

1 Timothy 1:12-17 “Those People”

Ever have to deal with *those people*? You know which ones I’m talking about. *Those* people. Granted, “those” vary depending on who you’re talking to. In Mary’s hometown of The Dalles, Oregon *those people* were generally the seasonal migrant workers from South of the border who worked in the orchards and processed the fruit tree harvests. They were often referred to as “the Pickers.” If any crime happened in town ... vandalism, theft, anything that was perceived as a threat to the health and welfare of the community ... the “Pickers” got blamed. But that was Mary’s hometown.

My hometown in Oregon was down in the mid-Willamette Valley on the coast range side which didn’t have a big ag industry like Mary’s hometown. The logging and timber industry was at the center of our economy. *Those people* in my hometown were the hippies and environmentalists. I grew up about two and a half miles down the railroad tracks from where the annual “Oregon Country Fair” is held every summer. But that’s not what the locals called it. The locals called it “The Hippie Fair,” and, like Mary’s hometown, if any criminal activity took place in the area any time in the month of July ... “Well it must have been *those people* ... those hippies.” Now the environmentalists, (who probably went to the hippie fair too) were vilified as well. For a while in the early 1980s, there was a big campaign to suspend timber harvesting in certain areas in our county because logging on that land threatened the habitat of the Northern Spotted Owl. People in my hometown, and other timber towns, started buying these little stuffed owls then tying or chaining them to the grills of logging trucks and pickup trucks. This wasn’t so much our way of wishing any harm on the spotted owl. In fact, we really loved the little critters to be honest. No, this was our way of showing contempt for *those people*. Those environmentalists. Classy, huh?

In Appalachian Virginia and Tennessee, *those people* were the folks who lived up in the hollers, made moonshine, grew pot, and cooked meth.

The stereotype there was that *those people* all lived on government assistance and that they were all related to each other somehow. And of course, every one of them were responsible for all the theft, murder, and other heinous crimes in the area. The more polite term for those people were “hillbillies.” The less than polite term was “white trash.”

Then, when we lived in South Central Virginia *those people* were the “rich, snooty elite” who came from old Southern money and flaunted it. These were the people who bought their way into political office but couldn’t relate to the issues that “regular, working folks” faced. And believe it or not, somehow *these folks* were responsible for all the crime too. Regardless of their political affiliation, they “stole from the poor” to stay rich, which made them criminals for stealing in the first place. But this also *created* criminals because the people who they stole from had to turn to crime to survive! What a strange paradox, right?

Everywhere I’ve lived, I’ve encountered *those people*. And as you can see, *those people* have been different depending on where I lived. A big revelation for me, though, was when I discovered that *I* was somebody else’s *those people*. Ever think of that? We’re so good at “othering” folks that we don’t recognize that we’re someone else’s “other.” When we’re the hero of our own story, it’s easy to make villains out of *those people* (whoever they might be). Someone once called me, “one of the privileged elite.” And I thought, “Wait, what?!” Because this was during a time in my life where we just had our first kid and were scraping by on a small-town-almost rural pastor’s salary with no medical insurance and still paying off student loans from college. The “Privileged Elite” were *those people* who lived up on the bluff in their little starter-castles who had four vehicles in their garage and went to other countries for vacation. I wasn’t privileged! That is until I thought about it. I had a steady job. I lived in a parsonage, so I wasn’t paying rent. Although I lived across the country from my parents, I had a good relationship with them and had a line of credit that would allow me to hop on a plane and fly back to see them in case of an emergency. I had a working vehicle. I had food in my pantry and refrigerator. And my

refrigerator actually worked. And even if it didn't I had the means to fix it. Compared to the person who "othered" me, I *was* privileged. Let's face it. We all do our fair share of "othering" people, and all of us are someone else's "other." We are *all* "those people" whether we like it or not.

