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Ardmore, Pennsylvania
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
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Proper 19, Year C:
Exodus 32:7-14
Psalm 51:1-11
1 Timothy 1:12-17
Luke 15:1-10

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners

One of the most striking characteristics of the four gospels, in terms of tone, is their uncompromising, all-encompassing, and urgent nature. Reading the gospels, you get the sense that calling on Jesus as your Lord will change everything in your life, right now. It will overturn your world. That means that relationships of various kinds are going to be overturned as well—relationships to the wider community, to your friends, and even to your family—and it will probably lead to your death, and soon. So have a nice day.

Before too long, though, as the worshippers of Jesus gathered themselves into new communities of disciples, almost immediately arguments of various kinds broke out between them that had to be adjudicated by the leaders of those communities. This happened fairly quickly, because people are ... people.

Those community leaders, the first Christian pastors, needed help, too. So early on we have three letters, written by St. Paul, that we call the “pastoral epistles.”¹ That’s because they were written to pastors, specifically Timothy and Titus, by Paul, who had a history with them and was acting as their mentor. Because they are Paul’s ideas about how worshipping communities should operate, we pay a lot of attention to them, and consider them worth our time. Some of what he says may seem a little out-of-touch, particularly when he’s talking about gender, while some of it seems like it could have been written yesterday. These are the pastoral epistles—letters written to pastors.

(Incidentally: we sometimes say that we separate “real” faith in Christ from participation in the “institutional church.” There are sometimes good reasons to say that, but the pastoral epistles show us that the separation is never as straightforward as we might like, and never has been.)

Our second reading today was from the letter to Timothy. The part that we heard is still toward the beginning, and Paul is laying out some ideas about he himself thinks about his own leadership, for Timothy’s benefit. And, in the course of it, he has this one striking line that we sometimes look at as one of the summations of the gospel. That is this, verse 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.*

I would like to reflect a bit on that sentence this morning.

“**The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance.**” What Paul is saying to Timothy right now is intended for everyone, not only the people in Ephesus, not only Jews, not only Gentiles. Timothy was probably from a family that was half Jew and half Gentile Christian, and this saying is true for all of them.

The subject of the sentence follows: it is about “**Christ Jesus.**” Jesus is Jesus’ name, but Christ is what he is: the Messiah. Not just any messianic figure. Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah

¹ Pauline authorship is disputed.

who had been promised to Israel for many centuries, but who he is and what he has done is applicable to all people: worthy of full acceptance. He is the Christ for everyone, while still being the Christ of Israel in particular.

He “**came into the world.**” That is, he came into the world from the outside. This was not necessarily the role of the promised Messiah. But what was outside has come inside: the creator has deigned to join his creation, alongside creation as its brother and its savior, its Lord and its God. This means that Christ Jesus is not just a really great person who helps us be better people; he isn’t just a political leader who accomplishes political ends. He has come to us from outside, out of his great charity, to accomplish something. He didn’t have to. But he did, because he is God and God is love. He has come into our world.

And he did it “**to save sinners.**” What does this mean? It’s a phrase that a certain kind of Christian talks about a lot, and another kind of Christian is really uncomfortable with. What does it mean, “to save sinners”?

One of the things it can mean is that Christ Jesus saves sinners from everlasting, postmortem damnation in a fiery hell. There is justification for this reading: there is plenty of reflection on it in the tradition and some in Scripture. Regardless of what degree of literalism we apply to it, we can say that parts of Scripture and parts of tradition make this point: whatever it is, wherever it is, however it is, and whomever it’s intended for, Jesus saves people from it. Jesus himself only talks about this part a little bit, and always in reference to the risks to rich people of being rich, and it’s not a big theme in Paul. But it is not absent.

We see a hint of it in Exodus, when Moses intercedes for the people who have made these golden calves, gods to worship. God is angry, and disowns them, telling Moses that these are Moses’ people, not his own, he doesn’t want them anymore. Moses intercedes. Moses saves the sinners in a way that is analogous to what Christ does. But Paul’s emphasis is much more personal than Moses’ is.

What Paul talks about being saved from here is his agony before death, the hell that he was already living in. It’s important for us to understand what pre-conversion Paul was like. He refers to himself before as a “blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence.” But that doesn’t begin to describe it. One of the marked characteristics of the first few centuries of the Church, before AD 313, was that it produced a lot of martyrs. A lot of people died in a lot of different ways, some of them in horrible ways, for being followers of Jesus. The persecutions waxed and waned over time, but sometimes they were quite terrible, and martyrdom, and the martyrs themselves, were a big part of what we might call the Christian culture.

What Paul’s peers knew is that some of them were persecuted by Paul himself, pre-conversion, or at least with his involvement. Paul himself is introduced into the New Testament narrative in the book of Acts, when he is keeping an eye on everyone’s coats as they kill St. Stephen. He goes house to house and pulls out Christians, and leads them to imprisonment, beatings, and perhaps death. He is the chief of the secret police. He is out for blood.

