

**First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“Second Chances”**

**Psalm 14
1 Timothy 1:12 – 17**

September 18, 2016

In the classic movie, “Schindler’s List,” there’s a scene in which the heroic Oskar Schindler is having a discussion with the malevolent concentration camp commandant, Amon Goeth, about the nature of power. According to Goeth, who casually and arbitrarily murdered Jewish prisoners on a daily basis, the essence of power consisted in his ability to kill anyone he wanted, for no reason, and with no warning, anytime he felt like it. He claimed that it was this freedom to capriciously kill that gave him the power to control the concentration camp.

But Schindler countered Goeth’s view by saying that true power consists in having the ability, and even the justification, to kill... and then choosing *not* to do so. And he then went on to tell the story of a prisoner who was brought before the emperor; and the prisoner, who was guilty of his crimes, and who knew that the emperor had every right to kill him, threw himself on the emperor’s mercy... and begged for forgiveness. And the emperor, who would have been completely justified in carrying out the execution... pardoned the criminal, and let him go.

And *that*, said Oskar Schindler, was the essence of real power: forgiveness... mercy... the granting of a second chance, when no second chance was deserved. To which Goeth jokingly replied, “Amon the god forgives you, Oskar!” And they both had a good laugh.

Later, Commandant Goeth had a chance to put Schindler’s advice to the test, when his young Jewish houseboy, Lisiek, failed to clean Goeth’s bathtub properly. An enraged Goeth clearly wanted to beat the boy, or worse; but, temporarily overcoming his anger, he said to Lisiek, “You may go. I pardon you.” But it was only a momentary reprieve, as the horror of the camp was once again unleashed, and Lisiek was shot and killed, by Commandant Goeth, as he walked away from Goeth’s home.

As it turned out, it was a pardon of only about thirty seconds for this poor kid, who’d committed the unspeakable crime of leaving a soap scum ring in the bathtub. Which, within the monstrous and psychopathic context of a Nazi concentration camp, may have been some kind of record for magnanimity. But it sure didn’t do young Lisiek much good; as there was simply no way for him to come back... from the youthful mistake which he had made. And which he paid for with his life.

And that’s the way it often goes with second chances, right? Not that we’re brutalized when we receive one... but that we don’t always get them, and when we do, they don’t always work out the way we’d like. I think we all know what it’s like to make a mistake or goof something up, and then never be able to live it down; to never be able to outrun the stain which that mistake leaves on our reputation.

When I worked as a hospital chaplain in Somerville, New Jersey, back in the summer of 1984, one of the patients on my floor asked me to pass along the message that he’d like to have a visit from his pastor. So, I innocently left a note in the clergy mailbox for this guy’s pastor, which said, simply: “Dear Pastor So-and-So: Joe Blow in room 317 would love to have a visit from you. Thanks, Chaplain Rick Boyer.”

Well, a few days later I happened to run into this pastor, in the room of a different patient, who also happened to be a member of this pastor’s church. I introduced myself, “Hi, I’m Chaplain Boyer...” and he responded with, “*Oh! You’re the chaplain who leaves curt notes, chastising pastors for not visiting their parishioners!*” I was utterly stunned. And I said, “*A curt note? I was just passing on Joe Blow’s message that he’d like to see you! I wasn’t chastising you! What am I supposed to do? Ignore the guy’s request?*”

But it was no use. This pastor was mortally offended that a mere hospital chaplain... a lowly seminary student, for Pete's sake, would dare to tell him how to do his job. And no matter how profusely I apologized and attempted to explain the situation, the die was finally cast. And from that point forward, the word was out among the local clergy: Chaplain Boyer thinks he knows how to do our job better than we do! And I wore that damning condemnation on my chest, like a big, fat, scarlet letter "A" for the whole rest of the summer. So much for second chances!

Anyway, you get the point. When it comes to receiving second chances, sometimes we get them, and sometimes we don't, and sometimes even when we do, things don't work out like we'd hoped and planned. Which is what makes our lesson this morning from Paul's first letter to his friend and disciple, Timothy, so important to us. Because, in this letter, and in our text, Paul reminds Timothy, and he reminds us all, that the message of the gospel rests *entirely* on second chances; on second chances which are not deserved, on second chances which aren't owed by anyone, on second chances which, in all justice, ought never to have been granted in the first place.

According to Paul's perspective, Almighty God is kind of like the emperor in Oskar Schindler's little parable to Amon Goeth; and he, Paul, and all the rest of us, are like the thoroughly guilty prisoner who's brought to the emperor to receive justice. Paul knows that he is guilty of terminal sin, in the sight of God's righteous judgment; and he knows that God has every right, every justification, every reason in the world to condemn him... to destroy him... to cast him into the outer darkness and out of God's presence forever.

