The World's Worst Sinner

In the name of him who came to seek and to save the lost, dear friends in Christ: I'm willing to bet that just about everyone here is familiar with the *Guinness Book of World Records*. It's the "go to" resource when you want to find who holds the title for being the tallest, the fastest, the most prolific, the best – or conversely, the smallest, the slowest, the least accomplished, and the worst of whatever talent, attribute, or competition you can possibly think of (not to mention a whole lot of others you'd never think of). To be sure, if you've ever thumbed through a copy of the *Guinness Book of Records*, you get the distinct impression that some people have nothing better to do than to think up dumb stunts they can perform that nobody else has ever thought of simply in order to get their names in the book. Thus they hope to achieve their fifteen seconds of fame. Among such doubtful records are these: "the fastest 100 meters run barefoot on ice" (17.35 seconds – and that's without being chased by a polar bear); "the most live cockroaches eaten in one minute" (36 – by Mr. Ken Edwards of London, England – which is truly a remarkable achievement considering how intoxicated someone would have to be to attempt it); and this: the "most books typed backwards – using a blank keyboard and without looking at the computer screen (68 books coming to a total of 24,154 pages. Presumably the goal of this otherwise useless accomplishment was to assist the person who wanted to hold the record for *reading* the most books backward without the aid of a mirror). Interestingly enough, the *Guinness Book* itself holds a rather dubious title. Not only is it the book in which is recorded the greatest number of world records, it's also the one book most likely to be stolen from a public library. Apparently even cheap, dishonest people want to be able to look up who holds the record for what at a moment's notice.

Okay, if you're wondering where I'm going with this, it has to do with something that St. Paul wrote in this morning's Epistle. He says, "This saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, *of whom I am the foremost*." Talk about a doubtful title: here Paul calls himself *the world's worst sinner*. It got me wondering, how exactly do you measure that? I mean, if you go to the *Guinness Book* to look up the world's worst sinner, you'll not find an entry. Even if you could, it wouldn't say it was St. Paul. What you *can* find are entries for things like the mass murderer who killed the most people, the robber who pulled off the biggest bank heist, the most successful conman; these sorts of things. They list specific crimes, not the far broader category of sin in general, which as Lutherans, we know includes not only evil deeds that are actually done, but also wicked and selfish thoughts, good things done with evil motives, and even failing to act when you know what good thing you should be doing, what we call sins of omission. When you include all that into an evaluation of a person's relative sinfulness, how could you ever determine who is a worse sinner than whom? You'd have to be able to read minds.

Yet Paul, speaking by the Spirit of God confidently asserts that <u>he</u> is the foremost sinner in the world. How can he say that? The temptation for us might be to back up a bit to what the Apostle said earlier about his former life when he was a blasphemer and a persecutor of the Church. And certainly Paul – or Saul the Pharisee, as he was known then – was one very bad actor in those days. When we're first introduced to him, he's cheering on the enraged mob of hyper-zealous Jews that murdered St. Stephan, the first Christian martyr, by stoning him to death. What did Stephan do that got them so riled up? He helped the poor and needy and preached about Jesus. But witnessing this event was a turning point in Paul's life. He saw it as calling. He was convinced that God wanted him to be his instrument to stamp out the name of Jesus by intimidating, arresting, beating, and when necessary killing every Christian he could.

He went to the chief priests and had himself appointed to this task. They gave him the legal authorization to carry it out. And he was very successful at it. In no time at all he made himself the number one enemy of the Church. He became the center of a maelstrom of hate and violence directed against the faithful. And he enjoyed doing it. He loved making Christians suffer: men, women, children, it didn't matter to him. Whatever he could do to inflict misery upon them and so damage the cause of Jesus—a name he cursed and despised, so much the better. He honestly believed that what he was doing was right. He was sure that the Lord God in heaven was looking down and smiling upon him for the way he hated and abused those who trusted Jesus.

