

September 16, 2007  
16<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

“Christ Forgives Sinners”

**Primary Sermon Text**

Paul’s First Letter to Timothy 1:12-17

*I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. 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. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.*

**Supporting Texts**

Ezekiel 34:11-24

“For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.

“As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and male goats. Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, that you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture; and to drink of clear water, that you must muddy the rest of the water with your feet? And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have muddied with your feet?

“Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: Behold, I, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you push with side and shoulder, and thrust at all the weak with your horns, till you have scattered them abroad, I will rescue my flock; they shall no longer be a prey. And I will judge between sheep and sheep. And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the LORD; I have spoken.

Luke 15:1-10

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

So he told them this parable: “What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was

lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

"Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

## Sermon

We didn't use those very familiar words in this morning's confession. They are words that seem to trouble some folks. In today's confession we simply stated the fact, "We confess that we have sinned against You in thought, word and deed." That doesn't sting so bad. It's the truth. Been there, done that. It's easy to admit. In Divine Service-Setting One things are a bit harsher, "We confess that we are by nature sinful and unclean." That's got some teeth. It goes farther than just something we happened to think, say or do. It attacks our very character and knocks us down a peg. It tells us that we are kind of dirty to the core, doesn't it?

Those of us who grew up using the 1941 The Lutheran Hymnal are used to it being harsh. Page five's non-communion service let us off with only confessing that we're "poor sinners" who are "by nature sinful and unclean." But page 15's communion service, the same form as we used here last week, hits us hard and personal. It forces us to drop the "we" and go with the first person singular "I," and then even pushes us farther than just "poor sinner."

"I, a poor, *miserable sinner*, confess unto Thee all my sins and iniquities..." A "poor, miserable sinner." Over the years I've heard quite a number of folks comment about that phraseology being so harsh and nasty. It really is a pretty humiliating thing to say about ourselves. It makes you think that as you kneel and confess you should be pounding your head on the pew in front of you to punish yourself for being such a bad, poor, miserable person.

Often we as Christians hear this confession and go one of two different directions. Many hear the words "poor, miserable sinner" and think it goes they go too far, pushing our face down into the muck and mire of sin, making us out to be more depraved and godless than we deserve. I've heard people—LCMS Lutherans, mind you—actually say the words, "But I'm not *that* bad!"

We can look at our lives with eyes that see things in terms of civil righteousness, using our cultural and institutional norms as our measuring rod of sin. That works for us. By this measure I think all of us would count ourselves as "not that bad." Most of us seek to work for a living and to contribute to society. Certainly we're not as bad as the crystal meth addict who does nothing but steal and get high. A few of us recently took a bunch of Bibles up to Angola State Penitentiary, a maximum security prison which houses murderers and rapists and the like. Surely we're not that bad. And in those terms, sure, it works. In society we measure morality and wrongdoing in degrees. Shoplifting may get you three days of community service, stealing a car gets you three years in prison. There is "bad" and "not that bad."

That works here on earth among our fellow earthlings, but it doesn't fly if we try and bring it into confession before a perfect and righteous God. There is pure and faultless, and then there is everything else. There is the good that is a pure, spotless white, then there is every other shade which is a failure to be that pure, spotless white. It doesn't matter if it is a tint or a stain; it is not the required unblemished white. It falls short. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

So what are we doing if we're thinking of ourselves as something better than a "poor, miserable sinner?" Aren't we turning confession on its ear, in effect saying, "I'm not so bad so I don't really need all that much of your forgiveness today?" We're saying that we actually have some of our own righteousness we can stand on, that there is a decent amount of good in us. That we are in fact deserving of a higher status than "poor, miserable sinner." We're putting our self on a pedestal of sorts, raising ourselves up above the "really bad" sinners around us. We in effect become the Pharisees and scribes,

confident that we're "generally good people." This is dangerous. We dance with the same mindset that allowed those Pharisees and scribes to say, "*This man receives sinners and eats with them,*" as if they weren't sinners themselves.

We need to turn away from any such worldly comparisons with those around us and realize the reality. Remember what it is we do in confession. We kneel before God, not in comparison to our neighbor, but before the almighty, perfect and righteous creator of the universe—our creator. He stands in holiness and purity and we, well, we don't. In the presence of God we are indeed pretty dirty. In the presence of God we are pretty poor, pretty miserable, pretty sinful.

