

THE PERSON GOD USES. A sermon delivered by Rev. Steven Schafer at Mt. Hope on September 18, 2022. Text: I Timothy 1: 12-17.

Last week Sue and I were out with some friends and we were talking about a friend of theirs who we had recently met. This friend is one of those non-stop talkers who you have to rudely interrupt if you want to say anything at all. But it doesn't really matter if you interrupt and say something because, as soon as she has the floor again, she picks up right where she left off, having heard not one word you said.

The friend we were out with has a dilemma. This non-stop talkative woman asked her one day what was wrong with her. She said that no one ever - EVER - invites her and her husband out to eat or in for dessert or to have coffee. "We're nice people, I think," she said, "but we have no social life whatsoever. What's wrong with us?"

How do you answer that? You KNOW the answer – she can't stop talking - but saying that would probably be devastating to her. It would be to anyone. A very touchy question to answer, "What's wrong with us?" Most people wouldn't ask, of course. Most of us wouldn't want to know the answer... What would you tell her?

Our friend said she sort of deflected the question and changed the subject and that worked. Almost immediately, Ol' motor-mouth took off again.

But the question stuck in my mind. What DO you tell someone like that? What can you tell them that will help them have friends and for people to want to be around them? I came up with the perfect answer to that question - as wise as any answer Solomon ever came up with. Unfortunately, my answer has nothing whatsoever to do with the sermon today so you'll either have to ask Sue or ask me, later.

What we are talking about today is the general feeling we all have from time to time of being unfit - not being fit for the work we do - not having the gifts and talents we need to do what we are assigned.

Most of us have heard of the "Peter Principle." In companies or organizations where people are regularly promoted based on achievement, merit and success, employees are promoted until they are in too deep and they simply "Peter out" - they don't have the ability to do what they are expected to do. Someone said it this way, "Employees tend to rise to the level of their incompetence."

But something interesting happens when God is involved. God seems to pay little or no attention to what we think we can or can't do. God seems to delight in taking a Moses, who said he got tremendous stage fright, and making him the leader and spokesman for three million people. He relishes the idea of taking a teenager like David and putting him up against a giant so strong and so well armed and so big that he makes trained soldiers quake with fear. He loved it when Peter, the fisherman, the denier, the bombastic apostle, became the rock upon which the church is built. He laughed when Abraham, at age 100, was assigned to begin a new nation from scratch - even his wife, Sarah, laughed at that one - SHE was going to have children 60 years after menopause?!

Then there is the greatest of Christian leaders - Paul. We know him as a man who was a great preacher and apostle. He wrote letters that have been around for two thousand years, he traveled the world - by boat, on a donkey, in an ox-cart, and on foot - he saw just about everything in his world that was worth seeing - every major city - he got to speak to thousands of people - he was the spokesman for a new religious movement. He spoke to the kings and rulers of his day. He was listened to by the poor. He spoke in homes and synagogues and palaces. He was able to recruit others to follow Christ by the hundreds and thousands. Somehow he never exhibited the "Peter Principle." He didn't ever seem to fail. But here is the thing - - it wasn't always that way.

Paul was not always faithful and pious. He wasn't even always "Christian." In fact, just the opposite. Paul was probably the last guy in the world you'd predict would have a career that would mean leaving his Jewish faith. He was circumcised at birth. He went to Hebrew school as a child. He kept kosher. He knew the Jewish laws. He studied in a Jewish seminary as a young man. He worked for the Jewish hierarchy. No one would have foretold that Paul, or Saul as he was known back in the day, would embrace the radical teachings of a controversial Jewish subversive who was executed a number of years before by the Romans.

A man named Stephen was the first non-messiah to die for the Christian faith. At his stoning we first see Saul. It says, "And Saul was there, giving approval to his death (8:1). It goes on to say, "Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison." He HATED people of "The Way" (that's what the early Christians were called - "People of the Way" - named after Jesus' words, "I am the way..."). He hated them beyond all reasonable hatred. He even went to the synagogue elders and asked for permission to officially to go Damascus, find Christ followers, and arrest them.

You know the story. On his way to Damascus, Jesus, now gone for a year or so already, appears to him in a brilliant light and speaks to him. He knows it is Jesus and is immediately converted - now to be one of those he has papers to imprison... Later on he would say, "I was a 'blasphemer, a persecutor and a man of violence'" (v. 13). Would you choose a man like that - with his reputation and his credentials and his actions - as someone who would do amazing things for God?