But then he discovered otherwise. It happened while he was leading a column of soldiers to Damascus. They were going there in order to arrest Christians who had fled from the persecution in Judea. Paul's mission was to bring them back to Jerusalem in chains to face imprisonment and torture until they renounced their faith in Christ. But just as he was drawing near the city, the Lord Jesus appeared to Paul in a vision of blinding light from heaven. Trembling in terror on the ground where he'd fallen, Paul heard a voice asking him, "Why are you persecuting me?" When Paul asked who was speaking, the Lord replied, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." Put yourself in Paul's place – to suddenly come to realize that not only were you in the wrong, but that you had actually set your heart one hundred eighty degrees against the Lord and the work he's doing in the world. Imagine how ashamed and terrified he must have been realizing that he stood before the Lord with the blood of the truly faithful on his hands. He expected to be destroyed in an instant and cast into the deepest pit of hell.

Instead, to his immense surprise and relief, Jesus dealt with him mercifully. Paul was baptized, his sins were washed away, and he received the gift of the Holy Spirit. In the days that followed, Paul came to understand the Gospel of Jesus Christ probably better than anyone else ever had before him – which was a good thing, because Jesus had important work for him to do. His plan was to take Paul, who had been the number one enemy of the Christian faith, and make him its leading advocate. Thus Paul would become a showcase of God's great mercy in Christ – how he so much wants to save sinners that he would even rescue and turn around the man who most hated Jesus Christ and make him his most powerful and prolific evangelist. That's part of what Paul is saying here. "If you imagine that you've committed some sin or series of sins so horrible, so enormous, so dark and low and shameful that God can't forgive them, you have only to look at me. I tried to destroy the Church of Jesus Christ. I tried to silence the wonderful good news by which people are saved. I killed and tortured and abused the people of God. What could be worse than that? And yet Jesus was merciful to me. He forgave me my many sins and raised me up to new life in him. Whoever you are, whatever you've done, he'll certainly do the same for you."

These are powerful words of comfort to anyone who is burdened by guilt; but like I said, it's only part of what Paul is saying here. You see, he wrote this letter to Timothy some thirty years after his conversion to Christ. And yet when Paul speaks of his being the foremost of sinners, he uses the *present* tense. He doesn't say "*I used to be*"; but "*I am* the world's worst sinner*." Now, it makes sense that even though he knew he was forgiven for his many offenses against the Lord that he still carried some sense of guilt over what he had done long before. But that isn't what Paul means when he says that he is still the world's worse sinner. No, he means that as far as he is concerned he really does hold that terrible title right now in the present.

How is that possible? He wasn't persecuting the Church anymore. No, in fact he had by this time done more to spread the Gospel and plant more churches than the rest of the Apostles of Jesus combined. The Lord was using him to save thousands of people. And through his

writings he would help save millions, yes, billions more. You would think that at this point he might count himself among the least sinful people in the world.

And that is precisely the problem. You see, as a Pharisee, Paul had believed that being godly was all about striving to obey the rules, regulations, and traditions which the Lord in his wisdom had imposed upon his chosen people to set them apart. And Paul believed that he was doing very well for himself in this regard. He considered himself a Pharisee to the Pharisees; that is to say, everyone looked up to the Pharisees as being the best and holiest people around. They were living examples of godliness. In the same way, says Paul, the other Pharisees looked up to me as *their* example of living perfection. "They were all striving to be like me; but I out-classed them all." *That's* the way Paul saw himself.

And that's why he hated Christians so much. They had a different way of seeing things. They said all people were sinners and that no one is righteous in the sight of God by trying to follow the Law. They said that only Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who came down to earth to live as a man – *only he lived perfectly*. And then in love – to save sinners – this same Jesus offered his perfect life on the cross as the atoning sacrifice for all the sins of the world. They said that true righteousness before God consists not in being righteous on your own, because everyone falls short of that goal. They said that true righteousness before God consists in trusting in what Jesus has done to save sinners. It's not doing what's good – no one does; but believing in Jesus who does good for you and who suffered and died in your place.

