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Created For Mercy

1 Timothy 1:13

During our recent visit to Scotland we spent some time in the Ayrshire region. There we visited a village where some of my ancestors lived. The town of Sorn is quite picturesque with a 17th century church and a 15th century castle. But a monument at the church offered testimony to a troubled period of its history. It pays tribute to a villager who was picked up and summarily killed by government troops in the 1680s. This was the period that was called the “killing times,” when it was open season on those who were not willing to worship in the manner dictated by the British government in London. The Scots who rejected the idea that the king was head of the church were known as Covenanters and the village of Sorn was one of the centers of that movement. In this area of Ayrshire we saw many monuments to the heroes and the victims of the “killing times.”

When our time in Ayrshire was over we returned our rental car to the Glasgow Airport and then took a taxi to central Glasgow to catch a train to Edinburgh. We were surprised and delighted to discover that our cab driver was a history buff who knew a lot about the Covenanters and the “killing times.” He understood that this was a period of history when extremists manipulated the fears of well meaning people with their violent rhetoric and actions. He told us a story about one of these extremists who he referred to as Bloody Claver (Graham of Claverhouse). Claver was one of the military officers the King had charged with hunting down and killing Covenanters. He noted that Bloody Claver was unusually single minded in carrying out his violent activities. Claver was at his own wedding banquet when word came that some Covenanters were in the neighborhood. He left the banquet immediately to track down and kill these people. For an extremist like Bloody Claver there could be no holiday from the killing.

The Apostle Paul described himself in similar terms in the letter of 1 Timothy. Paul had also been a man who practiced violence in the name of religion. As a young man, he believed that his own Jewish community could not coexist with the emerging Christian movement. His anxiety about people who were different from him made him susceptible to the angry rhetoric of his time. He was manipulated by demagogues and incited to violence against Christians.

What Paul experienced during this period of his life has disturbing resonance for our time when Christians in America are being told that we should fear Muslims. Nicholas Kristof has described this situation in these words:

Perhaps the closest parallel to today’s hysteria about Islam is the 19th century fear spread by the Know Nothing movement about “the Catholic menace.” One book warned that Catholicism was “the primary source” of all of America’s misfortunes and there were whispering campaigns that presidents including Martin Van Buren and William McKinley were secretly working with the pope...Similar suspicions have targeted just about every other kind of immigrant. During World War I, rumors spread that German-Americans were poisoning food and Theodore Roosevelt warned that “Germanized socialists” were “more mischievous than bubonic plague (*New York Times*, September 5, 2010, page 10).

We know a lot about the kind of fear and angry rhetoric that led Paul to practice violence. In 1 Timothy Paul tells us what set him free from this destructive cycle. Paul had an encounter with God which revealed to him that God is not about consolidating power or labeling evil-doers. God is about mercy. Paul writes:

I am grateful to Jesus Christ 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, a man of violence. But I received mercy... (1 Timothy 1:13).

When God's mercy breaks into Paul's life he learns that he was created for mercy and not for fear.

This is the message that Jesus tries to convey to the scribes and Pharisees in the 15th chapter of Luke. The gospel writer tells us that these religious leaders are grumbling because Jesus is spending too much time with the outcasts of society. The tax collectors and sinners have been branded as the people who must be blamed for everything that is wrong with their society. But Jesus is not following the playbook of the religious leaders which calls for demonizing and persecuting these dangerous people. Instead Jesus is socializing with them.

Jesus responds to the grumblers by telling parables about people who search for that which is lost. He speaks of the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep that are in the fold to search for the one that is lost. He describes the woman who has lost only one of her ten silver coins. She is not satisfied until she has searched the house diligently and located the coin that was misplaced. When the woman and shepherd succeed in finding what was lost they celebrate. They throw a party. Jesus wants the grumblers to know that this is who God is. The God who searches for and then redeems the lost is all about mercy.

Jesus was inviting these religious leaders to discover the truth that transformed Paul's life. We were not created to live in fear of those who behave or worship differently from us. We were created to celebrate our own redemption by extending God's mercy to the entire human family.