

“Our Response to Grace”

1 Timothy 1:12-17

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Back in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania when I was a little boy of ten, my 5th grade teacher was a quiet woman with iron-grey hair named Miss Wiseman. She had been teaching children for a very long time and her greatest passion was Poetry. On every single day from September to June, one of the students had to stand up in front of the whole class and recite a poem. Based on selection, content and delivery, one reader each week, month and semester was voted the best. All this poetry reading culminated in a final competition between two finalists at the end of the year for coveted First Place. And I, Clinton Roberts, was one of those two finalists.

At that point in my life’s story, I considered myself to be “The King of Poetry.” I had this competition in the bag, and for my final recitation I selected Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Ozymandias,” a short sonnet that could be memorized, beginning with “I met a traveller in an antique land” who describes finding the remains of a broken stone colossus in the desert sands and which builds to the pronouncement written on the shattered pedestal:

“My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings. Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!”

I had this poetry slam in the bag, I thought gleefully, until on the day of the competition, after I had smugly sat down after delivering the sonnet in

stentorian tones, broken only occasionally by pre-adolescent squeaking, this tall, gangly, curly-headed girl named Sally Thompson stood up, straightened her Coke-bottle glasses on her freckled nose, glared at me fiercely, and recited Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "The Village Blacksmith" perfectly from memory. She won. And I lost. The King of Poetry looked on her work that morning, and despaired.

I

It might truly be said that this tired old world has certainly "had its share" of Ozymandians—both then and now. Shelley's sonnet may have been inspired by the remains of a 57 foot statue of Ramses II, and there are plenty of kings and emperors, prime ministers and presidents who have followed Ozymandias' example with equally pharaonic opinions of their greatness. The Bible is correct when it states in Ecclesiastes, "there is nothing new under the sun." When it comes to human vainglory, we've seen it before and we'll see it again—especially in an election year.

But that's precisely why this short text from the Pastoral Letters, as we call them today: 1st and 2nd Timothy and the Letter to Titus is so vitally important to consider. These three letters are attributed to Paul but in all likelihood were composed by the second generation of Christians who looked to Paul for inspiration, sound teaching and guidance. And this is precisely why this text offers such a different understanding of power and glory for you and me to lay hold of and emulate as followers on Jesus Christ.

In the first chapter of 1st Timothy, Paul is addressing his partner and protégé in the Gospel, young Timothy who is ministering in Ephesus. Paul is at the end of his life under house-arrest in Rome, awaiting the judgment of Emperor Nero—a true “Ozymandias” if there ever was one. Paul has every reason to despair, yet closely what he has to say:

First, Paul is a grateful person! Grateful to Jesus Christ for accepting him, finding him faithful, and calling him to serve. Paul knows very well that he doesn't deserve this acceptance—indeed he describes himself as formerly being a blasphemer of Christ, a persecutor of the Church and “a man of violence.” We learn from the Book of Acts just how Christ revealed Himself to Saul, as he was named back then—on the road to Damascus. There was a blinding light, and he fell to the ground. A voice said, “Saul, Saul—why are you persecuting me?” This was truly an Intervention—and it wasn't gentle. But the outcome would transform Saul the Pharisee into Paul the Apostle, for the blessing of many, then and now.

Second, Paul is a “grace-filled” person... overflowing with faith and love not of his own making but through the work of the Risen Christ in him. He is deeply aware that he has received mercy, and as a Jew under the judgment of God's Law—this is no small thing to receive. Judgment, mercy and grace are all words that are found in our text for today, and they each carry a distinct theological significance that is addressed in many different ways throughout the body of the Old and New Testaments. Yet at their essence, they can be defined in this way:

- 1) Judgment is getting exactly what we deserve.
- 2) Mercy is not getting what we deserve.(*Skyway)
- 3) And Grace is getting what we do not deserve and can never purchase or earn:

God's acceptance of us, just as we are, for the sake of God's Son, who came into this world to "seek and save the lost," who covers our unrighteousness, clothes us with love, and stoops down to wash us clean. Grace is "Charis" is the Greek, from which we get our word "Charity." Grace is not the absence of judgment: Grace is the presence of God's steadfast love and the triumph of mercy over judgment. His name is Jesus. He is God's gift of grace: the author and finisher of our faith. He is the Lamb of God and the true King of kings: he is the means and end of our salvation.

