

Suttons Bay Congregational Church  
1 Timothy 1:12-17

September 16, 2007  
Rev. Robin Long

12I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. 13Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. 14The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

15Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. 16But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life. 17Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

During the long, rather boring summer days of my childhood, my mornings were spent looking forward to noontime, not because I wanted lunch, but rather because, after lunch, I knew the mail would be coming. I waited for it with my forehead resting against the cool mesh of our screen door, watching for Peggy McKinney's dad Bill to drive up to our mailbox in his funny little mail truck. His vehicle entered my field of vision as he pulled up to the Winzeler's mailbox—about a half a mile west of our house. When he drove away from the Winzeler's I went out and waited for him on the porch, meeting him at the mailbox where he would pile my arms with bills, catalogs, bank statements, and letters. It was the letters that were the focus of my attention. As I flipped through the mail in my arms, I hoped to catch a glimpse of a familiar tilting, scratchy writing on the front of an envelope—the tilting, scratchy handwriting of my Grandma. I love my Grandma and enjoyed trying to decipher her handwriting as she wrote to me about what the weather was like in Fostoria, Ohio and my Grandpa's latest woodworking project. But what I really wanted out of those letters that started with "Dear Robin" and ended with "XXOO Love, Grandma" was the piece of Wrigley's Doublemint gum that she always enclosed. Gum was a forbidden fruit in our house and the only time we got any of the sticky, chewy, sweet, and wonderful stuff was if it came in a letter from Grandma. I loved gum and Grandma's letters were the only place I could get it. And though I am now a self-supporting, 32 year old married mother and gainfully employed minister who can find 30 cents in the bottom of my purse to buy myself a pack of Wrigley's Doublemint gum anytime I want, the sweetest and most enjoyable gum I ever chew still comes in an envelope with tilting, scratchy writing on the outside and is wrapped up in a letter that begins "Dear Robin" and ends with "XXOO Love, Grandma." Now that precious gum has become a symbol of something so much more, a symbol of the wonderful thing that is my relationship with Grandma who just celebrated her 89<sup>th</sup> year of living on God's good earth.

In this age of email, text messages, unlimited calling plans, and form letters, a handwritten letter—with or without a stick of gum in it—that begins with your name and ends with the signature of someone who loves you is a treasure. There's nothing special about being the "Whom" in "To Whom It May Concern", being addressed as the "Current Resident" leaves me cold, and one piece of mail I received this week that was addressed to "The Primary Household Grocery Buyer" was just laughable—but a handwritten letter with your name on the top—now that shows that someone cares. And that's what we have this morning in our scripture reading—a letter purported to be written by the Apostle Paul to his friend, colleague, and student Timothy. In this letter, Paul gives Timothy a pep talk by means of the stories he tells him of his own faith journey. "12I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. 13Even though I was once a

blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. 14The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.” In other words, Paul has sent Timothy a letter saying, “Dearest Timothy, I’m just so thankful that God found me on that road to Damascus, that God showed me Jesus, and that God allows me to be Christ’s disciple even though I’d been so nasty, selfish, and greedy. Isn’t it amazing that the “Head Honcho in the Sky” showered me with a super-size dose of love and compassion. Now Tim, accept this as my believe, what I’m going to tell you you can take to the bank—Jesus Christ has come to save all of us sinners. That’s right, to save sinners. And because I was the worst of them all—the slimiest of the slime, God chose me to be an example of God’s grace and mercy by forgiving me. He did this so others, regardless of their sins, would believe that his endless grace and mercy is available to each of them. Isn’t that the most amazing and coolest thing ever. Honestly, all honor and glory be to Almighty God always and forever. XXOO Love, Paul.

This letter to Timothy is not only a personal letter, but it is also a personal testimony about God’s saving power. When Saul encountered God’s blind on the road to Damascus, his life was in shambles, he was a wreck, he was beyond the point of saving himself—indeed beyond the point of realizing he needed saving.

Imagine it’s 2 AM on a cold January night. A woman named Ann is desperate for a drink. The kids are in bed, her husband’s asleep, and she can’t find a drop of alcohol in the house. Though earlier in the evening Greg McMaster had predicted a storm for eastern Leelanau County, Ann leaves her home in the village to drive down to Traverse City—she knows that Meijer is open all night and that the bottles of wine will be standing at attention in aisle 4 waiting for her to make her selections. She scrapes the snow and ice off her windshield, turns the defroster on full blast and waits for the cold air blowing on her face to turn warm as her Volvo slips and slides out of her driveway, down her street, and turns right onto St. Joseph Street. The snow is blowing and she tries to avoid the patches of black ice forming at the edges of 22. The wind whipping off the bay is nasty and controlling the car is becoming even more of a struggle, but she’s making it. Until suddenly, somewhere after the Marathon station and before the old Windows restaurant, Ann finds herself in a complete white out. She hits a patch of ice and her car goes spinning. Miraculously, after spinning into the northbound lane and back across the south bound, her car comes to a stop with a gentle “thud” as it makes contact with a snow drift. And as her car makes impact, so too does God’s presence with her. She suddenly realizes how close she came to losing it all—to losing her life, to her children losing their mother and her husband losing his wife—all for a drink. No longer blinded by snow, she’s now blinded by the tears pouring down her face—tears of regret, relief, sadness, and, and tears of hope. “12I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength . . . The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.”

This letter from the apostle isn’t just for Timothy—it’s for us—written to each of us who feel unworthy, unable, unloved, un-whatever it is that we’re feeling that’s keeping us from feeling God’s love and grace. The ideas Paul expresses aren’t unfamiliar, we often hear them in church—“for God so loved the world that God gave God’s only son our Lord . . .” That’s nice—but it’s more of a “To Whom it may concern” message than it is a personal letter. These words written to Timothy are personal—they’re written just for us—folks who are struggling, who are trying, who are believing despite our doubts, and who often don’t feel up to the magnificent task of doing Christ’s work in this world. This letter names the greatest blessing we have in this life—the blessing of being saved, of being forgiven, of being given

new life and the life everlasting, of experiencing grace like Paul experienced on the road to Damascus each and everyday of our lives—not because we've earned it, but rather because we need it—and God knows we need it—and so Christ gives it to us and in this letter, Paul names it for us—the greatest blessing in this life—Christ's saving grace.