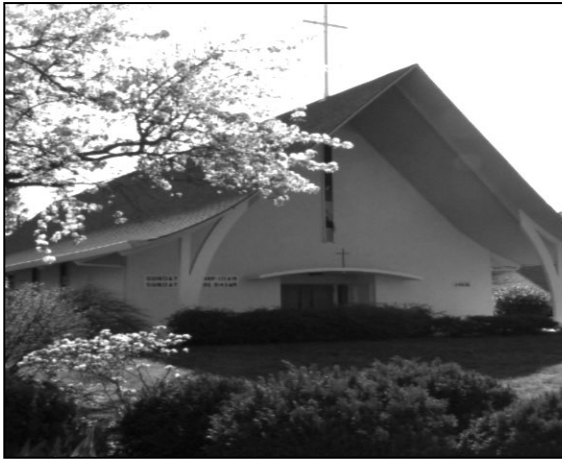




## **Pentecost 14**

**September 14, 2025**

**St. Timothy Lutheran Church, Portland, OR**

**THE LESSONS: Exodus 32:7-14; Psalm 51:1-10; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10**

**SERMON TITLE: “Who Changes... God or US?”**

**Grace and Peace to you in the NAME of GOD: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.**

### **INTRODUCTION**

I’m sure you’ve all heard that old joke about Phil T. Rich, the multibillionaire who introduced himself to St. Peter at the gate to heaven. St. Peter quickly thumbed through The Book of Life and mumbled, “It seems you’ve amassed a great deal of wealth and... oh!” Phil was alarmed by St. Peter’s response and asked, “What’s wrong?” St. Peter replied, “I’m sorry but you can’t come into heaven. I’m afraid I’ll have to send you to Hell. Phil protested, “NO,, WAIT! I can’t go to hell! Wait here for a moment! I’ve got something on earth which might change your mind!” So, St. Peter allows Phil T. Rich to quickly go back to earth and to gather all the gold he had accumulated in his lifetime. Phil brings it back to the pearly gates and dumps it in front of St. Peter and confidently smiles, “This should change your mind!” St. Peter shakes his head in disgust, “Honestly, Phil, do you really think you could bribe me with gold? That’s what we pave our streets with.” Well, you know where Phil T. Rich ended up... Even though he was allowed take his wealth with him, he couldn’t tempt St. Peter to change his mind? But, often people, like me, try to tempt God by making promises that we won’t keep but hope that God will change His mind.

### **Exodus 32:7-14**

Our first lesson tells us that Moses wanted God to change His mind after the Israelites rebelled against God when Moses failed to come down from the mountain after forty days. So, Aaron made two golden calves to

appease those disgruntled Israelites. Of course, God was angry. Our first lesson tells us that Moses pleaded with God to change His mind, “Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel... how you swore to them... saying to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’” And our lesson says, “And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.” But, did God really change His mind or did God want to demonstrate to Moses that God always keeps His promises? God keeps His promises. God is forgiving and is steadfast in His love. That’s why Isaiah told the Exiles in Babylon because of their rebellion, “I - yes, I (God)(I) alone - will blot out your sins for my own sake and will never think of them again.” God didn’t change His mind because God is forgiving and steadfast in love.

### **Psalm 51**

David who wrote this morning’s psalm knew that God was forgiving and steadfast in love. He committed adultery with Bathsheba and had her husband, Uriah, killed in battle. Then, when the priest, Nathan, confronted him, instead of covering up like our government leaders would do today, David confessed in this psalm, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; In your great compassion Blot out my offenses...and cleanse me from my sin... Against you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so you are ... right in your judgment... Remove my sins... and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be purer than snow... Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.” That’s why the Apostle John told us in his first letter, “If we say we have no sin, the truth is not in us. But, if we confess our sin, God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us of all unrighteousness.” David was king. He didn’t have to repent. But, God was David’s King and David was God’s servant. Because David knew God was aware of his inner-most thoughts, David knew he had to confess or he would never have peace. David didn’t merely confess to be forgiven; he confessed so that he could be back in relationship with God. That’s why forgiveness is the key to God’s kingdom; forgiveness reestablishes our relationship with God and our neighbor. We don’t

change God. God changes us. John tells us that, when we confess our sins, we are changed because God changes us. David was changed from a sinner separated from God to a forgiven sinner who is reconciled and back in relationship with God.