Jesus saved him from that. His was sin, but not some run of the mill sin. His persecution of the Church was—according to Christ Jesus who appeared to him—a persecution of Jesus Christ himself. (Another reason that split between institutional Church and individual faith in Christ isn’t so clear.) He was an enemy of Christ and his Church, in the most dramatic ways.

This is the same person who then became the important leader of early Christianity, author of half of the New Testament, instructor to pastors, someone not afraid to correct Jesus’ actual disciples. Imagine that. When he showed up to preach or start a church, at least sometimes someone who was there would recognize him as the guy who showed up at his house or his parents’ house and dragged them away and had them beaten.

All of that that he perpetrated, the persecution and violence and terribleness, not only wasn't good for the Christians. It also wasn't good for Paul. Not because it would or would not land him in hell, but because it's no way to live. His heart was dark, his mind was angry, and his hands were bloody. Christ Jesus saved him from that.

He gives thanks to God about this because he didn't change from that way of life because he came to his senses and made a New Year's resolution to change. He changed because Jesus Christ himself appeared to him and knocked his horse, made him temporarily blind, and said, stop it. Didn't force him to stop it; Jesus didn't knock him dead. He knocked him off his horse and made him listen to a preacher, Ananias.

This is how Paul, the sinner, was saved. When he says, Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, this is at least part of what he is talking about. That he has seen his own life be saved, from a life of sin—dark heart, angry mind, bloody hands—to a life of grace.

This was Paul's personal experience: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, "**of whom,**" he says, "**I am the foremost.**" I want to point out two things about this.

First, we tend to like it when a religious person, talking about religious things, shows a bit of humility. When he or she shows a common touch with the common man. "Holier than thou" is not a nice thing that we say about people. So for Paul to say, I get it, I'm with you, I'm a sinner, too, can strike the ear pleasantly. He's not just talking down to us, he's in the same boat. Common touch. He isn't being holier than thou.

I cannot emphasize enough that Paul does not mean it that way. Paul is not being cute or coy, or trying to have a common touch. He is not humble. He is an elitist, but in an upside-down way. When he says that he is the foremost sinner, he isn't kidding. He really and truly means that he is the foremost sinner they know. They know it, but he knows it too, because when he goes to preach somewhere, and at least someone there recognizes him as the guy who killed his parents, Paul recognize that person, too. It goes both ways. Paul is surrounded by people whom he used to try to hurt and sometimes kill.

But this doesn't cause him to go hide his head in shame, to crawl under a rock in die. Instead, he exults in the fact that the fact that he was so sinful, and that Jesus saved him, means that Jesus can save everyone. Paul's conversion doesn't show that Paul is good. It shows the goodness of God in Christ. Paul isn't being cute. He is showing how ugly he is, to show what God can do, and he celebrates that.

Second, he doesn't say, "of whom I *was* the foremost." As in, back in those days I was so sinful, but now everything is fine. He says, "of whom I *am* the foremost." The past isn't without consequences, even if it has been forgiven. But this doesn't make Paul crawl under a rock either. Instead, the fact that Paul *is* the foremost, and yet is still the Paul who was chosen by Christ to bring the good news to the world, again shows the wonderfulness of God in Christ—not anything great about Paul.

Paul doesn't care about a common touch, he isn't being humble, exactly, and he has no interest in feeling guilty. Guilt is a waste of time. Paul doesn't want Timothy and the Ephesians to feel guilty. He wants them to feel forgiven, to know in their bones that all guilt has been expunged. And they, and we, can know it is true because Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom he himself is the foremost.

This is a great teaching of St. Paul: that, without Paul's invitation, without Paul's desire or even cooperation, God knocked him off his horse and saved his life, which had been a life marked by death. If he can do it for Paul, Paul says, he can do it for anyone. So no matter what the situation in anyone's life is, no matter how death-filled their lives—our lives—are, no one is ever beyond hope, because Christ saved Paul, who *is* the foremost sinner. No matter how you are, or what the situation is with people you love, or what the situation is in the world gone mad, there is no cause

for despair. Christ is always out front, at work in our lives, and the lives of others, even when we don't know it. Paul didn't know that God was working on him. But he was, and it saved Paul.

When we gather in worship, like we do today—when St. Timothy's church gathered to worship, when every church in history has gathered—we don't gather as a group of good people. Jesus calls not the righteous, but sinners to repentance. Our church, Timothy's church, is a church of sinners, like every church in history ever has been. We're aren't a club of good people. We are a hospital of sick people. But we are sick people who are being treated, who are being saved, and the one who heals us is the one who pays our bill also. No matter where we come from, no matter what darkness is in our hearts, or anger in our minds, or blood on our hands, Jesus Christ is himself already working on us, just as he was already working on Paul.

Because this saying is sure, and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom we are the foremost.