**September 11, 2022 1 Timothy 1:12-17**

***The Story We Share***

**Scripture:** *1 Timothy 1:12-17 NRSV*

*(12)I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, (13)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, (14)and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. (15)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. (16)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. (17)To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.*

**Notes:**

1. Paul is talking about the ***law***.
   1. Paul was a blasphemer, a persecutor, a man of ***violence***.
   2. Paul has a desire to tell of the ***mercy*** and ***grace*** extended to him by Christ Jesus.
2. We wonder “***Mercy***?”
   1. Paul is ***sharing*** what the Lord has done in his life.
   2. You can never testify to what the Lord has done in your life without talking about ***yourself***.
3. Paul has learned to live with that awful “***thorn*** *in the flesh*,”
   1. Paul talks only of God’s ***mercy*** and ***grace***.
   2. Those who testify most often, talk of God’s redeeming ***grace*** and endless ***mercy***.
4. God’s ***mercy*** has been given to us.
   1. We too have our ***thorns*** in the flesh.
   2. God knows these things that ***scar*** your heart.
5. What is your ***testimony***?
   1. How have you seen God’s ***grace***?
   2. “The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance – that Christ Jesus came into the world to ***save*** ***sinners***.”
   3. Don’t you think that’s worth your ***testimony***?
6. The story we ***share*** tells others what the Lord is capable of doing in the lives of others.
   1. ***Share*** what the Lord has done in your life
   2. Consider your testimony, and then ***share*** it with others.

**Script:**

I have often shared that growing up I felt deprived because I would always miss Bonanza on Sunday nights, or maybe I would complain because I never got to see the end of the wonderful world of Disney, why, because I had to go to church. Every Sunday evening growing up we would stop at my grandma and pap Davis’s to pick up my grandma and you could bet that the wonderful world of Disney was either getting close to the end or Bonanza was just starting when it was time to leave. I believe the word I have heard used for Sunday evenings was that it was an evangelistic service. Most of the time Reverend Brown would have a “come to Jesus” message but occasionally the service would take a turn and Reverend Brown would ask for a testimony. People would begin to testify to how the Lord was working in their life, often people would request prayers for their needs or the needs of friends, and a prayer meeting would ensue.

Now for us kids who did not understand the purpose of such services we just assumed that Reverend Brown did not have a message prepared and was taking a different route to fill the allotted time of the service. I have come to know that this was not the case, because let’s face it, a Pastor can always find something to talk about; Right? But the testimonies we would hear were usually from the same people and each time they testified, they sounded very familiar to the testimonies we had heard weeks before from the same person. Or when the pastor would ask somebody to pray; their prayer was very similar to the prayer they shared weeks before. But every once in a while, somebody would share something that was different, maybe even profound and we would think, “Man, I am glad I was here to hear it. I am glad I came to church.”

In our passage today Paul is writing to his young protégé, Timothy. You can tell that Timothy is much younger, because of the advice that he is given from Paul. You can tell Paul has much more experience, because he has much more advice to share. He talks about protecting himself and others from false doctrine, he says, “Instruct certain people… not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine training that is known by faith.” I doubt Paul would have spoken in this manner to somebody who was older, that may have seemed disrespectful; but with Timothy, he has lots of advice to share. But just when Paul gets on a roll, for some reason Paul switches his direction, Paul shifts gears. We find this in 1 Timothy Chapter 1, verses 12-17. Join me in the reading of our passage today.

***(12)I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, (13)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, (14)and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. (15)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. (16)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. (17)To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.*** *1 Timothy 1:12-17 NRSV*

In the previous verses, especially verses 3-11 Paul is talking about the law. He is telling Timothy what constitutes sound teaching, Paul tells him that it is that which “…*conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me*”. Did you catch that little phrase that Paul slipped in there? “…*the glorious gospel… which he entrusted to me*” I can imagine Paul writing this line and then laying down his pencil, leaning back in his chair, taking off his glasses and reflectively staring off into the distance. Sitting there remembering the places he has been, the perils he has faced, and the struggles that the Lord has seen him through. And then, there is that line, “…*the glorious gospel… which he entrusted to me*”. What an honor it must have been for Paul to be transformed from who he once was into who he is now. Perhaps his eyes get a bit misty as he reminisces, and he folds his hands together as if to pray. Then we see his mind kick back into gear, the gears shift and his direction changes. Paul leans forward, puts his glasses back on, and picks up his pencil; and then he begins what seems to be his personal testimony.

