

Sometimes all it takes is hearing a name you haven't heard in a while to take you back to a different time and place – someone mentions a grade school classmate or a high school sweetheart or an old coworker you haven't thought of in ages and instantly a flood of long-forgotten memories come rushing back.

I'm betting that for some of you here today the name I am about to say has some of that power, but for decidedly undesirable reasons.

Jeffrey Dahmer...

Many of you more obsolete children here today probably recognize that name, and perhaps for some of you, simply hearing the name brings back a flood of memories of what it must have been like to live in the Milwaukee area at that time.

For the benefit of those of you who aren't quite old enough, or who maybe recognize the name but don't remember the man, Jeffrey Dahmer was a serial killer from West Allis, WI. Between 1987 and 1991 he killed 17 men and boys between the ages of 14 and 32. But he wasn't your every-day, run of the mill serial killer. Some of those men and boys he raped before killing them – adding rapist and pedophile to his list of monikers. Some of them he raped after he killed them – adding necrophiliac to the list. He is also known as the Milwaukee Cannibal because some he cut up into pieces and ate. When he was finally caught they found refrigerators full of body parts.

It's uncomfortable to talk about. It makes you cringe just a little bit just thinking about it – especially if you lived around here during those years. In 1991 Jeffrey Dahmer, the renowned rapist, serial killer, and cannibal, was sentenced to 15 consecutive life sentences. He only served three of those years however, because in 1994 an inmate killed him.

For our purposes, the interesting part of the life of Jeffrey Dahmer is the fact that many sources claim that he repented of his sins and became a Christian shortly before he was killed.

Now, stop and think about that for a minute this morning.

You know and believe what Christianity teaches about repentance and forgiveness (that if you repent, if you are sorry for the sins you have committed against God and against other people, if you trust that Jesus died on the cross for those sins – no matter how many and big and gross they may be – with repentance and trust your sins are forgiven)... which means that if the reports are true, Jeffrey Dahmer, the rapist, pedophiliac, necrophiliac, cannibalistic murderer is in heaven right now.

What does it feel like to think of a person like Dahmer as a brother in Christ? What would it feel like to have Jeffrey Dahmer walk in here this morning and sit down next to you and your family and start singing hymns with, or to stand next to you, brushing shoulders as you celebrate the Lord's Supper together?

What does it feel like to picture Jeffrey Dahmer standing there right next to your grandma, grandpa, mom and dad waiting to welcome you into heaven? What

does it feel like to picture a man like Jeffrey Dahmer arm in arm with your mental image of Jesus?

I'm going to be honest and tell you, there is a part of me that cringes at that thought. When I think of heaven, I first tend to think of a place full of those amazing models of faith from the past – people like the Apostle Paul or Martin Luther or someone like Martin Luther King Jr. When I think of heaven, I think of a place full of my loved ones who died in the faith before me – people like my mother-in-law who was hands down, one of the most amazing Christian women I've ever had the privilege to know. When I think of my brothers and sisters in Christ, I think of folks like you – none of you perfect, but also not Jeffrey Dahmers.

To the logical brain it just doesn't seem right or fair. It doesn't seem just that someone as disgusting as Jeffrey Dahmer would get the same thing at the end of his life that I'm going to get. Because the logical human brain loves comparisons.

But here's the uncomfortable truth about today. God's word makes clear that on my own, from God's perspective, Jeffrey Dahmer and I... we're not all that different.

Jesus says that anyone who hates his brother is a murderer (all it takes is one moment of unrestrained, selfish anger and God looks at me the same way I look at a Jeffrey Dahmer), but the idea that I'm on the same playing field as Jeffrey Dahmer when it comes to the fifth commandment and murder is almost laughable to my logical brain.

But here's the thing... I don't get to make the rules. God does. We are rightly disgusted by the sins of someone like Jeffrey Dahmer because we understand how wrong that kind of behavior is. Our perfectly holy and righteous God looks at us and feels the same way – disgusted by our behavior because he understands better than us how wrong our behavior is.

Here's what we need to understand: us thinking we are better than Jeffrey Dahmer, us scoffing at the idea of him holding hands with Grandpa in heaven, us recoiling at the thought that someone like that would be welcome here at this church with people like us is exactly the same thing we see the Pharisees doing in the Gospel lesson for today (and it is usually not a good thing to find yourself in the same position as the Pharisees). They looked at Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners and they scoffed. They after all, were better than the tax collectors and sinners... couldn't Jesus see that?

