

The Greatest Saint and Greatest Sinner

1 Timothy 1:12-17

He was a juvenile delinquent, a punk, a sinner. One day, when he was starting the engine of a stolen car he heard police sirens. He sped away but crashed into a car driven by an elderly woman who was backing out of her driveway. He leapt from his car and began to run, well ahead of the police.

Although in all likelihood he would have escaped, something prompted him to turn around to check on the elderly woman. She was not injured, but by that point the police were turning the corner to her house. She looked at the thief and said, "Go sit on my porch." Without knowing why, he trusted her. When the police approached, she said that the person who rammed her car had fled. They wondered who was the teenager sitting on her porch swing.

She answered, "Oh, that's just my grandson." Even though he wasn't. The police left. The woman yelled at the thief, "Get in this house. Why do you do this, young man? You could be doing so much more with your life!"

And in her Christian kindness that young thief, Donald Driver was transformed. Not all at once, but the transformation had started, transformation from thief to good citizen, from sinner to saint.

The voice of that elderly woman echoed as he rededicated himself to school and dedicated himself to Christ. He played football, got a scholarship to Alcorn State, graduated with a degree in accounting. And has since become a star wide receiver for the Green Bay Packers.

But now Donald Driver is even more of a star off the field. He is reported to do more community

appearances than any of his teammates. SI columnist Rick Riley reported that Cathy Dworak, the team's manager of community relations, observed, *"He's a wonderful man. He's always smiling, fun, positive. He calls me up and asks if there are any appearances I need done. Can you imagine?"*

Driver has done more than 300, and any honorarium he receives is deposited in the Donald Driver Foundation. His Foundation's motto is this: *"The goal of the Donald Driver Foundation is to help change the homeless families' issues each day with STRONG HANDS that build and strengthen instead of destroy and weaken, with STRONG MINDS that invent new ideas to achieve these goals, and with LOVING HEARTS that overflow with love and compassion."*

And it is all centered in Jesus Christ. Go to the website, and you find his wife is the president, and you have to look really hard to find anything that would indicate Driver is a football player.

Robert Brooks, a motivational speaker, comments : *So the car thief has become a redeemed and joyful man, who never takes a single day in the NFL for granted. Or in life, for that matter."*

And that's a strong foundation of our faith, isn't it? The idea that the greatest sinner can become the greatest saint. A car thief can become a role model.

An idea that St. Paul knows as well from his own experience.

In his first letter to Timothy St. Paul is writing as one who has some tremendous sins to confess. This letter is letter of observations about the Christian life, and also instructions about the Christian life. Paul has been a strong force in shaping the Christian community, but now his time is coming to an end. He writes to Timothy, his protégé, but also to all who would come after, including you and including me. He writes about his experience, not because he is self-indulgent, but because he believes it can be instructive for those who come after him.

By the time Paul is writing he is probably the most famous Christian , and considered by most to be greatest saint of all. Through the force of his faith, his intellect, and his dogged determination, he opened faith in Christ to all people, allowed it to break out from the bonds of tradition.

St. Paul believed that he used to be the greatest sinner of all. He was once a blasphemer, that is one who spoke falsehood about God; a persecutor, who wanted to inflict harm upon the Christian community, and a man of violence, he even agreed with and participated in, violence against the Christians.

But when Paul confesses, there is no lingering regret at having left his former life behind. Nor is there any pride in who he has become. There is only a grateful heart, that realizes it was only because of God's mercy that he was allowed to enter into new life in Jesus' name.

Paul tells his story, not to bring glory upon himself, but to give glory to Christ. As the greatest sinner becomes the greatest saint, he speaks a personal word of the transformation that Christ offers every life, and any life.

But Paul does some other things as well in this Scripture this morning. He reminds us of Christ's ultimate purpose. Now, we need to realize that when Paul is writing, the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, have not yet been written. But he knows this much: already the established truth is this: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, and that patience and mercy are central to what Jesus did. This is the foundation of Paul's faith; this is what he has been taught, this is what he has experienced for himself.

To be the Body of Christ is to live in this truth. Paul realizes he has been chosen, not because he is special or unique, but because of the very nature of Christ himself.

But which sinners? By calling himself the worst, Paul is telling us that Jesus came to save all sinners. And that, of course, says something about how we live out our lives as the Christian

community. As Christ did for Paul, we do for those around us: which is this. To see the Christ potential in everyone we meet. To say, there is someone Christ can transform.

And then to be a community of Christ that is open, inviting, welcoming. For we never know when our love, our kind words, our caring might begin to transform a sinner to a saint.

Paul and his brother and sister Christians lived out their faith in a Pagan culture, as entertainment and excitement and self-indulgent as ours. And what transformed that culture is what will transform ours: when those who believe in Christ offer a way of life, though not perhaps as exciting or entertaining, proves to offer a life with deeper meaning and true abundance.

That's why we do the ministry we do. That's why we support the missions we support. That lives might be transformed. That sinners begin the journey to the saint side of the road. That young lives be shaped Christward. Logos, YAH, Youth Group, Men's handyman ministry, Sunday School, UMW projects, and all the rest.

It's our calling; it's who we are as a church. To help unlock that Christ-like potential in everyone we encounter, from young to old, from friend to stranger.

Christ came into the world to save sinners. Even the worst. Paul reminds us of this in our Scripture this morning. And invites us to realize that there is not a one of us who is so bad that we are beyond Christ's redemption, nor a one of us so good that we are not in need of Christ's redeeming love.

But Paul has more to say. Paul was the worst of sinners, but Christ claimed even him. But now something more: not only is the sinner claimed, he is also called.

It has been said that our salvation is Christ's gift to us. What we do about it is our gift to Christ. But Paul goes even further than that: the ability to live in response to Christ is also a gift.

1Ti 1:12 I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. If the greatest sinner is appointed to service, then all are. Christ claims us not just so we live with him in heaven; in claiming us, he also calls us to live as participants in the Christian community.

A good witness is to tell what Christ has done for us. A greater witness is to be able to tell what we have done for his sake as his ambassadors, as his servants. What makes the Donald Driver story even better is not just that he became a football star, but became a Christian who gives of his time, his talent, his energy, his heart, to others.

Donald Driver and St. Paul. Two stars who shine brightly. Two sinners who became saints. And Christ loves us no less than he loved them. And calls us no less than he called them.

So today we celebrate the mission and ministry God allows us to do as members of this church, this gathered Body of Christ here in Beaufort. Today we celebrate that as His light shines upon us, through us it continues to shine upon others, sending forth love, and caring, and hope, and transformation. Amen.