, in the city of Wuppertal, Germany. “The Theological Declaration of Barmen was written by [this] group of church leaders . . . to help Christians withstand the challenges of the Nazi party and of the so-called ‘German Christians,’ a popular movement that saw no conflict between Christianity and the ideals of Hitler’s National Socialism.”

The declaration cites scripture texts and rejects false doctrines. The delegates stated, “As members of Lutheran, Reformed, and United churches, we may and must speak with one voice in this matter today. Precisely because we want to be and to remain faithful to our various Confessions, we may not keep silent, since we believe that we have been given a common message to utter in a time of common need and temptation. . . In view of the errors of the ‘German Christians’ of the present Reich Church government which are devastating the church and are also thereby breaking up the unity of the German Evangelical Church, we confess the following evangelical truths. . .”

The second affirmation cites 1 Corinthians 1:30, “Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption.” The declaration then boldly proclaims, “As Jesus Christ is God’s assurance of the forgiveness of all our sins, so in the same way and with the same seriousness is he also God’s mighty claim upon our whole life. Through him befalls us a joyful deliverance from the godless fetters of this world for a free, grateful service to his creatures. We reject the false doctrine, as though there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords — areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him.”¹

I have always liked Flannery O’Connors’ comment about the Apostle Paul, “I reckon the Lord knew that the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse.” Of course, the Damascus road story doesn’t say a word about Saul riding on a horse, but maybe he decided not to walk the 150 or so miles from Jerusalem in the south to Damascus up north.

Whether Saul was on horseback or on foot when he met the risen Lord in person, he ended up on the ground when a light from heaven flashed around him and a voice said, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” This story about Saul’s “Damascus road experience” is often called “The Conversion of Saul.” Certainly Saul was a changed man. However, he wasn’t really converted, at least not in the sense of changing from no faith to faith, or from worshiping one God to worshiping another god. Instead, Saul’s up-close-and-personal encounter with Jesus redirected Saul’s zeal for and devotion to serving God. Saul was called to a new way of life and a new ministry.

Paul certainly seems to reflect on his Damascus road experience and call to a new life and ministry when he writes to Timothy, “I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.” (1 Timothy 1:12-14)

Maybe you have had your own Damascus road experience. Perhaps you know someone whose life has been turned around by God’s grace and mercy in Jesus Christ. Or, your faith may have been nurtured through the years, quietly and consistently. Nowhere in the New Testament does Paul ever say something like, “Unless you have a dramatic Damascus road experience like mine, your faith is not valid.” In fact, in his second letter to Timothy, Paul writes, “I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you.” (2 Timothy 1:4b-5)

What the Apostle Paul **does** encourage us believers to do is to lead a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called in Christ Jesus. In our Presbyterian, Reformed theology we talk about the connection between truth and goodness. This is one of the historic principles of our Presbyterian Church (USA) which have been in place since 1788. The connection between truth and goodness is really about how to live out our faith in God. In other words, we hold “that truth is in order to goodness; and the great touchstone of truth, its tendency to promote holiness, according to our Savior’s rule, ‘By their fruits ye shall know them.’ . . . We are persuaded that there is an inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty. Otherwise it would be of no consequence either to discover truth or to embrace it.”²

Last Saturday, Pat Barrow, Jim Sills, and I spent the day at the presbytery office in Elizabethtown with the other members of the Committee on Preparation for Ministry. That committee is charged with the oversight of men and women who are in the process of discerning their call to the ordained ministry of Word and Sacrament. We met with five people. Three were applicants to be enrolled as Inquirers. The inquirer phase is a time to ask questions and to explore God’s call. A fourth person who is already an Inquirer brought us up-to-date on his seminary education and ministerial work in Richmond. The fifth person was an applicant for Candidate status. The entire presbytery will vote on October 8 on our committee’s recommendation that he be en-

rolled as a Candidate. This is the final, major step in the process that leads to ordination as a Teaching Elder in the Presbyterian Church (USA). Two of these people went to seminary right out of college. One person used to be the vice-president of his family's automobile business. Another woman served in the U.S. Army. The final person is currently working as the director of youth ministries at a Presbyterian church. All of these people shared their call stories with us — how “the grace of our Lord overflowed with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.” In their particular cases, part of their response of gratitude for God's mercy in Jesus Christ is to discern God's call to the ordained ministry of Word and Sacrament.

Last Sunday at our congregational meeting following worship, you elected Curt, Dean, Linda, Jason, and Geneva to be elders in the session's Class of 2019. In the next couple of months, these elders-elect and I will be learning more about the duties of the office of elder. One of my favorite parts of officer training is hearing people tell their stories of faith and how they try to live out their faith in God in gratitude for the grace and mercy God has shown them in Jesus Christ. In their particular cases, their response of gratitude for God's mercy is, in part, heeding God's call to serve Christ and his church by being ruling elders in the church.

But we are **all** saved for service, whether it is in the church or in the world around us. Both John Calvin and Martin Luther valued the work of all Christians. They drew a sharp contrast between the traditional call of clergy of the time to be “out of the world” and the Christian call “into the world.” As one person has said in reflecting on Luther and Calvin, “[they] regarded vocation as a calling *into* the everyday world. The idea of a calling or vocation is first and foremost about being called by God, to serve Him within his world. . . Activity within the world, motivated, informed, and sanctioned by Christian faith, was the supreme means by which the believer could demonstrate his or her commitment and thankfulness to God. To do anything for God, and to do it well, was the fundamental hallmark of authentic Christian faith. Diligence and dedication in one's everyday life are a proper response to God.”³

How can we say “Thank you” to God for his mercy and grace to us in Christ Jesus? We can certainly begin by joining Paul in his doxology of praise: “To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever.” But we can also say “Thank you” to God by living a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called.

God's amazing grace has saved wretches like us, but God's grace has not just delivered **us**, but has delivered us for the sake of **others**.

In our gratitude for God's mercy, let us remember that we are also saved to serve.

Let us pray: Lord God of heaven and earth, with gladness we praise you: for making us in your image to love one another and to care for your creation; for the gift of your Son who redeems us according to your grace and guides us according to your will; for your Holy Spirit who empowers us to show your love to others. We offer all praise and honor to you, one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

NOTES

¹ “The Theological Declaration of Barmen,” in *The Book of Confessions: The Presbyterian Church (USA)* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 1999), Sections 8.13-8.15, p. 249.

²*Book of Order 2015-2017: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA), Part II* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 2015), Section F-3.0104, Truth and Goodness, p. 12.

³Alister McGrath, “Calvin and the Christian Calling,” June 1999 at www.firstthings.com.