



Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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September 23, 2007

16th Sunday after Pentecost

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Exodus 32:7-14

Psalm of the Day: Psalm 51a

Second Lesson: 1 Timothy 1:12-17

Gospel: Luke 15:1-10

Thank God for Abundant Grace

As you think about your daily life and what you do day after day, week after week, what is your life filled up to the brim and overflowing with? Is it work? Is it the hours you spend at your job or at your employment? Is it your family? Is it your aches and pains? Is it your worries? Is it your loss or your concern about loved ones? What is it that you are filled up to the brim and overflowing with?

I know in my life, one of the things we seem to be filled up and overflowing with, and it is not necessarily a bad thing but it sure seems to be awfully full, is chasing after the kids and the different sporting events. With five kids on six or seven different teams, it seems like you are going in six different directions all in the same night. It's not necessarily a bad thing.

But could you imagine what would happen if while teaching confirmation class I would say to the students, "I have a special project I want you to do. It is going to require you to drive 45 minutes away, and it's going to take six hours during the day, and your parents are going to have to come and watch you do it." Just think of how the cheese sales would go up around here with all the whining that would be going on. Yet, with sports we do it, and because you throw a ball into the middle of the kids, we are happy to do it at times, right?

There are things we fill up our lives with that we choose. There are things that fill up our lives because they are put there in front of us and they are things that need to be done—work, doctors' appointments, whatever the case may be. But as you are going through life and you feel like you are struggling with things that you are filled to the brim with and overflowing, think back to what Paul says to you this morning. He says God's grace, God's love that was "poured out on me abundantly," that is literally the meaning of that word "abundantly"—filled to the rim and overflowing. As you face some of the different things that challenge you, remember you are also filled to the brim and overflowing with God's undeserved love for you in Jesus.

That is something that brings a smile to your face and some joy to your heart and some spring to your step, right? Remember that truth, and as we remember it, then we will be led to do what God lays in front of us this morning, to thank him for his abundant love or abundant grace. That starts with, as you remember, first of all that that grace was shown to me. We think about it individually as the worst of sinners. Then you remember how God's grace is not only shown to you, but it is shown through you as you live for God in your daily life.

As I said a little earlier in worship today, this is Paul's first letter to this younger pastor, Timothy, who he had left behind to take care of this congregation. He is a young guy and there are probably all kinds of uncertainty and doubt about who he is and who is going to listen to him. Maybe there is a sense of intimidation because this congregation was started by the great apostle Paul, his mentor, the guy he looked up to as this great Christian teacher and missionary, which he was. But Paul writes to remind him who he himself as Paul truly was so that Timothy would find encouragement to be a faithful pastor where the Lord had put him.

He writes and he tells Timothy, "You are going to need to know certain things. Here is one of the things you should know first of all. I thank God that God considered me faithful for service even though I am the worst of all sinners." Paul isn't just exaggerating here. This is really what he believed about himself because he said, "I was once a violent man, a blasphemer and a persecutor." He was a Jew among Jews, a Pharisee among Pharisees. He had made his life's calling, this wunderkind of the Pharisees, to make Christian's lives miserable. He would take letters like he was on the way to Damascus when the Lord confronted him and converted him, so he could throw these Christians into prison, letters from Jerusalem. He stood there approvingly holding coats so that people could wind up and get a better throw with their stones as they killed Steven.

When he says he was a violent man, when he says he was a persecutor, he was not exaggerating. When he says he was a blasphemer, he was not exaggerating. He did all he did because he thought he was serving the Lord, but he recognized now that it was blasphemy because he didn't recognize Jesus as true God, Jesus as Savior. So what he is really saying to Timothy is, "If God could use someone like me and what I once was to be what I am now, don't worry, the Lord will be with you. The grace he has shown to me is also the grace that he pours out to the rim and overflowing on you, Timothy, so you will be able to serve." There is no doubt Timothy was weighed down with doubts, anxieties and uncertainties.

Paul's genuine humility when considering himself the worst of all sinners is something I think we would do well to imitate, although I'm not convinced we always imitate it all that well. Here is what I mean—last week when we looked at Philemon, we talked about how selfishness leads to a lot of the squabbles that happen within congregational life, right? We talked about, "I didn't get my way, so I am going to hold my breath and I am going to be mad at you forever and ever and if that keeps me away from the church, that is your fault, you deal with it"—because of our selfish nature. When I talked about that, if you were here and heard that, which face jumped into your mind first of all? Was it someone who is not sitting here right now or was it your own face?

I think there is a portion of us that when we hear the description of sin in people's lives, we can picture people, but all too often we don't picture a mirror, do we? Maybe we get to the mirror second, third or later. Maybe the Lord has struck us to the quick and we picture ourselves first. But really, when we think about sin, we want to think about how we offended God and how we have fallen short of what he has demanded of us and how we are blasphemers, persecutors and violent people who don't always love God

above all else, who don't always love our neighbor as ourselves, who often find a way to let that selfish, sinful nature bloom into steroid-induced strength.

But here is the thing that is amazing—God's grace, his love for us in Jesus, is poured out on us to the rim and overflowing. It covers all the times that we have thought of others as sinners instead of ourselves. It covers all the times that we have been unloving and unkind to one another and all the times that we have told God, "I know better than you know. You should change this in my life." Jesus was perfect in our place in every one of those instances, and then he died in our place with every one of those sins nailed to his hands and his feet.

God's grace not only tells us that, it shows us that as he washes away sin in baptism as we saw this morning. He lets us taste it even. He uses the sense of taste as we receive the wine and the bread and know that in, with and under it is his body and blood to wash away our sins. Thank God for his abundant grace because it covers sinners, wretched, pitiful sinners like you and like me.

Then, just like with Paul, Paul says "God did this for a reason so that other people could see what his grace is like and how it has worked on someone like me." The same truth is there for you and me. God's unlimited patience is displayed in us as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life. The patience that has washed away our sins leads us to live for God. The patience that has washed away our sins leads us to serve God. The patience that has washed away our sins leads us to put God in front of our own wants. Do we always do it perfectly?—of course not. But when God's strength is in us and working through us and we put him first, we will have the opportunities to tell others about the grace that has overflowed the rim upon us and we will have the opportunity to tell them that God has done that for them also.

We want to do what God has called us to do because we want to thank him for his abundant grace. But God's abundant grace also flows through us so that others might know the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

Each and every one of us here are Christ's hands and Christ's voice, and as you and I go about those things that are in our daily lives that seem to be overflowing and maybe sometimes it feels like overflowing quicksand around our legs, as we face it with the confidence that we are not alone, that our God will help us, that our God can do imaginably more than we could ask for or imagine, people will see what God's grace looks like, because they will see it in the strength he gives to us.