9-28/29-19 Grace and Mercy Rev. Amy Haines

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Think back to your first day of work, your first day of a new school year, your first day as a parent, your first day as a widow, your first day in a leadership position.

On that first day, was there someone to encourage you? Someone to answers your questions,

show you the ropes, or simply to offer a smile or a hug when things got complicated?

Today, our Scripture is a word of encouragement to a young disciple named Timothy in the first century church. Today, our Scripture is also a word of encouragement to every one of us here in the twenty-first century church.

Timothy was one of the new leaders in the early Christian church who had not personally walked alongside Jesus. He was a mentee of Paul. He was a second generation Christian.

He was young. He had a very different personality than Paul.

Yet Paul trusted in Timothy’s faith and call and gifts enough that Timothy was sent to Ephesus

to assist that embattled congregation through its growing pains and past false doctrine to a strong witness for Jesus.

We think the church today has its issues, yet the church has always had its issues, challenging all of us to work out the messiness of Christian living in our own time and place. That was true for Timothy and the church in Ephesus and is still true for us here in Springboro today.

This letter to Timothy is a word of encouragement that takes us back to the foundation of our faith—a timeless foundation of God’s mercy and grace and call upon our lives.

This letter to Timothy reminds us once again of Paul’s faith journey, from persecutor to prophet, from Pharisee to Apostle, from strict adherence to the Law to the overflowing love and grace and mercy of God. And when we reflect on Paul’s journey, may we also reflect on our own faith journeys, our own experiences of grace and mercy.

MERCY

Paul proclaimed:

“Even though I used to speak against God, attack his people, and I was proud,

I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and without faith.” (v13)

He then went on:

“This is why I was shown mercy,

so that Christ Jesus could show his endless patience to me first of all.

So I’m an example for those who are going to believe in him for eternal life.” (v16)

The apostle Paul, when he was known as Saul, was a righteous Pharisee who believed the people following Jesus were corrupting the Jewish faith, following a traitor rather than the Son of God. He proudly terrorized and arrested those who followed Jesus.

And then he met Christ on the road to Damascus, after Jesus’ death and resurrection. In that moment he received God’s forgiveness for his past ways of judgment and he was called to a new way of faithful living, following Jesus as Savior and Lord.

Mercy is God’s gift of compassion and forgiveness, moving us from past mistakes to a hope-filled future, offering us a second chance rather than the punishment we deserve.

Mercy is not a gift we can earn; mercy is God’s choosing to forgive us rather than condemn us.

Yet to the Greco-Roman world that surrounded the first century church, mercy was a character flaw; the ideal was justice. You sinned, you were punished. If you were condemned, you were killed. Mercy went against the grain of society, contrary to justice.

To believe in a God that was merciful, and called humans to be merciful to one another, was mind boggling. What god cared about his people?

We may live 20 centuries following the world of the early church, but this demand for justice and struggle with mercy continues. We want justice to be served, often harshly, and struggle when mercy is given to those who don’t deserve mercy.

Yet our God is a God of mercy. God has forgiven us of our sins, and while we may suffer the consequences of our actions, God will not allow divine retribution. Jesus died to take our punishment and free us for new life.

As followers of this Jesus who offered us mercy, we are now called to offer mercy to others,

to choose to forgive, to choose to be compassionate, to choose to offer a way forward

rather than always be looking at past sins and shortcomings. This is the premise of so many of our new church starts that reach out to those in recovery, offering compassion when the world offers judgment.

Once there was a young employee who secretly misappropriated several hundred dollars of his business firm’s money. Nowadays, that young man would be in jail faster than you can say

misappropriation. Yet at the time of this story, this young man was in for a surprise.

..As he walked up the stairs toward the administrative office the young employee was heavy-hearted. He knew without a doubt he would lose his position with the firm. He also feared the possibility of legal action taken against him. Seemingly his whole world had collapsed.

Upon his arrival in the office of the senior executive the young man was questioned and asked if the allegation were true. He answered in the affirmative.

Then the executive surprisingly asked this question:

“If I keep you in your present capacity, can I trust you in the future?”

The young worked brightened up and said,

“Yes, sir, you surely can, I’ve learned my lesson.”

The executive then responded,

“I’m not going to press charges, and you can continue in your present responsibility.”

The employer concluded the conversation by saying,

“I think you ought to know, however, that you are the second man in this firm who succumbed to temptation and was shown leniency. I was the first. What you have done, I did.

The mercy you are receiving, I received. It is only the grace of God that can keep us both.”

-adapted from Don Mallough, *Crowded* Detours, in Illustrations Unlimited p.347

GRACE

Mercy and grace go hand in hand.

After reminding Timothy of the mercy he had received, Paul proclaimed:

“The grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

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.” (v 14-15)

Mercy and grace are foundational to our faith. For as mercy forgives us, grace loves us into a new way of living. Grace is the gift of God’s unconditional love for us, love that we cannot earn and do not deserve, yet receive anyway. Grace is God’s unmerited favor toward us, shown clearly in Jesus’ death on the cross.

As Ephesians 2 proclaims:

“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 Christ Jesus for good works,

which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” (Ephesians 2:8-10)

Paul as a Pharisee tried to work to earn his salvation. When he came to believe in and follow Christ Jesus, he knew that only by the grace of God was he saved. And he counted himself as among the vilest of sinners saved by grace!