Our scripture this morning focuses on the Apostle Paul who is writing a letter to Timothy, a young apprentice in the early church. And Paul shows quite a bit of vulnerability here in this letter too. As he's reaching out to Timothy, he gets pretty personal as far as what motivates him to share the depths of God's mercy with others. Paul says that he counts himself among the worst of the worst when it comes to sinners and that if he can be forgiven, then who *can't* be forgiven? I brought this up last week, and I'll bring it up again. One of the things that sets our faith tradition apart is not only our acknowledgement that we all mess up and fall short of God's glory, but that we also have a God who errs on the side of grace and mercy. God has a heart that longs to be reconciled with those of us who are created in God's image, but who have strayed from the path. God doesn't say, "See? I told you so!" when we're in the middle of self-inflicted suffering. Regardless of how far we stray, there is always the persistent, inexhaustible opportunity to come home and return to the source of mercy and renewal.

This is where *those people* come in. See, *those people* help *distract* us from *our* shortcomings. If we're honest, there's usually something about *those people* that scares us about ourselves. Or there's something about *those people* that keeps us from looking at them with a less than compassionate heart. But God? God is always there ... waiting for us to lay ourselves open, to be honest about the barriers we place between ourselves and others, and between ourselves and God. And that's what Paul is doing here. He admits his past sins. He is honest about where he fell short. He confesses, "I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence." But then he goes on to say that, "I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ

Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—*of whom I am the foremost.*”

How many of us have ever thought, “I’m the chief of all sinners?” Don’t get me wrong, some of us may very well think that. But its funny how someone else will always come along and say, “Oh yeah? You think you’re bad? I’ll show you who’s the ‘chief of all sinners.’” And then they come up with a story that will blow yours all to pieces. I’ve been to churches where testimonials are a regular part of worship. Someone will stand up in church and tell a story about how their life was a parade of terrible choices, and all the bad things they did. They’ll go on for 20 minutes about how many drugs they took, how many people they slept with, how many times they lied, stole and cheated from others. And then they say, “Then by the grace and mercy of God, I was saved.” Period. Twenty minutes of bad choices, twenty seconds of God’s grace. It’s almost an open invitation for the next person to get up, and tell a *thirty minute* story that makes the first person’s story seem like an afternoon at Disneyland. Thirty minutes of even worse choices, followed by, “Then by the grace and mercy of God, I was saved.” See, even during this time in their worship service that was meant to lift up God’s mercy, folks were “othering” and making it all about themselves. And *every* church does it to some degree. *Those people* exist in the church too. “Oh, those first service people” or “those second service people.” Or “those bleeding hearts” or “those bible thumpers.” Or “those old folks” or “those young folks.” Or, “those country music lovers” or “those folks who like the old boring oldie songs.” *They* are everywhere. *Those people.*

Here’s something to think about. Let’s consider the apostles ... the ones who Jesus sought out and called to be his inner circle of disciples. They were all *those people!* Jesus gathered so many “others” around him it was almost comical. Peter, the fisherman, probably thought of Matthew as one of *those* tax collectors who sold out to the Romans to make a living off taking money from “regular folks” like him. And we could

turn that around too, because it's likely that Matthew thought of Peter as one of *those* uneducated, fishy-smelling bottom dwellers.

Simon the Zealot probably thought Bartholomew was one of *those* religious sell-outs while Bart probably thought Simon was some crazy Torah-thumping doomsday prepper who would kill someone for misquoting a scripture. All of them probably thought James and John were thugs for having nick-names like "Sons of Thunder." But this didn't matter to Jesus. Jesus wanted *every one of those people*. He hand-picked every one of *those* people.

See, God has a soft spot for screw-ups. I think Paul recognized this, and that's why he was willing to be so bold in proclaiming God's mercy. We've all been *those people* at some point in our lives. We've been on the outside circle of acceptance, either because of something we've done or because of who we are. Maybe we identified ourselves as one of *those people* and then deemed ourselves as unworthy. Or maybe we've just been pushed to the margins by the ones in the circle of acceptance. If we're going to fully understand the extent of God's mercy and grace, we have *got* to stop "othering" people. Instead of being "those people," what if we could work on being "we" people? If there's a group of people who you just can't seem to stop looking at with a less than compassionate heart, maybe you need to consider laying yourself open to God and being honest about the barriers you place between yourself and others? Or even the barriers we place between ourselves and God. Part of the good news that we proclaim as Christ's followers is that God continually gives us the tools to smash those barriers *if* we're willing to take those tools up and actually use them. May this be so.