God, like the emperor in the story, has this right. *And* He has the power to use it, and to make it happen. And Paul, like the prisoner in the story, hasn't got a leg to stand on; and his only hope is the mercy, the grace, of the God who holds his very existence in His Almighty hands. And what Paul tells Timothy is that, like the emperor in the story, Almighty God has said to him, to Paul, "*I pardon you. I forgive you. You are free to go!*"

And that, my friends, is the essence and the power of the gospel. Not the fact that God is able to judge, and punish, and destroy; but the fact that He *is* able to do that... but *doesn't*. And rather than retribution... He offers love, and a second chance, instead. And so Paul says to Timothy:

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

"Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst. But 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."

Paul reminds Timothy that, in his pre-Christian days as a church-hating Pharisee, he committed terrible sins in the name of blotting the Jesus movement out of existence. He persecuted people who believed in Jesus; he had people thrown out of the Jewish synagogue for showing sympathy for Jesus; he applauded when people such as the disciple Stephen were stoned to death for speaking about Jesus; he was on his way to Damascus to arrest Christian believers when the Lord knocked him off his horse, and revealed to him the truth about Jesus. "*And it was all of that horrible, dreadful, manifestly sinful behavior,*" says Paul, "*which made me the very **worst** sinner that there ever was.*"

And, frankly, Paul was probably not too far off base with that self-assessment. To his Pharisee friends he might have been a star; but to the Lord Jesus Christ, and the people who followed Him, he was nothing but a first-century version of concentration camp commandant Amon Goeth. A monstrous sinner

of the very first order. But, in spite of everything he's done to deserve God's wrath, Paul tells Timothy that God *pardoned* him instead. God showed him mercy. God gave him a second chance.

And, of course, Paul used that second chance to become an apostle to the gentiles, a pillar of the early Christian church, and the writer of letters of such spiritual importance that they're part of the Bible that you're holding in your hands this morning. And that, as I said, is the essence of the entire gospel message; that our Lord can and will give even someone as virulently hostile to Jesus as Paul once was... a second chance; a chance to change, a chance to do life differently, a chance to come back from whatever sins and screw-ups had wrecked his relationship with God... and start over, with forgiveness, and with hope, and with peace.

And that promise wasn't just for Paul, and it wasn't just for Timothy... it's for you, and me, and everybody else who, in humble acknowledgment of their sins, turns to Almighty God for mercy. Which, just to be clear, doesn't mean that the human consequences of our sins just disappear, with God's forgiveness... so we can blithely skip along on our merry way!

No, no, sometimes our sins are such that there's work to be done to rebuild relationships, or to express remorse, or to take responsibility of one kind or another... after God has forgiven us, and given us another chance in our relationship with Him. The mercy and grace of God is never a free pass for us to avoid appropriate accountability for our actions, no matter how much He loves us, and we love Him. But, with that understanding, the message of the gospel is, truly, one of forgiveness, and mercy, and grace... specially directed to people who don't deserve it. To people like you and me... and Paul the Apostle.

Which brings us back to this morning, and our ongoing life of Christian discipleship. You and I may not be church-hating, disciple-destroying, mega-sinners like the pre-Christian Paul was. We may not be concentration camp commandants who deal out horror and misery, like the Nazi Amon Goeth. But that doesn't mean that we're still not sinners, one and all. It doesn't mean that we haven't made a mess of one thing or another in our life... that requires some kind of grace, or mercy, or forgiveness.

And that's where the truly good news of Paul's message to Timothy comes in; because, as Paul reminds us, Jesus came into this world specifically to save, to forgive, to give a second chance... to sinners. Sinners like you... and sinners like me. We, who stand in daily need of another opportunity to try to get life right... just happen to worship a Lord and Savior whose main task in this world is to hand out second chances; and third chances; and however many chances we need to bring our hearts and souls into conformity with His love, and His purpose.

And, again, that's not a free pass to just sin our little fannies off... and then come back for our painless vaccination of "sins-be-gone," so we can go out and remain essentially unchanged in our hearts and souls. No! But it is a blessed and priceless opportunity for us to take another shot at doing Christian discipleship better than we've done it before. It's a grace-filled reminder that, no matter who we are, no matter what we are, and no matter what we've ever done... there is always hope for us! Because our Lord Jesus is always on the job for us. And that's not changing, ever.

Almighty God is offering each of us a second chance this morning. Where do we need to use it? What part of our life, what part of our faith, could use a little do-over, in the name of Jesus Christ? The answer will be different for each of us. But, whatever our answer may be... let's have the faith and the courage to take that second chance... and make something great of it! And the God who made us, and who loves us... will be with us, every step of the way!

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!