Now I may paraphrase a little here but Paul goes on to say, “*Speaking of God entrusting his glorious gospel to me… I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service…*” Paul goes on to open up his heart to Timothy as he shares with him what he once had been… a blasphemer, a persecutor, a man of violence. Paul then confesses, “*But I received mercy, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus*.” Notice, Paul has no advice here; just an open-hearted desire to tell his young friend how far he has come because of the mercy and grace extended to him by Christ Jesus.

There is a story I read this week about a church board ding a pastoral search. I really doubt that it is true, but it makes you think and consider our stereotypes and biases. This is the way the story goes…

A pastoral search committee was having a difficult time finding a person they thought suitable for their church. They considered a number of candidates, but none seemed to be the kind they felt they needed for their particular challenges as a congregation. One candidate after another was rejected for having some fault or another. If he could preach, he was a lousy administrator. If he was a capable administrator, he couldn’t preach. That sort of thing. Finally, one of the committee members lost his patience. He stood up and read a letter from a pastoral candidate. It went like this…

“*Gentlemen, understanding your pulpit is vacant, I would like to apply for the position. I have many qualifications. I’ve been a preacher with some success and am also noted as a prolific writer. Some say I’m a good organizer, and I’ve been a leader in most places I’ve been.*

*What I do is a labor of love from the grace of God that is within me. Therefore, I require no payment for my services, and am willing to find employment elsewhere in addition to preaching the gospel.*

*I am over fifty years of age, though I have never preached in one place for more than three years. In some places I have had to leave town when my work has caused disturbances or riots. Since you will no doubt want to do a background check, please be advised that I have been in jail three or four times, but not because of any wrongdoing on my part.*

*My health is not too good, though I still manage to accomplish a great deal despite my infirmities. The churches I have served have been small, though located in large cities. Admittedly, I’ve not gotten along very well with religious leaders in the cities where I have preached. In fact, some have threatened me and attacked me physically.*

*I am not too good at keeping records. I have even been known to forget who I have baptized. However, if you can use me, I will do my best for you. Thank you for your consideration.”*

The member of the committee who read the letter said to the others, “Well, what do you think?” The board members looked at each other in astonishment. Why would they ever consider such a person as this? Who signed that letter? The man looked at them and said, “The Apostle Paul.” “…*a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy*…”

We look at all that Paul accomplished in his life and we wonder “Mercy?” What does Paul mean, “mercy”? In another letter, to the church in Corinth, he refers to his “*thorn in the flesh*.” He calls it *“…a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me,*” (2 Corinthians 12:7-8). But to the best of my knowledge, Paul went to his grave with that thorn still intact. You call that mercy?

On more than one occasion Paul refers to that famous story of his conversion on the road to Damascus. There have been times when I was tempted to think that Paul talks too much about himself. But then I read his words very closely. Paul is not talking about himself; he is sharing what the Lord has done in his life. That is how you give a personal testimony. You can never testify to what the Lord has done in your life without talking about yourself.

Paul, or should I say Saul at the time, never applied for the position he was given. Jesus basically accosted him on that road to Damascus, knocked him to his knees so he couldn’t run, and then blinded him with the brightest light imaginable so he couldn’t get away. And what did it get Paul? At another time, Paul is talking about himself (he does that quite a bit, you know), he tells of how he had suffered five – count ’em, five – public whippings and three beatings with a rod. He had been stoned, shipwrecked, and imprisoned. All this because Jesus wouldn’t leave him alone, Jesus kept pushing him to do more. You call that mercy?

And Paul did all of this in addition to that “*thorn in the flesh*.” We don’t know what the thorn in his flesh was, but evidently it was so painful – or maybe we should say shameful – that he doesn’t identify it. “Thorn in the flesh” is a way of disguising it so that while he can tell us about it, he can’t, or won’t, tell us exactly what it was. And while he doesn’t tell us what it was, he tells us that he begged God three times to remove it. You know what my response to that is? Just three times? Is that all? If I had a problem that severe, I think I’d be begging God every waking moment to take it away from me.