Just like those Pharisees, we have a comparison problem – this silly notion and tendency in our own hearts to compare ourselves to others and feel good when that comparison makes us look good.

And we don't just compare ourselves to serial killers, rapists and other "big ticket sinners" out there. We look down on other people all the time. We tisk-tisk to ourselves as we Facebook or Instagram stalk that old high school classmate who has

obviously made some bad life choices recently. We grumble about those young people who just don't sign up to help out around church like you did when you were young. We revel in the juicy gossip about other people that makes us feel a little bit better about ourselves.

Sitting here on a Sunday morning, we see the ugliness of the Pharisees scoffing at Jesus eating with "tax collectors and sinners" for what it is, but at the same time we can't quite stop playing the same comparison game ourselves.

Friends, when I *really* look at my own heart, when I apply God's word to my heart, it ought to become less clear to me why I am more deserving of God's love than a Jeffrey Dahmer or that Facebook friend who is one their second marriage in as many years or that other "member" of St. Paul's who doesn't put in the hours or offerings like you.

It turns out that from God's perspective (which, by the way, is the only one that really matters) Jeffery Dahmer does not hold the corner of "disgusting sinner". It turns out if I want to label someone a sinner, all I have to do is look at the face staring back at me in the mirror.

Which is Paul's point to Timothy.

The Apostle Paul looked at his own life – at his own heart – and he came to a conclusion that at first glance would seem crazy to us and this world. Paul came to the conclusion that he was the worst of sinners. Now if we are going to play the "better than Jeffrey Dahmer game" or the "worthy of God's love" game, this doesn't add up. Yes, Paul made some ignorant mistakes early in his life, but by the time he was writing this letter to Timothy, a young pastor, he had done more Christian work than just about all of us put together. He was a missionary of missionaries, a man who lived and breathed morals and virtue. But even then, Paul looked at his own heart and saw a sinner. He saw a sinner because God's word made clear to him that that's exactly what he was.

I ask you today to do the same. Look at your own life. Look at the thoughts of your heart. Stop comparing yourself to others. Stop pretending that your little pet sins are nothing compared to the likes of someone else with bigger, more obvious pet sins. Stop acting like a Pharisee. Look at your heart as only you can – because only you can read the secret sins of your heart – and realize that God knows what is in your heart. Look at your heart and realize that there is no one in this world that you witness sinning more often than yourself – which means from your perspective there is no worse sinner in this world than the person staring back at you from the mirror.

God's word reveals to me that I deserve one title: "Sinner".

But then also realize that that's not all God's word reveals to me. God's word also reveals to me a little word: "mercy." Mercy – kind and forgiving treatment of someone who could be treated harshly.

Paul learned from God that he deserved hell, but Paul also learned from God about mercy.

**"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 immense patience as an example to those who would believe in him and receive eternal life."**

This is the incredibly important and comforting theme for today: God takes dirty, disgusting sinners, and he loves them. God has *mercy* on the worst of sinners.

He took weak, complaining, faithless Moses and he loved him. He loved him enough to save him. Not because Moses had earned it or deserved it, but because of *mercy*. And that is incredibly good news because that means when I am weak, complaining, and faithless, God can have mercy on me too.

Jesus called a man named Matthew – a cheating and hated tax collector – and loved him. Jesus ate and talked and loved prostitutes and criminals – the immoral, disgusting outcasts of society. And that is good news because that means when I am a cheat and hated by others, when I am immoral and disgusting God can have mercy on me too.

God took the arrogant, proud, murdering Paul and he loved him. He loved him enough to save him because of *mercy*. And that is good news because that means when I am arrogant and proud and hateful God can have mercy on me too.

And yes, if the reports are true, God took the morally repugnant Milwaukee Cannibal and had mercy on him. Instead being repelled by that fact, if we let God's word show us our own hearts, perhaps we, like Paul can find relief in the fact that if the worst, most disgusting sinners can be saved, I can be saved too.

God looks at you, and he has mercy. The Bible very clearly could have/should have said, "Here is a trust worthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came to into the world to destroy sinners – of whom I am the worst," but because of *mercy* our hearts can leap for joy at this **"trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to *save* sinners – of whom I am the worst."**

I am saved. And if I, the worst of sinners from my perspective, am saved, so are you!