

Thumbs Up, Thumbs Down

I Timothy 1:12-17

You've seen the movie or read the story. The ancient coliseum of Rome is crowded with men and women and in the arena a gladiator stands with sword upraised above a fallen adversary. The gladiator looks to the emperor for a sign. The sign itself is very small, but it makes a huge difference because it determines the fate of the fallen warrior.

Thumbs up? Or thumbs down?

Thumbs up means a man will walk out of the bloody arena to live another day. Thumb down means that death will flash from the gladiator's sword, and a limp body will be dragged out as trash to be disposed of. We all know the story.

Now, such bloodthirsty sport is repugnant to us. But when you've read the story or seen the movie, have you paused for just a moment to really feel your way into it, to put yourself in the crowd, to feel its raw emotions pulse in you? And have you looked at your own deepest soul in that moment and found perhaps in yourself the attitude of thumbs down? Away with the enemy. Away with evil doers. Away with losers. Away with the despised. The crowd is against them anyway; there is nothing one person can do. So thumbs down. Away with them!

We don't sit in such an arena. We face different issues. But I think the contrast is not unfamiliar to us. Thumbs up or thumbs down, humanity or inhumanity, mercy or judgment. These same forces pulse in our world, too. In some sense the struggle of this or any time is the conflict of these two gigantic opposites, the one powerful to drag humanity down, the other striving to spread a kindness over the world, to make humans clasp hands together in harmony for the common good. The difference is our attitude. Thumbs up or thumbs down? Here are a couple of thoughts to think about the attitudes we allow to shape our life and the lives of others.

I have two points this morning. Here is the First: We live in a thumbs-down world.

We live in a thumbs-down, attitude-down world. Judgment, blame, and criticism come easily. The world loves to find fault, even when there is none, and to punish fault when it is found. That's the way the world is. Sometimes the church is that way, too. Critical, cynical, fault-finding, judging, and punishing in its attitudes and interactions.

The Apostle Paul could never get over that he didn't get what he deserved. The scripture describes the contrast between what Paul expected to receive from God and what he did receive. The scripture says that Paul was a blasphemer, a persecutor, a man of violence. That was his confession. We hear in his confession the wrenching sorrow that shook Paul to his core. For he was an exceedingly faithful Jew. He would not utter the name of God because it was too holy for his lips. He certainly never literally or consciously blasphemed God or took God's name in vain. In fact, everything Paul did was with the intention of serving God and receiving the reward of being faithful.

But when Paul encountered Jesus Christ, everything about his faith and life was turned upside down. He saw that instead of serving God, he was opposing God. He saw that instead of being rewarded for his faithfulness, he deserved to be judged for his sinfulness in persecuting Jesus' followers. Paul viciously persecuted the early Christian church and thought he was serving God by doing so. But when his life became centered in Jesus Christ, he saw that all his zeal was totally contrary to the will of God. Paul was moving exactly the opposite the way God was moving in the world.

He was well-educated. Well-respected. Totally good intentions. Loyalty, devotion, and a sense of mission. And he was wrong. Dead wrong.

Then the most unexpected thing happened. God blessed him. God blessed him and called him to be – not a destroyer of the church, but an apostle – one of the very chosen of the chosen. Paul never got over that. He did what deserved death and God gave him life. He was a sinner in rebellion against God, but God loved him and called him. Paul expected to receive thumbs down because that's the way the world is, and that's the way he'd been living in it. Instead, he received thumbs up because that's the way God is. Paul says he was an example of God's over-abundant mercy and grace. He discovered he was the worst of sinners, and by God's grace, he became the greatest example of what God could do to transform a thumbs-down life

into a living message of God's redeeming mercy. If God could save his mixed-up, bitter, violent life, God can save anyone.

Here's the second point: God is a thumbs-up God, and we are called to be thumbs-up, attitude-up people.

We may live in an attitude-down, thumbs-down world, but we are called by God to be an attitude-up people. The reason we are called to be this is because we are sinners.

There *are* sinners in this church. In fact, we are a church of sinners. You and I are still getting to know each other, but if you could poke around in my life, it wouldn't take you very long to find sin. And if I were to poke around inside any of your lives, I would find sin pretty quickly, too. There is sin in our lives and this side of heaven, it will always be that way. There are sinners in this church and that's why we're called to be an attitude-up people. We take sin seriously; but we take God's over-flowing grace and ability to transform life more seriously. God's Grace is greater than our sin.

We should have a big sign outside that flashes "Sinners Welcome Here!" I long to have this sanctuary filled with to bursting with sinners, because only those who know they are sinners also know that they need the grace of God. Only those who know they are sinners also know they are not superior to others in God's eyes. Only those who know they are sinners cannot turn thumbs down on people who are hurting and who need forgiveness because God has not turned thumbs down on them. In Christ, God says to sinner, "Life to you, not death. Life to you and peace and joy and hope." Thumbs up.

So sinners like you and me can come here without being judged to learn and grow and serve and worship. We're not all in the same place in our walk with Christ. We all have strengths and weaknesses. But in our life together we can come to know the grace of God that heals and gives hope and power and joy even in the midst of sin and struggle.

By the grace of God we in the church must not turn thumbs down on people because they are sinners. That's what we are, too, and God has not turned thumbs down on us. Is it too much to ask that we do for others what Christ has done for us? Your attitude can make such a difference in others' lives.

There are couples who come to me asking to be married, and they're living together. Many have children together. I have rarely been the first pastor they approached, and often I can see that they are tense, braced for the thumbs-down judgment and rejection.

I know that lots of couples don't give a hoot about anything religious. They just want a nice ceremony and someone to sign the certificate. I know that. I'm not naïve. But I would rather be exploited myself than to have any couple turn away from God because I had judged them thumbs down, unworthy of a Christian wedding ceremony. A long time ago, I decided that it was my role to give these relationships the hospitality of the church, and to honor the unfolding of God's grace in their lives that brought them to me. It's my role to receive them with joy and hope for their relationship.

Paul found the mercy of God when he expected just the opposite. So have we, and we are called by God to be a thumbs-up people in a thumbs-down world.