### **1 Timothy 1:12-17**

Paul is sharing that truth about God as he shares his experiences in this first letter to his disciple, Timothy, “I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord... because he considered me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence.” We know Paul’s story of how he crusaded to silence those heretics who were following a criminal who was crucified and supposedly rose from the dead. Then, in a strange turn of events, Paul encountered that same Jesus on his way to Damascus to arrest Jesus’ followers. Then, instead of attacking the followers of Jesus, Paul became a follower. That’s why he told Timothy, “The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance: that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me... Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience as an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life.” And, Paul knew that eternal life wasn’t after he died; it was his time here on earth. As a Jew, Paul knew that eternal life was having a relationship with God and he knew that God was embodied in Jesus, the Christ. Christians also know that, because the evangelist John told us in his gospel, “...this is eternal life, that (believers) may know YOU, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom (GOD) ha(s) sent...” Eternal life is NOW when we know heart, mind, and soul that God is who God says HE is. Because he knew THAT GOD, Paul endured persecution, arrests, beatings, stoning, imprisonment, and, ultimately, was beheaded for his faith. So, even though he suffered in his earthly body, his faith sustained and emboldened his spiritual body. Most American Christians haven’t had our faith tested like that.

### **Luke 15:1-10, The Call and the Challenge**

Many Americans are a lot like the Israelites. When they didn’t get their way, they chased after other gods. And, the Bible tells us, when you chase other gods, you’re going to be lost. No one worships golden calves or stone statues anymore but Dr. Paul Tillich, the German

theologian, in his work "Systematic Theology" wrote that whatever is our ultimate concern is our god; so, if our worries, our fears, our doubts, our anger become our ultimate concern, the thing that consumes our mind and time, then that is our god. If we worship those other gods, then we will be lost. So, even if they obeyed most of the commandments, when obeying the law became their ultimate concern, the Pharisees and scribes who accused Jesus of welcoming sinners actually were breaking the Great Commandment: to love God and to love their neighbor. That's the point that Jesus was trying to get across when he told the parable of the lost sheep. Jesus is asking how do you think the shepherd felt when he found his lost lamb; how do you think the woman felt when she found her lost coin. That's why Jesus told the Pharisees and scribes, "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." In other words, God rejoices when one sinner turns his/her life around and follows God. But, it seems like in today's world that ninety-nine are lost; so. It seems like ninety-nine are dancing around golden calves. Is God angry enough now to strike down those sinners? But, throughout the stories in the Bible, people have thought God is like humans who think justice is destroying those who oppose us. That is not the God that Jesus has shown us. The God of Abraham and Jesus is merciful and steadfast in love. God forgives. God forgave the Israelites who worshiped golden idols; God forgave the zealot who hunted down those who believed that Jesus rose from the dead; God forgave a king who committed adultery and murdered her husband. God is the God of Abraham and Jesus and is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. God forgives. So, what do we do about the ninety-nine who are lost? Give up? Like that old story about the hundreds of starfish stranded on the beach, the grandson picked one up and threw it back into the sea. The grandfather asked, "What difference does that make?" And the grandson answered, "It made a difference to that one." In such a time like this Christians are challenged to make a difference to someone who is lost. People who are lost and wretched need to know how God's grace and love can save them and lead them home. They need to know God's grace can lead them home through their many toils and snares and that God promises goodness and hope as long as life endures. In such a time like this, our world longs to hear the sound of God's amazing grace...