We admit this to God and to ourselves. It is a pretty miserable state to be in...to stay in. But it is the right place to be because, "*The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.*" Paul had been a blasphemer, persecutor and insolent opponent of Christ. But Paul came to know Christ, or rather Christ came to let Paul know Him in a big way in that bright light and booming voice on the road to Damascus. For three days after that a blind Paul sat fasting in silence. What do you think he was thinking and feeling? Probably something along the lines of, "Oh man. I am such a poor and miserable sinner!"

But Paul speaks joyfully of that time in his letters. He says that despite his sin, Jesus gave him strength and judged him faithful. "*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.*"

Paul calls himself the foremost of sinners, and so should we. We must because we are. And we must because it is sinners Jesus came to save. Those who don't think they're so bad, don't think they need to repent much, do they? And without repentance, one stands outside of the forgiveness Christ won for us. Jesus says twice in Luke, "*But unless you repent, you too will all perish!*" Confessing before God, being a poor, miserable sinner is proper and right, for Christ Jesus came into the world for the express purpose of saving poor, miserable sinners. Jesus Christ suffered, died and rose again for poor, miserable sinners. We poor, miserable sinners come before Him knowing we have nothing good to offer Him in return for His sacrifice. We are at His mercy. And Paul is a model, that "*Jesus Christ might display His perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in Him for eternal life.*" Jesus Christ forgives the repenting poor, miserable sinner. Paul reacts with joy, saying "*To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.*" Jesus tells us how things go in heaven when a poor, miserable sinner comes before God for forgiveness, "*There is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.*" It is God's good pleasure to forgive His children and there is rejoicing in heaven when He does.

Which brings me to the second reaction to these words; there are those who with humble and contrite hearts speak "I, a poor, miserable sinner..." in true repentance and knowledge that they deserve such a title. Then I get to speak the truth in some of the happiest words a pastor ever gets to speak, "*as a called and ordained servant of the Word, I announce the grace of God unto all of you, and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit!*" Your sins are forgiven! And the reaction of these people? "I, a poor, miserable sinner...am still a poor, miserable sinner...I really stink."

Some folks, especially Lutherans, and maybe even more especially Lutherans who use to be Catholics, do guilt really, really well. They are very comfortable wearing that "poor, miserable sinner" moniker. They do exactly the opposite of the Pharisee. They dig a hole of guilt and try to bury themselves in it so deep that nothing can possibly get them out. They look at the things they do or have done, think or have thought, things they've felt or feel now, and say there simply is no saving them.

Wake up! See the reality! Look at Paul's example again. The guy arrested Christians and had them imprisoned and killed—men, women and children. Yet he thanks the one who gave him strength, "*Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to His service...*" Christ saved Paul and He saves us too. Look at what God says in our Old Testament lesson; "*I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out,*" "*I will rescue them from all places where they have been*

*scattered...*” “*I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak...*”

You can't be so poor and miserable in your sin that Christ can't forgive you. “*The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.*”

Paul speaks with joy of the new creation we are in Christ. The angels in heaven rejoice when a sinner repents and receives the forgiveness Christ won on the cross. Through Christ we have gained entrance to the kingdom of heaven. We will stand in God's presence forever, not as a poor, miserable sinner, but as a forgiven and pure child of God forever wearing the unblemished righteousness of Jesus Christ. We are forgiven. God doesn't see us as a poor, miserable sinner! Don't stay there in that guilty and forlorn mindset. Rejoice! Smile! Sing! Praise! Know that you are saved!

You are that sheep lying on Christ's shoulders. You have been found, saved. You are being carried by Christ to heaven, to the rich pasture on the mountains of the new Israel. You were lost, but the angels rejoice that you've been found. Christ rejoices that you've been found. Join in the celebration and live out that joy in your heart and in your life!

“But pastor,” you may say. “Which am I then; poor miserable sinner or righteous child of God?” The answer is a not-so-simple, “Yes.” Let the Holy Spirit be your guide. Let the Spirit convict you of being that poor, miserable sinner and drive you to repentance. Then let that same Spirit fill you with joy as you realize that Christ's work and merit has gracefully gifted you with full forgiveness and purity. Take great comfort in the order—repentance and forgiveness. There is always a blessed end in Christ. The poor, miserable sinner is always forgotten and left behind in the tomb. The final reality is that we are indeed the eternal children of God. The words of the loving father in the parable of the prodigal son are true. Through Christ God says of us, “*This son (or daughter) of mine was dead and is alive again; he (or she) was lost and is found.*” And then it says, “*So they began to celebrate.*”

May we all celebrate this truth also, and the peace which passes all understanding be and abide with us all. Amen.