

*Joy Over Us*

Time after Pentecost  
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

There are some deeds once they are done that call for retribution. The people who do them need to be tracked down and caught, and tried, and punished. Such terrible deeds, such atrocious acts, even then can't really be forgiven. It is as though there are some human crimes that are of so vast a magnitude, of such great consequence, of such deep horror that those who commit them should pay with their very being.

Perhaps it is just such depravity that causes a raging God to greet us in the opening lines of the first lesson. God storms at Moses as He denounces the corruption of the people who in the absence of their leader and in the face of an invisible God have built a great golden calf, a deity, an idol, a savior of their own. In the course of a few days loneliness, forgetting the one who has led them out of slavery across the sea into the wilderness, they turn to a god of their own.

What terrible sin is this they've committed that they would completely abandon God. Surely He would descend on them with wrath and destroy them for their betrayal. Nor is it surprising that the early Christians who knew the terrible things Paul had done when he had persecuted their fellow Christians both feared and doubted Paul. Nor did Paul hide from what he had done before he became a Christian. In the letter to Timothy, printed in your bulletin, he confesses "I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence." He, personally had seen to the imprisonment and death of so many faithful Christians. For the murder of the faithful and the total abandonment of God are surely such staggering sins of such dimension that they can never be repaired or overcome.

And similar stories of human sinfulness of overwhelming tragedy and of staggering proportion speak to us of crimes deserving punishment and retribution. Such is the story of Simon Wisenthal whose life is lived like an obsession hunting down Nazi war criminals of forty some years ago. His entire purpose is to see these people who persecuted and murdered the European Jews are at last brought to justice and punished as severely as they so rightly deserve.

In his work *The Sunflower*, Wisenthal describes his imprisonment in the concentration camp of Mauthausen in Poland. One day, as he was cleaning a barn which the Germans used as a hospital a nurse came to him and led him to the bedside of a young German soldier. The man's face was wrapped in bandages, bloody and oozing, and his haunted eyes peered out from behind. When Wisenthal reached the bedside the young soldier clutched his arm and poured out the story of his life. He told how his battalion had come across a small Jewish town and herded all the people and their children into a large and spacious barn. The barn was then set on fire and all who tried to escape the flames were cruelly and cold-bloodedly shot down. He had asked a nurse to bring to his bedside a Jew, if any were left, that he might make his confession and receive forgiveness. For without pardon of someone who was a Jew the young soldier knew he could not die in peace.

Now, hopefully, none of us are as burdened by sins as was that young soldier. Yet each of us knows what it is to bear the burden of our sinfulness. And each of us knows what it is to seek and search for and await forgiveness. Yet, for each of us there looms that deadly human experience which speaks to us of sin so great, of crimes so cruel, of acts so atrocious that forgiveness at least humanly speaking is out of the question.

Each of us has experienced the up welling burning surge of anger and outrage that rises within us when we hear of acts both desperate and depraved. And each of us knows in such circumstances what it is to withhold our forgiveness. It seems to be a fair observation that these days more and more such deeds are reported. And we wonder with alarm and horror just where things are headed and as our desperation grows so too our hearts are hardened.

We want people who spread the deadly influence of drugs caught and punished. We want Osama bin Laden caught and put to death. We are anguished by the immorality of our leaders and call for firm ethical standards in the halls of government, of state and of country. And we look for tougher standards and firmer measures and stricter guidelines to order the conduct of life.

So it was for the Pharisees who quite unlike the people of the wilderness did not falter in the absence of their leader or fail in the wake of a seemingly absent God. Instead they painstakingly observed every law and each ritual to preserve the commandment of God and the way and life of the Jewish people. They kept the rigorous standards and the rigid rules and were exemplary in terms of their conduct as chosen people of God. And they too suffered with a perplexity just like our own when we're brought face to face with the sinful nature of the world.

It is out of an inborn and deep sense of what is right that we are lead to be appalled at all that is so wrong in the world. And it is just from this perspective that Moses confronts his God. For Moses' sense of the nature and purpose of God is mortified at the divine fury he encounters. How can the One who has chosen these people, who has sought them out, who has called Moses to his leadership task, who has set them all free from Egypt, who has promised their survival to the patriarchs now abandon all His plans? Moses dares to remind God that the very existence of His chosen people is solely due to His grace, His mercy, and so Moses calls on God to be God faithful in His mercy to His people and faithful to His promises also. And later, much later God will give up his hiddenness and clothe himself in the flesh of His Son and walk the road to Jerusalem and offer himself as the sacrifice for ours and for all human sin.

For just as Jesus in the gospel this morning stands in the midst of sinful and corrupted people so too he encounters Paul. Paul determined and bloody minded carrying the conviction of the Pharisees determined to serve God and bring righteousness to bear on the earth. Paul totally dedicated to silencing the heresies of the first Christians and to restoring true Jewish faith and conduct that all might be set right for the sake of God. It's in the middle of that task with Paul in that mood that a gracious and merciful Christ found that lost, anger burdened sinful and straying Paul just as His merciful Father before Him found His suffering people and drew them by His choosing out of Egypt.

Notice how the letter to Timothy puts it: "I," Paul is reported as saying, "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 sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners --of whom I am the foremost."

And the seeking, searching work of God in Christ continues before the startled and astounded Pharisees just as it continues now uncalled for, without merit and quite freely in the midst of us all. For it is the human way to seek safety in preservation and to track down all breaches of order with punishment and retribution. It is the human way especially when we struggle in a difficult and seemingly irresponsible world when we feel outrage and deep burning anger when the ethics and standards of the faith seem so easily and thoughtlessly betrayed. When Christian conduct is seemingly so well known yet carelessly and totally ignored. It is then, quite humanly and out of a deep and inbred sense of righteousness we seek to punish the transgressors and like Simon Wisenthall turn our backs on the depraved.

But the young soldiers and the sinners are not abandoned. For God haunts the furthest corners of the globe the darkest reaches of its sin benighted shores just as shepherds search for missing lambs and poor women scour the house for lost coins. And they are found like a chosen people brought to the banks of a river and led into new life and a promised land. Like Paul's they are overcome by the brightness of the breadth of God's mercy seeing their past for the tragedy it was yet finding themselves reborn with missing sheep returned and lost coins found, with death replaced with life and broken hearts and tortured minds mended and relieved and forgiven a new joy is born.

So each of us struggles along the weary, wild and wicked ways of this world. And, at the weekly end of our wandering way it's here we gather to share with God our failure and frustration so that in the living Word we may hear our forgiveness and salvation and a be a part of heaven's joyful celebration. For the source of God's joy is not in the law however its made, or kept or enforced by those to whom it has been given, but in the lives the Son has sought and found and in the lives who have and are and will be by Him forgiven.

Come, gather at the table and join in the heavenly celebration at our return. **AMEN.**