To Paul this was madness. It was completely backward, against common sense, and more importantly, against his own sense of pride in what he had accomplished. Paul didn't want a Savior. He didn't need one. He wasn't a sinner – or at least not a very bad one. And that, as it turned out, was his biggest sin of all: believing in the myth of his own righteousness. That's what kept him outside of God's will. That's what made him an enemy of the Church and of God. He despised God's grace in Christ and the work that Jesus did to save the lost because he didn't think he needed it. That sin more than any other was the one sending him straight to hell.

This is the great truth of the Gospel Paul came to understand after his conversion. Jesus came to save sinners – the worst kind of sinners. Jesus receives *only* sinners and eats with them. This means that you can't be with Jesus if you don't acknowledge and confess your sins. You can't be saved by him if you don't know that without him you're lost. The worst sin of all, then, is to think of yourself as not being completely sinful, or at least of not being as sinful as someone else, or imagining that there is within you something – anything – good or worthy in the sight of God. Because to the extent that you believe any of those lies of the devil, you think you don't need a Savior as great as the one God sent you in Jesus Christ.

Paul could not read the minds of others; but knew his own heart. And despite his repentance from sin and his trust in Jesus, he knew that the same old pharisaical, self righteous attitude still lived in him, always calling him to look at his own good works rather than in the righteousness of Christ that comes by faith. He knew he was still guilty of the greatest of all sins – and that's how he could call himself the world's worst sinner. From his perspective, he was. And that's how he knew just how desperately he needed Jesus and the forgiveness he purchased for sinners with his own blood.

But what about you? A little bit ago you sang, "Chief of sinners though I be". What did you mean by that? Were you serious? Did you mean it? Or were you just singing along without really thinking about what you were saying? Or perhaps you meant it in a subjunctive

sort of way as in, "Even if I were the chief of sinners (though I know I'm not) Jesus shed his blood for me, so I'm covered."

If it was something like that, let me suggest that you need to examine yourself more carefully. We all sin much every day. And we can identify at least some of these sins and repent of them. Hopefully you do. We know too that when we compare ourselves to the perfect law of love that the Lord requires of us, the law that says we must at all times be gladly willing to give ourselves in sacrificial service to others – our neighbors and enemies alike even as Christ gave himself for us – when we compare ourselves to *that* standard, we all score a big fat zero. We aren't just a little sinful; we're rotten through and through. We know this, and yet, only you know your own heart. And in your heart you know that there are others you judge to be worse sinners than yourself. It's that little voice that tells you things like, "At least I never did what he did, or I'm not as selfish as she is, or I could never even imagine doing what they did." That's the voice of the Pharisee in you smugly laying claim to a least some of your own righteousness before God, which, as we've seen, is the worst and most dangerous sin of all. That's the sin, more than any other, which undermines trust in Christ who alone is your righteousness. So, if you follow what I'm saying here, every mature Christian ought to consider him or herself the world's worst sinner. That you don't, if you don't, proves that it's true – again, because only you can know what's in your own heart and the law of love commands that you put the best construction on the words and actions of others precisely because you can't know what's in their hearts. Get it? Every Christian should judge him or herself to be the world's worst sinner. From your perspective, it ought to be true. And then you'll see how much you need the super-abounding grace of God in Christ and appreciate all the more what he did to save you.

In that sense, then, as we properly judge ourselves, we're all tied for the title of world's worst sinner; but don't count on getting your name into the book of world records because no one can make that evaluation but you. What matters even more though is God's judgment. He *can* read minds. And he knows every evil thought, word, and action of everyone. Whom do you suppose he has judged to be the world's worst sinner? The answer may surprise you. It's not the mass murderer who killed the most people, or the heretic that led the most people away from the truth of the Gospel to eternal damnation. It's not anyone like that. No, the one person God judged to be the world's worst sinner – the only sinner in the world in fact – is his own Son, Jesus Christ. God made him who knew no sin become sin for us that in him we might become the righteousness of God. That's why he wore the crown of thorns: to mark him as the King of all sinners, to show that God laid upon him the iniquity of us all.

May each of us then with heartfelt shame recognize that we own the title "the world's worst sinner" so that we may receive the righteousness of him who bore the title for us on the cross. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!