

Let Mercy Lead (1 Timothy 1:12-17)

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/let-mercy-lead/

I disclosed on Facebook I would share today about one of my worst failures in my 22-year career as a youth pastor. I won't have you raise your hand if you are here or watching online SOLELY because of this promise, but I know there are a few of you.

Some of you may hear today's story and say, "Sorry, Mel. That isn't your worst. I can think of others." After 22 years at the same church, there are no secrets. I've made many mistakes along the way. Like driving a church van with no headlights through a dark field during a nighttime game of hide-and-seek. Although it was funny to throw the headlights on at the last minute and see youth pop up out of the tall grass and take off running for their lives. Funny but I do not recommend.

Or the time I had youth tape masking tape around their heads, sticky-side out, and dive into a pile of various objects to see how many they could get to stick to the tape without using their hands. I still remember spending several minutes in the bathroom with a young Cody Heibreder in tears – both of us - trying to slowly remove the tape that had flipped over in the heat of the game and stuck to his tender hair. I did not use my head when planning that game.

These kinds of failures we can laugh about today. But the one I want to share today isn't funny at all. It is painful, probably one of my most painful failures.

It was Graduate Sunday many years ago, the Sunday where we recognize our graduating high school seniors with a gift and a video tribute. It was also one of the first Sundays I preached here at FBC. So, knowing I was going to be very busy preparing for that Sunday, I enlisted someone to help put the video together. I proofed everything for that Sunday and gave it a thumbs up.

The morning went great! Wonderful crowd of family and friends. The sermon was received well. I was a happy camper. Until after the service. The parents of one of my graduates came up to me and asked why their child, who was present that day and had been recognized, wasn't in the video. I was confused but had no answer for them. I not only missed it that morning when we watched it, their child sitting not far from me, but had overlooked it in the preparations. I didn't notice that they were left out.

Friends, let me tell you one of my highest values is inclusion. It is vital to me that people feel and believe they are seen and matter. I do not always succeed at this, and it hurts me when I fail. So, to realize I had excluded someone who already struggled to feel seen, gutted me. And there was no way to fix it. We couldn't redo Graduate Sunday and that take back that moment. All I could do was own it, apologize, and make myself a promise it would never happen again. You can guarantee I triple check graduate inserts and the videos each year since.

But this was not the biggest lesson for me.

A week after was the party for this graduate, hosted by the family at their home. I had already RSVP'd. For a week, I agonized over whether to go or not. Would they want me there? Would it add salt to the wound? Would their extended family know what I had done and rightly slam the door in my face? Fear and shame make us go a bit crazy sometimes.

I decided it that even though it was hard it would be worse not to go. So, I went. After several minutes sitting in my car, I walked inside, expecting, and deserving, a cold reception. But that is not what I received. They greeted me warmly. They received me. They fed me. They introduced me, not as the one who had failed or hurt them, but as friend and pastor.

When I got back in my car, in tears, the Spirit of God whispered to me, "That was mercy." For the first time, I truly understood mercy because I had received mercy.

I knew about mercy. I could define mercy, the unmerited compassion where penalty was deserved. I believed in mercy. I would tell you God was merciful to me. But now I understood what it meant because I experienced it. Now I understood mercy because I had been thrown into the depths of it.

My friend and filmmaker, David Leo Schultz, describes the love of God this way. Imagine you are standing at the edge of the breathtaking Grand Canyon, and someone comes up next to you and asks you if you know how deep the Grand Canyon is. And you respond, "Yea, I saw it on a sign when we came into the park. The Grand Canyon is bigger than the state of Rhode Island. It's a mile deep, 277 miles long and 18 miles wide." Then, the person who asked you the question, comes over and pushes you over the side into the depths of the canyon. Yes, my friend is a bit dramatic, but his analogy communicates. It changes your understanding. It is one thing to know the depth. It is entirely different to experience the depth.

I thought I understood mercy ... until I was pushed into the Grand Canyon of mercy and experienced it from this family.

The Apostle Paul studied mercy in his education with one of the most prominent Jewish rabbis of his day. Paul thought he understood mercy until he was pushed into the Grand Canyon of mercy by the greatest Rabbi Jesus Christ.

Now, I can't push you into the Grand Canyon ... for a long list of reasons, the most important being I prefer prison ministry as a volunteer. But by reflecting on personal stories of mercy, like Paul's as told in 1 Timothy and other places in the New Testament, perhaps these stories can help us understand it in new and deeper ways.

Our text today is part of the Epistles or the pastoral letters because they deal with pastoral issues. The letters include warnings, instructions, and cautions as the church transitions from its early days to a more established institution and as one generation hands off the Good News and the practices of the faith community to the next.

In our passage today, we find an honest, raw sharing from mentor to mentee about how Paul, through Christ, was transformed from an agent acting against God and neighbor to one forever changed by the mercy of God to act on behalf of God and neighbor.

Paul was "a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man." We learn in other accounts of Scripture Paul arrested and jailed early followers of the Way, of Jesus, and worked passionately and violently against the church of God, trying to destroy it, believing followers of Christ as blasphemers themselves.

Yet, a blinding encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus allowed him to see for the first time the depths of his sin and the depths of God's mercy. His is a dramatic conversion story. He was given a new name, from Saul to Paul, and a new life, from persecutor of the Way to proclaimer of the Way, set apart because of the grace of Christ.

