

God's Most

1 Timothy 1:12-17

September 11, 2022

First Presbyterian, Luling

I spent part of yesterday morning over at the Foundation Farm, at the first annual Youth Grill Off. There were twenty teams, divided between the junior division, ages 8-14 and senior division, ages 15-18. They were making burgers with Foundation beef, on a charcoal grill. Each division had judges, and the teams could add whatever ingredients they wanted into the burger meat, or even wood chips on the fire to add smoke flavor to their burgers. There were prizes, of course, just like any contest. A showmanship prize. A "most fun" prize. Another for "most creative" and one for "most outstanding teamwork." A grand champion and reserve grand champion for both junior and senior divisions.

What fun is a contest without a winner, right? It's the same thing for Watermelon Thump Queen contest and parade. Same thing in La Grange last weekend for the County Fair Queen and parade. Most congenial, most photogenic, most ticket sales or votes. At the county fair there were prizes for vegetables and quilts and salsa and desserts and collections. The contestant or team who is the "most" of something wins a certificate or prize or, at the very least, bragging rights. Most Valuable Player, most improved, etc etc etc. I know this phenomenon is prevalent in American culture, but I assume it's somewhat universal. There's at least a little bit of competitive spirit in us, and we'd like to be the "most" something, sometime in our lives.

The person writing to Timothy, Paul or someone writing in Paul's name and referring to Paul's life experiences, wants to claim the "most" title in an unusual category. No most congenial or most fun for him. No. He claims the Most Sinful title.

Let's see why and what he's saying about that. The background to this passage is the story of Paul's conversion, which is narrated in Acts 9. Paul was Saul, you might remember, a zealous persecutor of Jewish disciples of Jesus, not even called Christians yet. Saul had an encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, which literally blinded him. "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" said the voice from heaven. Three days later he regained his sight, and then began preaching Jesus in the synagogues, and became the Paul we know, apostle to the Gentiles.

Presumably here in First Timothy, he's referencing his earlier life as Saul.

Here's how he describes himself: "I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence." And then describes how his life has changed through the grace of Jesus Christ: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost." He uses "foremost" again in the next verse to describe himself.

If there is some sort of "worst sinner ever in the whole world" contest, then he wants to claim the title. "Foremost" is not a word we use often, and the Greek word is pretty common—it usually means first or primary. So when Jesus says "the first shall be last and the last shall be first," "first" there is the same word that is translated "foremost" here. We might say something more like Number One Sinner, or Primo Sinner, or Most Sinful Award.

I have no idea what the criteria would be for a Most Sinful category. Paul's a contender, what with the persecuting of Jesus's followers. But there are plenty of others, some of whom would agree that they are the Foremost Sinner, and some who would be in denial. Maybe some of us think we deserve that title. Some folks think that their sins loom larger and more sinful than other peoples' sins. And others are just the opposite, "well, maybe I did that little bitty sin, but so-and-so is really awful." Mr. Foremost Among Sinners in First Timothy is clearly in the first category. His sins were so bad and categorically opposed to Jesus, that he believes—truly believes—that he can claim "Foremost Sinner" title.

In doing so, he gives Timothy the recipient of the letter, and us, two gifts. The first is that if Paul is the Foremost Sinner, then no one else can claim that title. There's no reason to feel nearly as awful about yourself as he does about himself, because he is most definitely the foremost among sinners. That's the small gift.

The big gift in claiming the Foremost Sinner title is that it sets up the next "most" in this passage. In the Foremost Sinner, Jesus Christ "might display the utmost patience," to make Mr. Foremost Sinner an example. Being the Foremost Sinner, that is, allows Jesus Christ's patience and love and grace and faith and mercy—all words used to describe Jesus in this passage—allows Jesus's grace to be demonstrated to the utmost. Jesus's grace is more than sufficient to forgive even the Foremost Sinner, so it's obvious that Jesus's grace is plenty enough to forgive any of the rest of us. That "utmost" word is a different word, much less common, but it seems to mean something along the lines of whole, complete, perfectly done. So in the life of the Foremost Sinner, Jesus displays the Utmost Grace. Foremost Sinner meets Utmost Grace, and Utmost Grace is more than capable of taking care of that sin.

You see how that comparison works? Paul establishes that he's the worst sinner. And if Jesus's grace is enough for the worst sinner, then it's clearly enough for anyone else's.

The passage is centered not on the Foremost Sinner, but on the Utmost Jesus. "The grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." And the verse that was our call to confession today: "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." That grace and mercy initiated the call to Paul, even though he was the Foremost Sinner. And that grace and mercy and utmost patience—and I love that patience is included here—enables Paul to fulfill Christ's calling to him.

The passage closes with more mosts, this time about God. It's a verse that is a doxology, similar to the one we sing every week. Doxologies are words of praise about God. This one says "To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever, Amen." God is not just King, but is King of the ages. Only God is immortal. Only God is invisible. God is the Most of everything, so honor and glory to God.

The Most of Everything God sent the Utmost Grace and Patience and Love into the world in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ the Utmost came into the world to save sinners, up to and including the Foremost of Sinners, and us. It's the good news of the gospel, for the Most and the least.