

Overflowing Grace  
1Timothy 1:12-17 and Luke 15:1-10  
September 16, 2007

We all know the story of the Apostle Paul. Luke tells it three times in Acts. Paul, then known as Saul, was riding to Damascus to round up some Christians for jail or worse. They were followers of the Way, traitors to the faith, perverting God's holy law. But something totally unexpected happened to him. He had an experience of Christ – a bright light, then a voice asking him, "Why do you persecute me?" And after that experience, unable to see, he was led to Annanias to be schooled in the Way he'd so vigorously persecuted. And as a sign of his complete change, he was baptized – he died to the old life and rose a new creation, and he took a new name- Paul.

Nowhere in Paul's own writings is this story told. But in several places he shares bits and pieces of his life-changing experience. In today's reading from 1Timothy, he shares his gratitude, his thankfulness for Christ's action in his life. He marvels that someone as flawed as he, could actually be used by God, "judged faithful" and "appointed" to God's service. He has full knowledge of who he had been and what he had done; he doesn't rationalize or make excuses for his previous behavior. He confesses, "I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence." He calls himself the "foremost" of sinners. In spite of all that, he received mercy, and the grace of the Lord "overflowed" for him. So now he wants to be an example to others – if he can be saved, ANYBODY can be saved! "I received mercy," he writes, "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."

Like a lot of converts, Paul can be obnoxious sometimes with his enthusiasm. I remember when my father finally quit smoking after more than 50 years of a two-pack a day habit. He'd had throat cancer, but that hadn't stopped him; he had emphysema, but that didn't stop him. But the six weeks in the VA hospital in Charleston waiting to find out if he had TB gave him the time he needed to quit the habit. There were no cigarettes in the VA hospital even though he tried to smuggle some in! When he got home, he was a new man – overjoyed with his second chance – no TB and no cigarettes in his life. He was amazed at how smoky our house and his clothes smelled – "Did you put up with that all these years," he asked my mother in amazement. But it was with strangers that he became evangelistic – he'd notice someone lighting up, and so he'd go over and kind of look like he wanted to bum a cigarette, and when the unsuspecting victim offered him a smoke, he'd begin his story of redemption. As obnoxious as it was, it even rubbed off on me. Overjoyed with my father's salvation, there were a few times that I'd shout out the back window of the car to unsuspecting smokers waiting on the street corner, "It's a matter of life and breath," and then scoot down really fast in the seat so they wouldn't see me.

Well, for Paul the saving grace of God in Christ is a matter of life and breath. And so he can get maybe overly enthusiastic for our modern tastes, but the truth of the matter is, Paul received an amazing gift one day, a completely unexpected and unmerited gift. He calls that gift "grace." And in response to this gift, he changed his goals, his identity, his entire life, and spent the rest of his years sharing with congregations all over Asia Minor what the faith and love of God can do, preaching his message, that God's grace is found in God's love that comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it, and that he is one of those undeserving people who has been so blessed. Once he had experienced God's grace in his life, once he had experienced forgiveness, and he just had to share it with others. It was too good to keep to himself.

Such enthusiasm is sometimes difficult to bear. But if it is, then perhaps we are fooling ourselves. Jesus talked about taking the log out of our own eye before we tackle the splinter in

someone else's and yet, it is so easy to be self-congratulatory about the virtues of our own lives, especially when we read about the messes those in the public eye create for themselves. Did anyone here chuckle over Idaho Senator Craig who stammered embarrassingly through his apology over being convicted for public indecency. I confess – I did. Do some of us shake our heads in disbelief over the rising crime rate around the country – murder, robbery, drive by shootings, gang violence, but fail to become equally disturbed over “staying the course” in Iraq even if it means unspeakable violence and devastation on all side, civilian and military alike. We advocate for our favorite causes with a vengeance (literally!), forgetting Jesus' command to love our enemies. We're here today wearing clothing that probably was made in a third world country; 80% of our toys come from China and we're distressed that they don't meet our quality standards, but do we ever stop to think about the quality of life in those countries where people sew our clothes and make our children's toys for pennies a day? Sister Joan Chittester remarks, that while we may clearly understand what is illegal, we barely understand what is immoral.<sup>1</sup> The French Philosopher Pascal wrote, “It is an evil to be full of faults, but it is a still greater evil to be full of them and unwilling to recognize them.”<sup>2</sup>

