

Pastor T.C. Arnold  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Trinity  
1 Timothy 1:12-17  
July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2017

Last weekend I attended an ordination and installation of a young man right out of seminary at Calvary Lutheran on 75<sup>th</sup> and Oak. And since this past week was the ordination anniversary of both yours truly and your Pastor Froiland, I have spent time reflecting on what that day was like for a brand new graduate who is being placed into the office of the holy ministry to be a pastor of God's precious flock. For me, it was terrifying. As I looked into the eyes of the young man being ordained and installed last weekend, I could see what I felt 18 years ago when I was in that very place. I could see excitement in his eyes. I could see a young man who was ready to get after it... I mean, for crying out loud, he just spent 4 years at the seminary after 4 years in college preparing for this moment along with a lifetime of service as a pastor. I could also see a bit of fear and trepidation. He was nervous, and I completely understand. There is rarely a time in someone's life when a person will feel more inadequate than a moment like that. I remember on my day of ordination here on June 27<sup>th</sup>, 1999, right before we processed into the sanctuary while singing *A Mighty Fortress*, I told Pastor Krueger, "I feel so unworthy at this moment in my life." Pastor Krueger looked at me and said, "Don't worry, you are unworthy, but so am I and all the rest of these sinners lined up to give you a blessing on this most important day."

The Epistle text for today are words from an old man apostle, St. Paul, to a young man bishop, Pastor Timothy. Just think, Pastor Timothy's call was not to be an assistant pastor or an associate pastor. His call right out of the seminary was not to be Sr. Pastor. No, rather, Timothy was called to the rank of Bishop straight out of the gate. And in order to remind Timothy of his unworthiness to serve in this blessed office of Bishop, Paul reminds Timothy of who he is before God, before the Christian congregation, to remind this young pastor of who and what he is as well. Paul says, "*The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.*"

Paul is the "foremost" sinner. And likewise, your Pastor Arnold is the foremost sinner. It doesn't stand to reason that we could have two "foremost" sinners. One has to be worse than the other, right? I mean, what about Pastor Froiland? He's pretty bad himself, right? Yes, he too is a "foremost" sinner.

But think about what this letter is for just a minute. St. Paul is writing a brand new pastor just ordained and installed into the parish – who was installed as a bishop with many more souls to care for, to pray for, than any pastor you might know today. He was a missionary pastor who had to lay the groundwork... who had to start from the very beginning by simply telling the Gospel story to a people who had absolutely no clue. Timothy didn't have a board of directors. He didn't have an elders committee. He didn't have a constitution and bylaws that showed him the proper procedure to accept memorials given to the church. All Timothy had was the Word. And the one who had this Word was a sinner-bishop who would need every bit of God's mercy, just like St. Paul, to preach the Word and deliver the sacraments of grace to a people who are just now coming to the faith. And the Lord is sending chief sinners to do this work? Men like St. Paul and Pastor Timothy? You bet He is!

This is what God does. He sends chief sinners. God is the one who made St. Paul worthy to be an apostle. That didn't come from his good life. You know better than that. Paul was the man

who persecuted the church to the highest degree. But, as it says in the text, “*the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.*” God’s grace made St. Paul, the chief of sinners, worthy to be an apostle. He did the same for Timothy, a sinner, and every pastor since then.

But most importantly He does the same for you. And thank God, because you are a “foremost” sinner as well. That particular designation does not just reside with apostles and bishops. It also describes you. I know it describes you because I am just as human as you are. I know your heart of desire for that which does not belong to you. I know your evil thoughts. I know what you do in secret. I know the way you talk about your neighbor. I know the deception you are up to. I know that the path that you are on with all of those things is not a path to heaven but a path to hell. I know what you deserve and I know the punishment for what you have done is. I know, but the question I have for you is, do you know?

Do you know that what you are up to in secret is a sin? Do you know those hurtful thoughts, those deceptive deeds work to separate you from the Lord? Do you know that when the desires of our heart become king, and not our Lord as king, then we are so much more apt to think, to believe, that what this place you are in right now is of very little consequence in our lives? You have a different God to bow down to. You have a different altar at which you worship. It’s a god created out of a sinful heart that selfishly wants for desire rather than turning toward the God of the soul.

Yet, even as we can exclaim with St. Paul... “*I am the foremost sinner,*” we are blessed to also be able to exclaim... “*the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.*” So with this exclamation on the tip of our tongues, repent, beloved in the Lord. Turn away from a life of sin and live for Christ, “*as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.*”

Usually it is during the season of Lent that we sing that familiar hymn, “*Chief of sinners though I be, Jesus shed His blood for me.*” This hymn is often sung during that penitential season but it’s actually not listed as a Lenten hymn in the hymnal. It’s a confession and absolution hymn. It’s where St. Paul would be in the text for today... admitting what his standing is before God and man... I’m the worst. But although Paul is the chief sinner, Jesus shed his blood for him. And when we sing this hymn, we put it in the first person... “*Chief of sinners though I be, Jesus shed His blood for me.*” We stand redeemed, beloved in the Lord. We stand forgiven and fortified in grace by a Savior who loved us to death... quite literally.

And so as sinners like you and me stand before the throne of God, it is true, we are the worst of the worst. But you are not seen by the heavenly Father in such ways. He looks at you through the blood of His Son. When the Father gazes at you today, it is by grace through faith that Jesus has clothed us with Himself and that is what he sees. He sees Jesus when He looks at us. And that, beloved in the Lord, is good news. Because we have no honor to stand on our own two feet. We have no grace from ourselves to be enter the kingdom heaven. We have no ability or good work good enough to set ourselves right with God.

Do you feel unworthy? You are. But thanks be to God you have been made worthy to stand before the Savior Jesus in His kingdom. Even Chief sinners are made worthy... made worthy to serve... made worthy to be called Christian... made worthy to be called pastor... made worthy to rejoice in the forgiveness of sins that is for you... the chief of all saints by virtue of your Savior Jesus. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.