People literally trembled at the mention of Saul's name. His goal was to destroy the hopes and dreams of the early Christians. If Saul had gotten a job interview and was asked to describe himself in a few words, he would have freely said, "I am your worst nightmare."

But God loves that sort of thing. God saw more in Paul than simply his past. God did not define Paul by his résumé and did not pass over him because he was a blasphemer, persecutor and man of violence. His past was not his future. God, who can make all things new, opened up the door to new life and invited Paul to enter in.

And as much as Paul would go on to teach about God and Jesus and life in the Spirit, his biggest lesson about God is in the transformation of his own life. If God can transform a Saul to a Paul, if God can "appoint to his service" a mean-spirited, blaspheming man of violence like Saul -- what can God do in and with you and me? Why do we think that God probably has not "appointed" US to serve His kingdom in some significant way?

Paul freely says that he is a follower of Jesus not because of his upstanding behavior in the past, but because of God's mercy and grace. God understands that Paul "acted ignorantly in unbelief" (v. 13) but is now ready to receive God's forgiveness. Ironically, it is Paul's experience with sin and turning away from God that makes him appreciate the gifts of God's mercy and kindness even more.

I have a friend, a man in his mid 40's, who is considering becoming a priest. But he's not sure whether or not he has the "call." He was involved with light drugs and lots of alcohol for the past twenty years. He's been sober for one. He is pretty sure God wants to use him in some way, but he struggles with being good enough. His past was so wretched and he was such a sinner that he isn't sure God can use him in the church. He isn't sure he could minister to others who may know that he, himself, hasn't lived such a 'holy' life.

It was precisely Paul's shameful past behavior that made him an ideal candidate for a future in forgiveness and redemption. Think about it -- who knows more about creating secure banks than a former bank robber? Who would you turn to for advice about foiling con artists? The best thing to do may be to turn to a former con man.

The FBI hired Frank Abagnale, the notorious criminal featured in the film, *Catch Me If You Can*, because of his great skill in impersonating others and his ability to forge checks totaling millions. ...A person known primarily for his dishonesty becomes an invaluable asset in charge of tracking down crooks!

Someone at the FBI was able to see beyond the obvious -- here is a criminal with a long record -- and envisioned something else. This former swindler is someone with experience that could benefit us! Here is a person who knows how to beat the system. Perhaps that knowledge -- however illegally obtained -- can be put to good use.

So it was with Paul. He knew he'd done some bad things for which he wanted God's forgiveness. He knows what it means to "fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). He has not led a life that has *earned* God's trust. He has not acted like a disciple, follower or believer of Jesus -- in fact, exactly the opposite. Yet Paul is called by God. *That is **mercy*** -- to be forgiven not because of any human action, but because God chooses to. *This is grace* -- God's seeing more in Paul than Paul can see in himself. Paul is in a unique position to talk about the value of God's forgiveness and mercy. He has experienced these gifts himself and understands their value in a personal way.

This is really good news for:

- Any of us who would dismiss our chances to be "judged faithful" or to be a disciple of Jesus because of our past - we can be.

This is really good news for:

- The person who finds it easier to itemize his faults than to enumerate his strengths - God can capitalize on those little strengths and overlook those major faults.

This is really good news for:

- Those around us whom we have already decided are hopeless cases. We should never give up on people. God can - often does - redeem them and make them more than anyone ever imagined.

This is really good news for:

- Those who feel like giving up. It is NEVER too late to be faithful and forgiven and renewed.

This is really good news for:

- Those who feel they don't know enough to be active, committed followers of Jesus. God can use us just as we are.

Our past does not have to dictate our future. Because of God's mercy, we are not victims of our résumés. We, like Paul, may have done things that are totally contrary to what God wants. God reminds us that our past does not have the final word. The past is prologue - the beginning to what will yet be.

Here's the thing: God has a job for you. God can create something new out of any and all of us.

We have been appointed to serve, and it's our job to discover just what is the nature of that service and to go out there and do it. Can you teach? Can you tutor? Can you give out discount prescription drug cards? Can you usher or greet? Can you adjust the sound system do something techy? Can you sing or play an instrument? Can you write? Can you fold bulletins? Can you pray? God is calling you to something - now. I can't tell you what it is. Only God knows. He's waiting for you to say "Here I am, Lord. Tell me what you want me to do and I'll do it... I'll be it."