The longer I walk in my journey of faith, the more I am convicted by my own sinfulness. Oh, not in that worm theology kind of way – you know, I'm a worm, I'm worthless, I'm lower than pond scum; but in the sense that I realize more and more my own brokenness; my own shortcomings; my sometimes desperate need for approval, my sometimes unseemly desire for power; my sometimes unrestrained determination to have my own way. I'm not a murderer, but that doesn't mean I never get angry. I'm not a thief, but that doesn't mean I don't look longingly at things I don't have. I love God, but sometimes I worship at the altar of other gods. In other words, I'm human. And so are you. Each of us here today knows those areas in which we have fallen short, and are in need of the love and grace of God in our lives. And the truth is that it is impossible for us to receive that grace and love if we are unwilling or unable to confess our need for it.

Maybe that's why I love our liturgy for Holy Communion so much. I love it when we confess our sins and say (ask congregation to read together from p. 12 of hymnal):

*Merciful God, we confess that we have not loved you with our whole heart. We have failed to be an obedient church. We have not done your will, we have broken your law, we have rebelled against your love, we have not loved our neighbors, and we have not heard the cry of the needy. Forgive us, we pray. Free us for joyful obedience, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Now, here comes the best part. I get to say to you, “Christ died for us while we were yet sinners: that proves God's love toward us. In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.” For anyone who has ever had the experience of being unforgiven, this is terrific news. But the best part comes next. You only hear one voice saying that, but I get to hear all of your voices saying to me, “In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.” And try as I might, I can't stop a smile from coming to my face and joy from rising in my heart. I am forgiven! Paul had his faults; I have mine; you have yours – but for each one of us the grace of the Lord overflows for us with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. And that's something to be excited about, exuberant about, maybe, some might think, obnoxious about. That's why, after we hear that good news, we come down here to the altar and have ourselves a party, passing the bread and cup among us.

Jesus talks about that party in today's gospel lesson. Just as when one lost sheep is found, or when one lost coin is recovered, and the shepherd, and the housewife call their friends together to celebrate the good news, so, he says, the angels of God rejoice when one lost person is found. God's love can change a scraggly lost sheep into the pride of the flock; and God's love can change a broken and lost person into the joy of heaven.

I've told you before that I'm a cat lover. But a couple of years ago, after the two brother cats I'd had for 13 years died within less than a year of each other, I thought I'd never have another cat. But then my friend Rebecca called me from Elberton to say a stray kitten had wandered out from a drainage ditch on a rainy Sunday after church, and meowed its way across the parking lot to her. Rebecca couldn't keep her. She'd already adopted four strays over the years. I didn't want the cat, but I went to see it, and for some crazy reason I took the pet carrier with me.

Naturally, I took her home with me, tried to clean her up a little, took her to the vet for her shots. And then I had to give her a name. But what should I call this little one and a half pound, flea-bitten, matted, wild-eyed, hissing, scratching creature? I've always wanted a cat named Priscilla – that's such a pretty, girly, sort of sophisticated name. Obviously though, it wasn't suitable for this cat. And so I settled on a not so beautiful, but quite serviceable name – Mable.

Miraculously, Mable has grown into a gorgeous animal. She's a tuxedo cat. She has long, silky black fur, with little white feet, a white chest, and white whiskers. And she trusts me now. She's affectionate. She climbs into my lap and licks my fingers clean before taking a nap on top of the book or newspaper I'm trying to read. I would never have imagined such a transformation. And so in recognition of her newfound beauty and dignity, I now call her "Miss Mable."

Fred Craddock writes of a similar situation, a wild stray cat that over several weeks of care no longer bares its claws and hisses, but instead arches its back to receive a caress. He says, "Is that the same cat? It couldn't be the same cat. It's not the same as that frightened, hurt, hissing kitten on the side of the road. Of course not, and you know as well as I do what makes the difference."<sup>3</sup>

I tell you about Mable because it reminds me, in a way, of Paul, a pretty scraggly, scruffy character himself, who by his own admission, received along with a name change, the grace and love of Christ and became a new creature. It is truly amazing what God's overflowing love and grace can do for a person, when God's hand covered with our scratches, reaches out to touch us. It can make all the difference.

"To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen." (1Timothy 1:17)

Rev. Lisa Caine  
Oconee St. UMC  
Athens, GA

---

<sup>1</sup> Sister Joan Chittister, *In Search of Belief*, rev. ed., Liguori, MO: Liguori/Triumph, 2006, p. 185.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing about Grace*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997, p. 181.

<sup>3</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001, p. 25.