

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. The title for today’s sermon is “*Chiefs of sinners*” and is from our Epistle lesson, Paul’s first letter to Timothy, chapter 1. Let us pray... Amen.

“They walked to the gallows together, pastor and penitent. Each step up took them closer to the fall—the abbreviated, fatal fall to come. As the criminal stood above the trapdoor that, moments later, would open to rope him into eternity, an officer asked him if he had any final words. “I place all my confidence in the Lamb who made atonement for my sins. May God have mercy on my soul,” he said. Then, turning toward the man who had been the shepherd of his soul during his incarceration, who had been his confessor, his preacher, and the one from whose hand he had received the body and blood of Jesus in the Supper, he said, “I’ll see you again.” Then noosed, hooded in black, and legs tied, he dropped out of this world into another.

As gripping as this account is, no doubt many similar scenarios have played out in the course of history, where condemned men have found repentance and faith when certain death looms nigh. What makes this story remarkable is that this man, along with many others who were hanged that day, was among the most hated men in human history, guilty of atrocities so horrific only words forged in hell could adequately describe them. These were Hitler’s men; His closest confidants. His very own pack of wolves. Yet in the months leading up to their executions or imprisonments, many of them had been transformed from Hitler’s wolves into Christ’s lambs thanks to the ministry of a farm boy from Missouri, who grew up to be a pastor, and who reluctantly agreed to be the chaplain of the fifteen Protestant war criminals during the Nuremberg trials at the close of World War II.

The pastor, or chaplain, was Pastor Henry Gerecke. When he first arrived in Nuremberg he went, cell by cell, to introduce himself to his infamous ‘congregation’ and to invite them to chapel services. Some refused, others wavered, and still others promised to be there. Of the fifteen chairs set up for the first service, thirteen of them were filled. Scriptures were read, sermons preached, hymns sung, prayers prayed. And, through it all, hearts were changed. Soon some of the very lips that had once barked, “Heil Hitler!” spoke a repentance-confessing, faith-affirming ‘Amen’ as they knelt to eat and drink the body and blood of their forgiving Lord. Some of these former wolves expressed a desire for their children to be baptized. One of them, though he began reading the Bible to find justification for his unbelief, ended up being led to faith by the very same divine words. So reliant did these men become upon their pastor that, when a rumor surfaced that he might be relieved of his duty and allowed to return home, they wrote a letter to Mrs. Gerecke, begging her to ask him to stay. On that letter were the signatures of all these former Nazis, men who had enjoyed power and rank, now humbly begged a housewife in America, who had not seen her husband for two and a half years, to let him stay. In her brief reply, “They need you,” is packed a whole volume about sacrifice and love.

Pastor Gerecke’s story has been told many times, but it deserves to be retold, again and again, to every generation, for two very important reasons. The first has to do with the men to whom he ministered, the ones who repented and believed in Christ. The scandal of Christianity is not that these men went to heaven; it is that God loved them so much that He was willing to die to get them there. Had it been a human decision, many would have thrown these men, guilty of such atrocities, into the flames of hell. But the truth is that people are not condemned because

they murder, or steal, or lie, but because they reject Jesus as the one who has already endured hell for them on the cross, and earned a place for them in heaven. There is no one who is so vile that he is beyond redemption, because the redemption of Christ envelops all people."¹

Yet it still seems so scandalous. That Hitler's chiefs, those murderous, villainous, unmerciful, homicidal, genocide encouraging spawn of Satan, could be saved. That for these wolves who openly and repeatedly encouraged the arrest, torture, and slaughter of numerous innocent people, that for these most grievous sinners, Christ even died for all their sins. By our standards, it seems so wrong. If Christ were here today, or back then, He would have dealt with those chiefs of sinner differently, mainly if He knew what they were guilty of.

Maybe He would have, but Scripture reveals something much different. In our Epistle reading today we heard of another chief of sinners; Paul. Now Paul, formerly known as Saul, was no saint in his former life as a Pharisee, but he could he have been anywhere near as bad or evil as Hitler's wolves? While it is a nice thought to say no, Paul was equally as evil. Now you may say 'He didn't kill anyone' or 'Have anyone tortured' like those chief wolves of Hitler did, but that was only because he didn't have the resources to get it done, nor was there enough Christians to execute in the few decade after Christ's resurrection and ascension. In reading Scripture, before Paul's conversion, He was anything but kind. In his own words he says, "**I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them.**"¹¹ **And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.**"(Acts 26:10-11) and elsewhere Paul says, "**I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women,**"(Acts 22:4) and tells Timothy, "**I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent.**"(1 Timothy 1:13)

Paul in some ways may have even been worse because he had absolutely no excuse to not believe in Christ. He was very well versed in the Old Testament Scriptures and heard first hand from eyewitnesses of Christ and who Jesus is of what He had done, yet He rejected it and instead persecuted anyone who professed faith in Christ as far as humanly possible. Instead of Hitler, Paul was the Pharisee's wolf. He stood by, watching and approving of the actions of those who killed Stephen, the first Christian martyr (Acts 22:20) among others. He tried to remove Christ completely from the world.