As Wesleyan Christians, grace ought to be central to our faith lives. For we follow in the footsteps of John Wesley who believed we are never apart from God’s grace. God’s grace is active before we are ever aware of it, continues as we come to faith in Jesus, and encourages us as we live by faith the rest of our earthly lives. God is always reaching out to us through prevenient, justifying and sanctifying grace.

Again, like mercy, grace is not something we earn. Rather it is a gift of God’s love. It is THE gift of God’s love—the gift of our salvation. The gift of our forgiveness. The gift that invites us to new life.

..Living by grace instead of by works means you are free from the performance treadmill.

It means God has already given you an A when you deserved an F; He has already given you a full day’s pay even though you may have worked only one hour. It means you don’t have to perform certain spiritual disciplines to earn God’s approval. Jesus Christ has already done that for you. You are loved and accepted by God through the merit of Jesus, and you are blessed by God through the merit of Jesus. Nothing you ever do will cause Him to love you any more or any less. He loves you strictly by His grace given to you through Jesus.

*-*adapted from *Transforming Grace: Living Confidently in God’s Unfailing Love, NavPress.*  On thepastorsworkshop.com:grace

(SUN only)

How many times in this service have we already sung or heard about God’s grace and mercy?

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.

Depth of mercy can there be mercy still reserved for me? God is love! I know, I feel; Jesus weeps and loves me still.

Even the bell choir offered us a hint of:

grace, grace, God’s grace. Grace that will pardon and cleanse within; grace, grace, God’s grace; grace that is greater than all our sin.

May we believe what we sing!

May we celebrate the grace and mercy we have been offered and is foundational to our faith lives!

CALL

Giving thanks for God’s mercy and grace, Paul also reminds Timothy that we are called to respond to such gifts of God through our faith and service.

Paul began this section of his letter with these words:

“I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength because he considered me faithful.

He appointed me to his service.” (v12)

When we accept God’s mercy and grace in our lives, then we are freed to live by faith in response to all that Jesus has done for us. And when we live by faith, God will appoint us to serve, serving through sharing our gifts and our passions, our experiences and our willingness.

A few will be appointed to serve in set apart ministry, such as clergy or Certified Lay Ministers.

Many more will be appointed to serve as laity in their local congregations, at their workplaces,

or in the greater community.

My mother made the comment this week that her prayer as a Cracker Barrel employee

is to be used to share Christ’s light and love with others. She tells story after story about how some of her regulars share with her their struggles and their hopes, and she offers to pray for many, and her prayers are appreciated.

Pastor Victoria Rebeck once shared about viewing grace in a Cook County, Illinois courtroom.

She was standing by a friend who was accused of hitting and killing two people with his car

while driving under the influence of alcohol. After the trial, in which the friend pled guilty,

a woman approached the defendant’s mother and said,

“Excuse me. I’m the mother of one of the people who died. I just want you to know that I know you must be in great pain, and that I feel for you. I know he didn’t mean to do it. I just wanted you to know that.”

In reflection, Victoria shared:

“Amid the violence and sorrow came a courageous, gentle word of grace, empathy and hope…

People like this grieving mother are building the realm of God in the urban rubble.”

-Adapted from Victoria Rebeck in *The Christian Ministry* (sept/Oct 1995) as told in *500 Illustrations*, p 113

Even in the messiness and struggle of our lives, we are called to respond in faith to God’s grace and mercy. Not as a way to earn our salvation, but in thanksgiving for Christ’s work in our lives and in our world. We are freed to live transformed lives, not weighed down by the burdens of the past, not weighed down by sin. We are freed to live by new ways of being with God and one another, as examples of mercy, grace and love.

The apostle Paul went from terrorizing the people of the early church to proclaiming Christ crucified to the Gentiles. His way of living by faith, as well as his way of being in relationship with God and others, changed drastically when he accepted God’s mercy and grace in his life.

As we watch the current impeachment proceedings with our current government officials, I think back to Chuck Colson, President Nixon’s hatchet man who served prison time for his role in the Watergate scandal. After recognizing he was a sinner saved by grace, Colson created Prison Fellowship, a ministry to take Jesus to prisoners around the world.

What is your story of how God’s love and mercy and grace has made a difference in your life?

Maybe you moved from addiction to recovery

Maybe you moved from anger to gentleness

Maybe you moved from doubt to confidence

Maybe you moved from fear to faith

Give thanks for God’s grace and mercy. God’s love and hope. God’s encouragement and call.

Give thanks that this foundation of faith offered to Timothy long ago is still offered to all of us here today.

And most of all be encouraged, for God is with us, as we today, like Timothy long ago,

are called to work out the messiness of Christian living in our own time and place.

..If God saw Paul and Timothy as good enough to use, then we’re good enough too.

If God saw Paul and Timothy as worthy of love and mercy and grace, then we are too.

If God came to save sinners like Paul and Timothy, God came to save sinners like you and me.

And if God tells his story and builds his church through the likes of Paul and Timothy,

God continues to tell his story and build his church through each of us.

-Chelsey Harmon 9-9-19 19C cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters

May you go forth to face the challenges of this world with the confidence of one who is forgiven, freed, and sent forth to live as a disciple of Jesus in this world!

“To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God,

be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.” (v17)

Let us pray.