

October 11, 2009

1 Timothy 1: 12 -16

I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I 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 in the world to save sinners --- of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life.

Hebrews 4: 12 - 16

Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

Exposed to Mercy

It' s a funny thing. When I was in college I changed my major from biology to chemistry because I didn't want to dissect anything, but when I was student teaching I finally did a dissection with my students and it was the most interesting thing! We dissected fish.

To find the various body parts, to see the gills and the stomach and all the various parts to see how they worked together to make a creature who lived and who ate and functioned as it was created to do, was fascinating! I loved it, and in turn, the students loved it, too. At least the girls did. Some of the boys turned a little green and asked to leave the room!

A funny thing, yes.

But using a knife to look inside a fish taught me things about fish that I hadn't learned by catching them, or cooking them, or eating them.

I learned more about them, I guess, than I ever really needed to know. I have always loved how fish looked, how they moved, how they , well, how some of them tasted.

But I didn't know them inside and out until I dissected one.

Today's reading from the Letter to the Hebrews uses some very graphic language about God cutting with a two-edged sword to separate, similar to a dissection, joint from marrow. This is a physically possible separation, but it's a very deep cut. And to cut soul from spirit is really not possible, since the two words overlap in meaning, but the words indicate that God's cuts are not just physical. They are spiritual.

That graphic language about the two-edged sword emphasizes how thoroughly God knows us. God knows not only our actions and our bodies, he knows our intentions, our deepest secrets, our thoughts, and our unspoken needs.

And because God knows us so well, he knows all of our most hidden sins. The ones that we would never admit to others, not to our best friends. Even the ones we don't admit to ourselves.

This is a scary thought! The sovereign God, creator of the universe, knows every single thing about us! He knows all of our weaknesses, all of our faults, all of our selfishness and our worst moments.

God hears what I say when I'm driving and someone cuts me off! God knows what I think but would never say about people I don't like.

God, the holy one, the perfect one, the righteous one who rules all things, knows way too much about me.

It's enough to keep me up nights, to make me want to run and hide, if there were anywhere to go, which there isn't.

The original hearers of the letter to the Hebrews were in the same boat that we're in today. They were sinners, trying to be better people. Some of them had come out of pagan backgrounds, just like some of us spent part of our lives not believing in Christ.

Some of them came from a religious background but didn't really practice their religion.

Some of them had done bad things in the name of their religion, like the apostle Paul, whose words from the first letter to Timothy we heard this morning.

Paul tells us the Good News, that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners! Sinners such as him! Paul writes about his

sins as a blasphemer, as a persecutor and he tells us this for one reason!

To show that if God could forgive him, then God can forgive us!

This IS the Gospel of Christ! Definitely good news for people of all times and places.

Christ did not come to save good people, perfect people! If he had, he wouldn't have saved many people---actually no one!

So if Christ came to save sinners, we have no more reason to be afraid of God's judgement, of what will happen to us because God knows us inside and out, down to our deepest places!

Because Christ came to live among us, because Christ was fully human, Christ understands us. He knows us. And he sympathizes with us.

And he has infinite mercy on us. Christ knows us inside and out, knows all our weaknesses and faults and sins, because he's been there, done that. And Christ, in mercy, offers us forgiveness.

For our part, we need to ask to be forgiven. Like when little kids do something naughty and we make them say "sorry," we need to say "sorry." Not like little kids, though, we need to mean it. We need to make an effort to be better people and not do the same things again. God knows our intentions. He knows if we intend to try to change or not. If we do mean it, if we're sincere when we say "sorry," then God will always forgive us.

God's mercy. God knows everything about us and still forgives us, still loves us. God's mercy means that none of us get what we deserve. Mercy means that we don't have to be afraid of God. We need to be sorry for our sins and ask for God's help in being better people, and we will be forgiven.

But there's more to it than this, as huge as this is!

Because we are human, because we are flesh and blood, we need this mercy to be tangible, to be visible and real to us. We still have needs even after we partake in communion, even after we read the Bible, even after we pray and sing and worship.

We still have needs because we need the incarnation. We need something we can see with our own eyes.

When Jesus walked the earth, he was that incarnation for the people who lived then. Now, in 2009, we can't see Jesus Christ with our eyes, so what is the incarnation for us?

After Christ was resurrected, he appeared to his followers and promised them that he would send the Holy Spirit to them, to teach them and to remind them of everything they needed to know. The Holy Spirit helped them start the Church.

And there it is, the answer to what is the incarnation for us. It's the Church. It's us! WE are the body of Christ, the incarnation for each other today!

God knows us in our deepest places and grants us mercy, but the way that that mercy is expressed is through us and in us. The Word of God became incarnate, took on a physical form, a physical body, in Jesus Christ, but now, today, WE are Christ's body, embodying in physical form everything that Christ was.

God's mercy, in a physical form, is us!

Fellowship that includes worshipping and praying together, eating together, studying together, singing together, and just hanging out together is wonderful.

But if we are not open to each other, if we are not a safe place for each other, a place to share our needs and respond to those needs for each other, then we are missing something important.

For God's mercy to be very real and meaningful to us, we need to see it, feel it, hear it, and sometimes even smell it!

The only way that happens is through each other.

We, the body of Christ, need to create a safe place for each other to admit our weaknesses, our faults, our sins, our need to be forgiven, our need for mercy and for love and for grace!

And then we can live that out for each other, letting that love and mercy and grace be shown through our actions.

It's not comfortable, being that open, that exposed to being known by others. I'm sure that the fish I was dissecting did not feel so great about being known by me, inside and out, either! But there's a big difference!

The fish had to die for me to know it so completely.

But for us, being known by others who love us and care for us and who are acting as Christ to us, is freeing. We no longer carry the burden of guilt and shame, our need for mercy is met, and we are made more whole and complete.

We don't have to die for God's mercy to become very real to us.

And in the end, being that exposed, that open, that vulnerable does not kill us. Instead, it frees us to live, to be truly alive, to be who we are created to be!

God's mercy means that none of us get what we deserve. God's grace means that instead of getting what we deserve, we get more than we have ever imagined in our best dreams!

We get the infinite love of the infinite God. We get to live in the place that Christ has prepared for us for all of eternity. We get to live, loving God and neighbor, by the power of the Holy Spirit, here and now, in this place and time.

We get to be the body of Christ, embodying the mercy and love and grace of God to each other, and to the world around us.

Thanks be to God for the incredible gift of mercy!

Lord, have mercy on us! And show us how to be merciful to one other.

Amen.