II

Resting at the center of our text is a statement that captures the very heart of the Gospel in just eight words in the Greek: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." If you've been attending a church where we pray the Prayer of Confession, then you've probably heard these words many times in the Assurance of Pardon—just as Adrienne spoke to us today! What you don't hear is what Paul says next: "Of whom I am the worst!" I don't think I've heard that from someone leading worship, have you? It comes across as somewhat self-glorifying in a "bad-to-the-bone" kind of way... So why does Paul say this about himself? Is he really the "chief of sinners?" What about

Nero? Or Herodias? Pontius Pilate? Or Judas himself? I think two things are happening here that are important to understand.

#1) In a world full of Ozymandians where political leadership is all too willing to say, “Look at me! I’m the greatest!,” here is a clear counter-message of spiritual leadership saying, “Look at me! Yes, I am absolutely a sinner!” Paul is saying that Jesus Christ has shown him such mercy as to accept him, consider him faithful, call him to be an apostle, and appoint him to serve. Given all that, what could you believe Christ could do for you? For this congregation? For our service in the world? I think Paul’s purpose in describing himself this way is to encourage and inspire those very people who think they could never be acceptable to God...to proclaim that they have in fact been accepted...through the amazing grace and agape love of Christ. Is this your response?

#2) Paul says he is the foremost, the chief, the worst of sinners because he understood deeply that when it comes to sin, we are all “the worst of sinners.” In the Book of Romans, he says there is not one righteous person on this planet—no not one. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” he says. Another way of saying this is when it comes to my relationship with Jesus Christ, the only sin that matters is my own—and not my neighbor’s. Comparing our sins with others is foolish, irrelevant and destructive. Jesus said, “First take the log out of your own eye before plucking the speck of dust out of your neighbor’s.” “Judge not, that you be not

judged,” he taught us. When it comes to our relationship with Christ, with ourselves, and with one another, we are all chief sinners here.

III

For some people, it takes an event like the Road to Damascus to experience Jesus for who he truly is: our Lord and Savior. For others, they may be more like John, the Beloved Disciple. When Jesus called, he got out of the boat and followed, never looking back. Still others may be more like Peter, who was blessed with great leadership, courage and faith, but also was besieged by self-doubt and a sense of personal unworthiness. Legend has it that when his time for martyrdom had come, he asked the Romans to crucify him upside down, lest he be compared favorably with Christ. What is your response to Christ’s call?

As for me, I was brought up in church and in a family with two loving parents. But it wasn’t until I was a young adult in graduate school that I began to experience the meaning of grace. On a cold, rainy night in New Orleans as I was struggling with depression, addiction and the loss of my engagement, I found myself entertaining thoughts of suicide. I ended up blurting out a prayer—and very selfish prayer—that went something like this: “Jesus, if you’re really real, and you’re really listening, I need to know that right now.” There was no amen. Well, our Lord silently revealed Himself to me that night...without a voice, and without a blinding light. It came through a sudden cessation of anguish, a sense of his living presence, and a profound experience of spiritual peace. That night, I was given something I didn’t

deserve and could never even ask for if it were not for the work of the Spirit. I may have forgotten the promise of my baptism, but the Lord did not. As it says in Ephesians 2:14, “He is our peace,” and my response to that gift led me in time to leave New Orleans and enter seminary in response to what Christ had done for me. After meeting and marrying Deb, raising our two children and now spoiling our three grandchildren, I’m still exploring God’s call on my life with growing joy and gratitude as I stand here alongside Kristie and Chip as your pastor.

IV

What is your response to Grace? To the love God holds for you in Christ? Will it be one of gratitude, joy and praise? Will it lead you to a growing commitment to serve and encourage others—particularly the young? Will you accept that you’ve been forgiven, without concerning yourself with the opinions or shortcomings of others? Will you look for signs of God’s grace even when the going gets tough: when you find out that you’re not the King of Poetry—or of anything else for that matter? Will you come to believe years later, when you graduate from college with a degree in English, that God and Miss Wiseman knew exactly what they were doing when you were a child of ten?

Well, when this is our response, then we too will sing with Paul and the angels, and with the Church throughout all ages,
“Immortal, Invisible, God only Wise...” Now to the King be honor and glory forever! AMEN