

Who's Your Friend?: The Sinner
1 Timothy 1:12-17
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You have three kinds of friends: sinners, saints, and indifferents. Well, at least you have three kinds of friends I am going to talk about over the next three weeks as you prepare to summon your nerve and invite some of your friends from those three categories to church on October 6. Last year on the first Sunday of October, you did such an outstanding job overcoming your fears and inviting people to church that many people urged me to make sure we did it this again, and so we shall, and may we have to set up even more chairs at the last minute than we did last year when our goal was to have more visitors than regulars.

For some people with the gift, inviting people to church is quite easy, but for the vast majority of us, doing so is, at best, an uncomfortable experience, and at worst, a paralyzing one. We are fearful and worried. We are worried we might be rejected, that we might lose that friend. We are worried that the nature of our circle of friends might change if word gets out that we are stalking them for church. We are worried that our pastor will embarrass us and say something we told our friend he would never say. I could go on, but you know what your fears are, rational or otherwise. I don't need to tell you. But let me assure you of one thing, that the old saying about spiders and stray dogs is even truer about your friends: that they are more afraid of you, than you are of them. You see, you already know what to

expect here. You already know more than one person here. You already know when to sit down and stand up, and that we use the word debts instead of trespasses in the Lord's Prayer, and that when we sing "Jesus Loves Me" everyone is supposed to sit down for prayer. But those you might invite, those you will invite, are in the dark on our customs and our traditions, and all they have to go on are their imaginations, and the hints they get from you. And so I hope to offer you the means of preparing yourself for the humbling but important task of inviting to church those who are more afraid you will ask than you are of asking.

Tonight I want to take a look at our passage from First Timothy to see what we can learn about inviting sinners to church. Of course, the word sinners conjures up all kinds of great images in your minds, right, and of course, you don't have any of those kinds of friends. After all, you are an upstanding member of the community, and you go to church, and you wouldn't be caught dead with "those kinds of people." Sorry, you're not off the hook. I'm not talking about "those kind of people." I'm talking about you. Or at least people very much like you. You see, the sinners to whom I am referring tonight are not those whom we might naturally put in that category, whatever the characteristics of sinners may be, but rather, I want to talk about those people who so much perceive themselves as sinners, that they wouldn't dare darken the door of a church for fear of being struck down on the spot. Perhaps that is an exaggeration, but there is a group of your friends who feel like they are not worthy enough to join you on Sunday, that they have done

something so awful in their lives that has filled them with shame, or a fear of confronting it, or a fear of it being revealed, that they will decline your kind invitation, and go on feeling guilty and sorrowful, instead of joyful and liberated. They are not likely to tell you what that sin or shame is, but it will be lurking there in the background – a marital affair, an abortion, an addiction, a broken relationship, being the victim of abuse, or maybe even just feeling that because they haven't "succeeded" in life, they don't measure up somehow at church, that they have been away from church for so long that they will look ignorant. I once had a man confess to me that he had raped a woman as a young man, and I am pretty sure that although he was one of the more biblically literate people I had ever met, his guilt was the reason he didn't go to church. I knew a couple once, both very faithful people, the husband even a candidate once for the priesthood, who didn't go forward for communion because they used birth control, a position their church opposed. And as much as they claimed to refrain from the table out of respect for their tradition, I could never feel convinced it wasn't for feeling they had betrayed their tradition. I have known many people who did not go to church out of a simple, yet vague, sense of unworthiness, as if the sum total of their sin and shame to date had disqualified them from participating; there was just too much to overcome, and at so late an hour of their lives. Yes, your friends come in all shapes and sizes, with sins real and imagined.

As much as your friends come with sins real and imagined, they come with fears real and imagined: the fear of rejection, the fear of discomfort, even the fear of disappointment that the church won't actually be able to deliver what they are hoping for. Some will come with the fear that if they come to church, they will be outed as sinners and made to confess in front of everyone, with a scarlet letter pinned upon their chests. These are people who fear that something dramatic might happen to them as they arrive at ECF, as dramatic as what happened to a certain gentleman in the movie "The Apostle," when he came uninvited to church with his bulldozer to knock down the interracial church of which he was afraid: (Show clip from "[The Apostle](#)").

You may have figured out by now that that is not exactly my style. And so you can tell your friends who might be a little nervous, that it is very unlikely it will happen that way, although I'll be happy to cry with them. If you've never seen this movie called "The Apostle," you simply must. It is one of the great movies of all time about the nature of God's grace and forgiveness. In fact, before you invite your friends to church, you might want to sit down and watch this movie together! What you may not know is that the preacher in this clip, the Apostle as he now calls himself, is on the run from the law for murder, and has hidden himself in a small town in Louisiana and while he is coming to terms with himself and God, he starts a small church there in which he collects a variety of people who might fall into one or more of our categories of sinners. It is, of course, the Apostle's own

awareness of his sin which makes him so empathetic, and so able to connect with others, in a way which calls to mind the Apostle Paul when he says in tonight's Scripture passage, "I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence." The violence to which Paul refers is found in the book of Acts, where the story of his zeal for snuffing out the church of Jesus Christ reached murderous proportions. Saul, as he was known in those days, Saul by his own account was a perfectly religious man, so zealous for his faith that he headed up the goon squad that rounded up Christians to imprison, or to even kill them, as was the case with the apostle Stephen, over whose death by stoning Paul presided personally. And yet here is the new man, Paul, giving thanks to the Christ he formerly persecuted, and recognizing the infinite mercy of God who could take, as he called himself, the "foremost" of sinners and through Jesus Christ make him "an example to those who would believe in him for eternal life."

Paul's understanding of what God has done in his own life has something to offer us as we suck up the courage to invite others to church. You see, God takes imperfect people and does wonders with them. We may think of Paul as the perfect disciple, but that is not how he saw himself. No, he saw himself as the flawed person he was, but he had also come to know that God saw him differently, that God could take even a sinner as great as he and call him to something completely

opposite. And so, as you get ready to invite people to church, let me encourage you to think about what God has done already in your own life, to offer a word of thanksgiving for the ways in which God has already looked past your sin or shame, and invited you to participate in your own life, how you have been qualified by Jesus Christ when you might be inclined to disqualify yourself. As counterintuitive as it may seem, it's actually important to own the unpleasant parts of your past, the ones you'd really rather forget, as I'm sure even the Apostle Paul would, the ones you really don't want anyone to know, the ones that make you cringe to think you ever did that. It's good to own them because it gives you some perspective, and in a sense some credibility when you talk about how God transforms people. It is all well and good to point to the Apostle Paul and to say, wow, look at what God did with that murderer, that blasphemer, all those years ago. But for those friends of yours who haven't committed murder lately, your own testimony of how and from where God has brought you to church will mean a lot more. I'm not suggesting you confess all your secrets and past deeds to your friends, but a little empathy, a little authenticity, can go a long way. Indeed, the best way to express it is as Paul does, giving thanks and glory to God for overcoming what he could not overcome on his own, no matter how righteous he may have thought he was.

I want to end on a humorous, but honest note. Some of our "sinner" friends might perceive us as we tend to perceive the Apostle Paul: as the perfect Christians, impossible to emulate. And when they have that image of us, it makes it

all the harder for them to imagine fitting in. If only they knew the truth: that sometimes just getting here on time takes all the energy we can muster. (Watch clip “[Nobody Has It All Together](#)”)

May we be honest enough with ourselves and our friends to let God make a difference in the world through us, as flawed as we may be, or as we think we are.

Amen.