

31st Sunday after Pentecost 2006: To Be Chief Among Sinners

Epistle: Timothy 1:15-17 [Reader: Eugene Huang]

Brethren, ¹⁵This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. ¹⁶However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life. ¹⁷Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Brethren, ¹⁵This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.” So opens today’s reading from the first Epistle of St. Paul to Timothy. Most of us know this saying already because it is firmly embedded within our liturgical worship, combined with the saving testimony of St. Peter: “I believe, O Lord, and I confess that you are truly the Christ, the Son of the Living God, who came into the world save sinners, among whom I am first,” which we pray in preparation of receiving the holy gift of Communion. It perhaps becomes so rote that we do not always think about its implications. What does it mean to confess that “I am chief” or first among sinners? Is it not to say “worst?” And if each of us allows ourselves to believe that, how should that impact the way we conduct ourselves? In doing so, and in answering these questions, we pray that God reveals to us His eternal wisdom.

Now most of us are familiar with the incident in the gospel in which Christ intercedes on behalf of the woman who was caught in adultery. An angry mob was about to stone her to death for her transgression, but they thought they would test Jesus to see whether He would uphold the Law of Moses that allowed such a heavy penalty. At first the Lord did not respond but stooped to the ground and wrote in the sand. No one knows what He wrote, but many speculate that He was writing the names of her accusers down, especially those who were guilty of adultery themselves. But the crowd would not relent, so finally Jesus raised Himself up and said, “He

who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first.” (John 8:7). The Gospel tells us that one by one each accuser was convicted by their conscience and walked away, until only the woman and Jesus remained. When He saw that no one remained He asked her, ““Where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you’ She said, ‘No one, Lord.’ And Jesus said to her, ‘Neither do I condemn you; go, and sin no more.’”

Sadly, one can still hear reports of the stoning to death of women going on in the world today. In some instances, the approach has been modernized. A well publicized incident described a truck-load of stones being dumped upon the convicted one, presumably to save the time and energy. And very quickly there is public outcry and condemnation of that act from the international community, and rightly so. Yet spiritually, do we not do the same thing? Are we not only ready to pick up a spiritual stone in our mind and cast it through harsh words and accusations but also just as soon prefer to see a person buried and gone under a truckload of the same and worse. In this cynical world, it is said that people love to see a star rise but they love even more to see one fall. To believe and confess that I am the first and worst among sinners means that not only do I not throw the first stone but that I go out of my way to intercept the stones of others. When I see the dump truck rolling up on someone else, I should stand in the way and say, “Over here, this is where that belongs! I am chief among sinners. I may accuse no one, but everyone may accuse me.”

Of course, living out this confession on a day to day basis is thankfully not so dramatic. Usually it consists of simply resisting the following temptation: We say, “Yes, I am a sinner, but so and so over here, well they’re really bad news!” Or, “I may not be perfect, but that one is a real piece of work,” etc. Again these are like those instances in which if we feel we need to say, “God forgive me for saying this, BUT...” *But nothing!* Either I am the first among sinners and I

do not dare to cast stones at others or I am a hypocrite who likes to hear himself talk in Church. I cannot say I believe and I confess this and then not act accordingly without being by definition hypocritical.

So what then is the benefit of holding such a self-debasing view? Will it not destroy our self-confidence? Will we not be overcome with guilt and unable to do anything? Will we be unable then to say anything remotely critical of the evils of this world? On the contrary, through our confession of sinfulness we establish all of these. St. Paul's very next line to Timothy is "However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all long-suffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life." Only when we confess our sins can we obtain mercy and forgiveness, and truly be set free from guilt and the power of sin. Through that mercy God reveals His love and patience, His long-suffering, which is exactly what emboldens us as Christians to proclaim the Gospel through our love for one another. And in humility and repentance, we show forth as St. Paul did so well, the pattern of belief for those who are being saved. We demonstrate to our children, our family members, our friends, and our fellow Christians what is the right and proper disposition of belief before God.

The last verse of our short reading from the Epistle today also gives us a very edifying prayer. St. Paul calls God not only the eternal, immortal, and invisible King, but also He who alone is wise. To cast a stone at our brother or sister requires to us to first think ourselves wise enough to act as judge and jury. If we remember that the Bible teaches us clearly that God alone is wise, we shall be far more circumspect in our words and deeds. Before we open our mouth let us check the personal wisdom we tend to follow to our mishap and measure it against God's wisdom. For to Him belong all glory, honor, and worship forever. Amen.

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