

“Whose Truth?”

Jeremiah 4:22-28; I Timothy 1:12-17

September 15, 2019

Paul's blasphemy was really an offense against God. His zeal was an assault on the Christian community. The prideful and arrogant motivation he had practiced in trying to silence the followers of Jesus led to the stoning of the faithful and the intimidation of the early church. But by the time Paul writes to Timothy, he has been confronted by the errors of his ways, and redeemed by the grace of God.

The mercy of God was revealed to Paul in its transforming forgiveness. The mercy of God, rather than accuse Paul outright, showed him that he was acting out of a very limited understanding of the Gospel. But now he knows the truth and declares it, namely that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. The forgiveness of God does not rest on a blanket condemnation and rejection of us, but seeks to build on the good that was planted in us when we were intricately formed and intricately formed, fearfully made, in our mother's womb. Our potential for doing good is often eclipsed by our evil-doing.

In the end we are all creatures loved and sustained by God, who always seeks what is best for us here and hereafter. Jesus' death on the cross for us is the ultimate demonstration of this patient and forgiving love. As part of our repentant change of heart, we ought never overlook the good in us that God sees and draws out of us into consciousness and action.

Let's consider what Paul has overcome. Formerly, as Saul, a very legalistic, rigid, and dogmatic Pharisee, he was inside the authority to cast blame, judgment, and condemnation on the “followers of the Way,” which was the original name of Christians back then. Recounting the whole story might shed a little light on how it was that Saul could have been so horribly mistaken. Saul thought these followers of Jesus were being disrespectful to Jewish tradition and beliefs, blasphemous even, and disruptive to community; at the very least, these followers of The Way were weird—and they were weird to those around them.

In fact, some documents written by Roman contemporaries have been found that accuse followers of the Way of practicing incest, because they all called each other brothers and sisters in Christ, even when they were married. And they were accused of cannibalism, because at the Lord's Table they professed to eat bread as Christ's body, and to drink the fruit of the vine as Christ's blood. They were accused of circumventing the norms of Roman customs and challenging the status quo, especially the status quo of sexuality—in which well-to-do women were expected to marry well-to-do men to produce the children that would serve as leaders in the senate, in the army, and in business. The poor women were expected to produce the workers that built Rome and the soldiers to fill the army. But suddenly some women who became followers of Jesus chose not to marry but to instead devote themselves to the work of the church, offering their homes as meeting places, donating large sums of money to the poor for pilgrimages to Jerusalem. Lydia, Salome, and Chloe, the wife of a Roman official represent some of the women who interrupted the status quo.

The followers of the Way were eventually called Christians, but this was a derogatory name; it was a mockery to name them after someone who had been crucified as a criminal, suffering the most humiliating death possible. That person was supposed to be the son of God?

They were outsiders, and as outsiders, they were persecuted by insiders, bullied by them; again, this isn't about Jews and Christians. It's about insiders and outsiders. That is why this isn't about what groups are doing it, but *why*. And the reason is because of this evil inclination we have to exclude some and include others, to have power over others, to humiliate and hurt and create power structures that deem some worthy and some not. Before Saul became blind on the road to Damascus, he thought **he knew** exactly who was blind—in other words, who could not see. But it required blindness for Saul...blindness to be led about, to be powerless, and to experience the dependency on another for Saul to *truly* see.

And, of course, Saul is taken to the followers of the Way, but the scripture tells us that they were afraid—understandably so. They had been persecuted by the likes of Saul, and now they were being asked to welcome him? They were right to distrust. They were right to be afraid. I even imagine some of them were angry. That's powerful, isn't it? Saul, who used to persecute the followers of Jesus, like Ananias, is then welcomed by him as "brother." This, my friends, is the essence of Christianity. We might not all get the different doctrines, traditions, and structures; we might not understand the scripture or we might find some of its stories disturbing or very foreign. We might forget to pray, not do anything for Lent, and struggle to come to church. We might feel under-churched or over-churched, but for all this, this story and so many others illustrate the essence of Christianity: *forgiveness*.

I remember a pretty graphic experience of needing, and feeling forgiven. It was connected to my relationship with my Uncle Ralph. My Uncle Ralph was a marine who served in Vietnam. He was a very tall, strong, imposing man, but so very gentle at the core. I remember him calling Mike and I aside at our wedding reception. He said something like: "You know your friends are going to want to mess with your car. You better give me the keys so I can keep it all under control." That was his way of managing, AND getting in on the fun. Oh yeah, Mike gave him the keys!

But the real story comes from when I was in fifth grade, and Uncle Ralph was across the ocean. It was one night at a revival service at Rocky Ford Baptist Church. Anyone who wanted to join the prayer circle at the end of the service was invited to come up front. I had been praying in church since I was ten years old. I was also faithfully writing letters to my uncle. I missed him a lot, and felt very sad that he was in so much danger, and separated from his family. I remember praying: "Help our soldiers, God, to get in there and fight for you, so they can win this war and come home."

It was dark on the ride home, and I ended up being very appreciative of that. Out of the silence my father said: "God doesn't want us to be fighting, Lynn."

In the early church, there were three particular sins that had the potential to ostracize one from the community of believers: Adultery, Apostasy, and killing someone. They were not unforgivable sins, just of the utmost seriousness. But if any of those occurred, and if the person wanted to be freed from that bondage of conscious error, there was a solution. The practice in the early church was to surround the repentant person, literally, in a circle of prayer. The elders and the members would physically encompass the individual, with singing, and reading scripture, and praying for deep healing and a liberation to move forward, free from sin and guilt. Therein lies our identity, our sole Truth on which we stake our faith. Our identity is that we are not the excluded ones the world tried to make us; our identity is not that we are so cool as to belong to the VIP group that excludes others; our identity lies in that we are a forgiven people of God; our identity lies in Christ, who is the bridge between the insiders and outsiders, who calls the insiders to repentance and the outsiders to their healing. As Jesus hung on the cross, he looked to the man at his side, the real criminal who was guilty of unspeakable acts of deception and violence. That man experienced the very truth that Jesus came into the world to proclaim: he came to say "no" to sin and "yes" to life abundant for all who believe in the Christ. "Today you will be with me in Paradise." Just as God's grace and mercy was sufficient to ultimately transform the life and practice of the persecutor Saul, so is it sufficient for you and me.