I get the feeling that Paul has gotten rather calloused over the years. So much has happened to him that he just doesn’t feel the pain anymore. It happens. Over the years I have punished my body in an effort to be popular, especially in High School. Playing football has left its marks on my body; deformed nose, aching joints, especially in my knees and ankles, all in an effort to be something I am not. I have learned to live with these pains and scars over the years, the pain is still there but I don’t say much about it anymore. After a while you just sort of learn to live with the pain and ignore the visible signs.

I believe that is how it is with Paul. He’s learned to live with that awful “*thorn in the flesh*,” maybe he has become rather numbed to the beatings, perhaps he has learned to expect being thrown in jail? Maybe, maybe not. Regardless, he refuses to talk of anything other than God’s mercy and grace that have been extended to him. I am amazed at those who I hear testify most often, at just how badly their bodies have suffered, yet these people don’t talk of their infirmities, but of God’s redeeming grace and endless mercy. The other day at Prayer Meeting, Ray testified to the beautiful day that the Lord had given us; it was pouring rain and the sky looked very gloomy. Yet , to rain one more day on God’s creation is a beautiful thing, even when it is raining.

It’s pretty amazing when you think about it. We tend to complain about every little hiccup that comes our way, not realizing that God’s mercy has been given to us in such a measure that we hardly even recognize it because we’re so busy complaining. My guess is that we have more in common with Paul than we may realize. We too have our thorns in the flesh. We’ve been beaten down a time or two. Look back over the journey of your life and you’ll find a few shipwrecks lying in your wake, there are some things you have experienced that you’d rather not talk about. God knows these things that scar your heart. Yet, he loves you anyway.

If I asked you to share your testimony this morning, would you speak about these things? Would you admit to your thorn in the flesh? Would you tell us about your beatings, would you tell us about your shipwrecks? Would you, through your tears, mention God’s mercy and grace lavished upon you even, and especially, in those times when you know you were not deserving of it?

There is a story that I have on good authority is true, about a woman whose life was coming apart at the seams. It is from Barbar Brown Taylor’s book, ***Home By Another Way***. Anyway, this woman heard from a friend about a silent retreat being held at a local convent, and she decided to try it even though she had never done anything like that before.

After her arrival, she received her room assignment and was standing in the dormitory elevator with her suitcase in hand when a short, plump nun stepped in beside her. The woman pressed the elevator button for the fourth floor, the nun pressed hers for the third. Then the nun asked, “What brings you to us, my dear?” The woman began spilling her guts. “My mother has just died, I think my father may be an alcoholic, my marriage is falling apart, and I feel like I am going crazy.”

Before she could say anymore, the elevator dinged and the door opened to the third floor. As the nun was exiting to go to her room, she gave the woman a funny little smile. “God must love you very much,” she said, and then the door closed.

What is your testimony? What has Jesus done for you? Where has Jesus brought you from, what has he healed you of, how has he blessed your life, where has He shown you mercy, and how have you seen His grace? Your personal testimony might be filled with the death or the failure of loved ones. Your testimony may be filled with broken relationships or all manner of difficulties, both emotional and physical. The Apostle Paul may have nothing on you when it comes to whatever that thorn in the flesh might be. But remember this: “The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance – worthy of full acceptance – that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” To save sinners like myself, to save sinners like you.

Do you know Jesus as Lord and Savior? If not today could be that day, all you have to do is ask and Jesus will extend his mercy and his grace will flow over you like a river of love. If you do know Jesus as Lord and Savior, how are we to know, unless you share your testimony with others? Tell others of the trials and tests that the Lord has seen you through; share how He has helped you through life’s most difficult moments. Don’t you think that’s worth your testimony? After all, God must love you very much. The story we share tells others what the Lord is capable of doing in the lives of others.

I say this almost every week, but it is worth saying again. You have been called to share what the Lord has done in your life so that others may find the hope the Lord has for their lives. We are to be salt and light. We are to scatter the seed of Jesus' works, recklessly upon the soil of the lives of others, praying that the seed will take root and produce a bountiful harvest. Consider your testimony, and then when given the opportunity, share it with others. It may be by telling our story, just as Paul did so many times, or it might be by living it out in the community, as Paul did each and every day, that others will be drawn into a relationship with our Savior, Jesus.