You see, he had been pushed into the Grand Canyon, and he never stopped speaking and writing about his immense gratitude for the shove. I imagine no one could dare number the times Paul told his testimony on all his journeys in synagogues and around tables and on the long days of travel from one city to the next. I bet young Timothy even finished it for him a time or two because he was so familiar with Paul's story of God's mercy.

Yet Paul did not share it for us to applaud or center him. It was shared to center Jesus for it is the work of Christ, not Paul, that transformed him. The focus is not Paul's sins but rather the almost unbelievable gap between Paul before Christ and Paul after Christ. The grace of Christ is so great even the worst of sinners – who Paul claimed to be – even the worst can be redeemed and transformed by Christ's love. Paul believes that if you know his story you will know that no person is beyond the redemptive reach of God's amazing grace. No one. The next generation of church leaders should not forget this when Paul is gone. Mercy should always lead.

If it is true of Paul, who regarded himself the worst, it must be true for me and for you and for any other living person.

When I received forgiveness from the graduate and family, they gifted me mercy. I did not deserve it. I could not earn it, and in honesty I struggled to receive it. But it transformed me and my understanding of God's mercy for me. It was the shove I needed.

We hear a lot about entitlement these days. One of my favorite jokes about entitlement is this one, "I don't have a sense of entitlement ... but I deserve one."

When we speak of entitlement or the belief that someone is inherently deserving of privileges or special treatment, it is almost always in conversations, or perhaps rant would be a better word, about how others think they are entitled. Very rarely are we speaking of our own sense of entitlement or belief we are owed something. But everyone wrestles with entitlement.

Franciscan priest and author Richard Rohr writes, "There's only one way to get us out of ... entitlement. Once in our lives we have to experience undeserved love at a deep, gut level. Where we didn't merit it, we weren't worthy of it; in fact we were unworthy of it, and we got it anyway. That's called mercy. Only the experience of divine mercy breaks down this entire way of counting. And that's what we do—we're all counters. We are! We think to ourselves, 'You gave this much, so you deserve this much.' Entitlement is lethal for the soul. Everything is a gift—one hundred percent pure gift. The reason any of us woke up this morning had very little to do with us and everything to do with God. All twenty-four hours today are total gift. And so, the only real prayer is to say, "Thank you!" and to keep saying it. When our prayer is constantly "Thank you," and we know we deserve nothing, and that everything is a gift, we stop counting. Only when we stop counting and figuring out what we deserve, will we move from the world of merit into the wonderful world of grace. And in the world of grace, everything is free."ⁱ

Paul was led from the world of merit to the world of grace by the mercy of God. Mercy transformed his life and his calling. And when we hear about the change that took place in his life, it reminds us God is far more generous in mercy than us, both mercy extended to ourselves and to others. Paul pleads for those of us who have been set free by the mercy of God to remain patient and hopeful for those whom God still longs to set free. And our patience is sourced from our own daily gratitude for Christ's patience with us.

On his death bed, German priest and theologian Martin Luther is said to have scribbled the following on a piece of paper, "We are all beggars. This is true." He also once said, "We are all mere beggars showing other beggars where to find bread."ⁱⁱ

One of my faith heroes, Brennan Manning, used to say, "A ragamuffin knows he or she is only a beggar at the door of God's mercy."

Paul spent the remainder of his earthly days as one beggar telling other beggars where to find bread, redeemed by the mercy of Christ for God's glory and for the good of others.

Friends, I am only a beggar at the door of God's mercy, telling other beggars where to find bread. And that life-giving, life-sustaining bread is Jesus. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry."

Maybe you feel a bit like I did as I sat in my car before going into the graduation party. Ashamed. Scared. Undeserving. I would not have been surprised at all if I had heard someone yell out from the bushes, "Dead Man Walking." That is what it felt like. Yet that was not what awaited me.

When we show up to the party Jesus is hosting, we may feel ashamed, scared, undeserving. Many of us would rather stay in the car miserable and hungry than receive what we know we don't deserve. But as one beggar to another, I'm telling you, it is worth getting over yourself and out of the car.

On Wednesday night, we kicked off a new year of Midweek for our children and youth. About twenty minutes into the high school program, while the lights were down and the youth were singing, two of our high school girls we've not seen in a long, long time walked in together. I cannot describe how happy that made us. Their small group leader and I mall-walked over and bear hugged them, huge smiles on our faces. We didn't care how long it had been, where they'd been, or what all had happened in life, we were overjoyed to see them. I told them afterwards I hoped they always remembered that welcome and to know that it pales in comparison to the welcome God will always show them.

It doesn't matter what we've done, good or bad. It doesn't matter where we've been or what we're going through. It is safe to get out of the car and let Jesus welcome us to the party. Jesus runs to meet you before you ever get to the door. And as one beggar to another, I promise you, Jesus truly is the bread of life. There is no thing and no one that will satisfy or sustain you like Jesus.

Because of God's mercy, this is the welcome we receive from God.

Because of God's mercy to us, this is the welcome the church should offer, without condition or hesitation, to others. May it be so.

ⁱ <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/everything-is-a-gift-2022-09-02/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.breadforbeggars.com/1748-2/>