Yet God is greater than the evil in this world. That is why He sent Christ Jesus, our Lord and Saviour into our world; to take on our flesh; to pay for our sins; to bind Satan, and to reconcile us back to God. Christ came because the evil is too great for us, the darkness too dark, and our sins too great. "**Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners**"(1 Timothy 1:15), a category into which Paul, Hitler's wolves, and each of us falls. We have all fallen short of the glory of God. We have all sinned and none of us could ever possibly get ourselves into heaven no matter how pious and self-righteous we may at times feel or act. So, if God were to give us what we deserve, apart from Christ, we only deserve condemnation, we only deserve suffering, only

¹ Copied and slightly modified from: <http://birdchadlouis.wordpress.com/2013/08/27/from-hitlers-wolves-to-christs-lambs-how-lutheran-pastor-henry-gerecke-brought-the-gospel-to-hitlers-highest-ranking-disciples-before-their-executions/>

eternal separation from God, and only the prospect of an eternity in hell. An eternity in hell is what our actions deserve, just as did Paul and those of Hitler’s men.

Now in no way am I saying the actions of Hitler’s wolves were not evil, because as I mentioned at the beginning, they were guilty of atrocities so horrific only words forged in hell could adequately describe them. Yet, Christ also lived and died for their sins, as He did for Paul, Hitler’s men, as He died for you. **“For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”**(Romans 3:22b-26)

We heard Paul today say, **“But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.”**(1 Timothy 1:16)

Christ came to save sinners. He came to search them out. God told Ezekiel in the Old Testament reading how He Himself will search for His sheep and seek them out and how He will bring them to Himself to feed and watch over them (Ezekiel 34:11,13-14).

But He didn’t just come for some sinners, Christ came to save all sinners. Jesus was harassed several times in His time leading up to his death on the cross for eating and associating with sinners. We heard in today’s Gospel reading. **“The Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, ‘This man, *Jesus*, receives sinners and eats with them.’**(Luke 15:2) But that was exactly why Jesus came. Jesus told everyone within earshot why He eats with sinners and the joy of repentance. **“Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”**(Luke 15:7) and again, **“Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”**(Luke 15:10) Jesus came to find His sheep and to restore and reconcile them back to the Father. **“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.”**³² ***Jesus did not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.***”(Luke 5:31-32)

The free gift of forgiveness through Christ needs to be remembered. It is only in Christ and on account of His life, death, and resurrection we have any hope. It is only God who forgives. Through His Word the Holy Spirit works to convert even the more obscene and evil heart, as seen with the men Pastor Gerecke preached to in Nuremberg, with a zealous Pharisee like Paul, or each of us. Remember, the truth is that people are not condemned because they murder, they are not condemned because they steal, nor are they condemned because they lie. The only reason people are eternally condemned is because they reject Jesus as the one who has already endured hell for them, who died on the cross in their place, and earned a place for them in heaven. There is no one who is so evil, so vile, or so detestable that he is beyond redemption, because the redemption of Christ envelops all people.

To quote Pastor Gerecke, in reference to the conversion of some of Hitler’s men; “Some will say of these men, ‘they were just scared into reforming.’ My only answer is that I have been a

preacher for a long time and have decided that that is the only way a good many folks find themselves.”(Saturday Evening Post, Sept. 1, 1951) Once everything else is torn away and removed, pride, honour, rank, possession and position, then the Word of God can break through. Sometimes we take for granted the power of God’s Word. Sometimes we are concerned it won’t work the way we want it to, and sometimes we are afraid it might just do what God says it will do: lead people to repentance, to the foot of the cross, and to eternal life in Christ.

This is a blessing we have, a blessing you and I have been given and one we do hear. We are blessed with the same privilege invite people to hear God’s Word and let the Holy Spirit do the work of making new creations. We’ve been given this wonderful gift where Christ comes to you and me, sinners in our own rank. We are guilty of sinning. But Jesus tells us “This is why I came for you, to save sinners! Your sins are forgiven in me.”

We have a wonderful gift, something completely underserved, because the magnitude of what He has done for us is beyond words or comprehension. Christ came in the flesh and gave His life for you, me and all people in order to save us. You and all your sins are forgiven because Christ has redeemed you. And He does. He convicts, He calls, He saves, He baptizes, He feeds, and, finally, He welcomes one and all into His kingdom.

And so remember “**Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.**”(Luke 15:10)

Is what God gives to us in Christ fair? No. Is our salvation in Christ what we deserve? Even less. But thanks be to God because by God’s grace, through faith, and for the sake of Christ He gives you His Son, His forgiveness, His reconciliation, and He also give you eternal life. “**To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.**”(1 Timothy 1:17)

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