



September 15, 2013

Diane Christopher

**Grace Overflowing
I Timothy 1:12-17
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Our Scripture passage this morning is a special one for me. This past week, we commemorated the 12th anniversary of 9/11. I was scheduled to preach that Sunday after the attacks. I had picked this passage (the one we are going to read in a few moments) from the lectionary before the attacks happened. When the tragedy struck, I questioned whether I should use this text, and perhaps pick one that was more pastoral. But I stayed with this passage because it is about transformation...of even the most vile of our world .

When I learned I was preaching today, I went to the lectionary and there it was: the same passage I preached on 12 years ago. I chose to preach from this text even though I didn't realize it was the Sunday after the anniversary of 9/11. When I finally did realize it, the passage became my focus for this past week. The Source was on 9/11, so I used this passage as our theme. Right after The Source, the Deacons met, and I used this passage as our study time together. They know my sermon already!

As we prepare to read this scripture passage that has a unique history with me, this is my prayer today: May the words we hear enter into our hearts and souls and minds so we will be filled with the hope and wonder of Christ, and as a result be transformed. May it be so.

I invite you to turn with me to I Timothy 1:12-17. This passage is a brief biography of the Apostle Paul. As I read, I want you to note what his life was like before he met Jesus. Then note what happened when he met Jesus, and what his life was like with Jesus in it.

By the way, this is a great format for a testimony to share with people, especially for those who became followers of Jesus later in life. This is what my life was like before I met Jesus. This is what happened when I met Jesus. This is what my life is like now with Jesus in it. Look for these elements as we read.

Read I Timothy 1:12-17.

The leaders of this church (Valley Pres) are reading a book called "Changing the Conversation." There are a couple statements in this book I have been dwelling on. It

says sometimes the Bible (especially Jesus) throws out hand grenades, and sometimes, the pastor will throw himself or herself over the hand grenade so it will not explode in the congregation. In other words, the pastor softens the blow of the message of the Bible.

I am not going to throw myself over the hand grenade today (at least, I'm going to try not to); I am going to let it explode in front of you. In other words, some of the things I am going to say today may be hard to hear and follow through on. Are you ready?

I love this passage because it is about transformation. And even the worst of sinners can be transformed. For you see, before Paul met Jesus, he was (in his own words) "a blasphemer, a persecutor and a violent man."

Paul hated Christians, and he made it his life's goal to get rid of them. He would go into the homes of Christians, drag them out, beat them and put them into prison. Acts 8 records the stoning and death of a young Christian man named Stephen. And Paul stands there, watching it all, and approving of it, and I wonder if he took up a stone or two himself.

Paul was a terrorist. So, you can see how this passage spoke to us after the 9/11 attacks.

Then, something extraordinary happened in Paul's life: Jesus interfered. God could have given up on Paul and considered him too far gone. Instead Jesus came to him and said, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" and knocked him down and he literally went blind in the presence of Jesus,

Jesus had every right to take Paul's life just as Stephen's life had been taken. Jesus could have left Paul imprisoned by his blindness just as Paul had imprisoned Christians. But graciously Paul was allowed to live and to see.

And Paul, the worst of sinners who beat and killed Christians, received wonderful, magnificent mercy, and abundant, overflowing grace.

And here's the thing. This man who was a blasphemer, a persecutor and a violent man did not earn any of it. He did not lead a life that *earned* God's magnificent grace and mercy. Yet it was given to him.

This is mercy -- to be forgiven not because of any human action but because God chooses to. Paul *received* mercy. It is a passive action. This implies that Paul did not seek mercy, but mercy found him. He did not deserve it, but mercy came to him anyway. He did not understand it, but mercy became his nonetheless.

This is grace – God seeing more in Paul than Paul can see in himself. It is God's unconditional love. As I have said many times: Grace means there is nothing you can do to make God love you more. AND grace means there is nothing you can do to make God love you less. It is given to us free of charge, on the house, no strings attached (Philip Yancey).

Now, look at the amount of grace: poured out abundantly. Another Bible translation says, grace "overflowed for me." It appears Paul made up a word to describe the amount of grace he had been given. He uses the word hyper and fill. A hyper-poured-out grace. Think about kids. Kids are active; but some are hyperactive.

Jesus' grace is hyperactive towards us. It's bursting forth. It is poured out beyond fullness. We cannot contain it or control it, and it is flowing everywhere just like the pictures we see of the flooding in Colorado. The rain in the mountains is overflowing the banks of everything and running down the sides of the mountain and flooding the plains and towns and homes. And it is changing people's lives forever.

It is a picture of God's overflowing grace which floods our hearts and souls and minds. And yes, it can be dangerous. It literally knocked Paul to the ground and blinded him. And it changed his life forever.

For you see, Paul used to live and breathe murderous threats against Christians. He was filled with hatred. But the dangerous grace of God overflowed in his life. Where his sin had abounded, God's grace and mercy abounding even more, until it knocked him over and he was saved from a life of hatred. In fact, he came to love the people he formerly hated.

That's transformation.

Now here is the hard part. This hyperactive grace is not only flowing towards us, but toward the ignorant, the unbelieving, the blaspheming, the persecutors, the violent in our world.

Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners.

No character is too crushed for it not to be redeemed by the cross of Christ.

Jesus Christ transforms lives. Christ picked the chief of sinners to demonstrate what his mercy and power can do in people's lives today. Paul says that he is an example to all, that if he can receive God's grace and love, anybody can receive God's grace and love. Even those you have given up on. Even those you consider hopeless cases. Even if you think your past is too much to overcome. Even to those who are angry, violent, abusive, addicted, depressed, crazy, suicidal, joy-less.

I discussed this passage with the Deacons on Wednesday night. I asked them to come up with modern day examples of people like Paul, people who are blasphemers, persecutors, violent. After we made our list, we talked about the grace and mercy given to Paul, and I said, "Christ doesn't extend mercy and grace just to the average sinner, but to the foremost of sinners. Even to those you listed. What do you think about that?"

This is what we came up with: grace is unfair. How can the same grace and mercy that has been extended to us overflow to the abusive and violent of our world? It's unfair. Here is a quote from Anne Lamott from her book "Traveling Mercies:"

"The mystery of God's love as I understand it is that God loves the man who was being mean to his dog just as much as he loves babies; God loves Susan Smith, who drowned her two sons, as much as he loves Desmond Tutu. And he loved her just as much when she was releasing the handbrake of her car that sent her boys into the river as he did when she first nursed them. So of course, he loves old ordinary me, even or especially at my most scared and petty and mean and obsessive. Loves me; chooses me."

How can we hold back what has been given so freely to us?

So this is what I told my congregation 12 years ago the Sunday after 9/11: pray. Pray for our enemies. Pray for the terrorists of the world.

And I add to that prayer list today: Pray for the abusive dictators of the world. Pray for the angry, the violent, the abusive, the addicted, the depressed, the suicidal. God's grace and mercy extends to them, and can transform their lives just as God did with Paul. Grace overflowing

So, as Paul remembers what he was before Jesus found him, and as he remembers all that Jesus has done for him, he cannot hold back his praise and we join in that praise:

"Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen."

May it be so.