If I were to assess a major problem effecting Christianity in our times, which is something I am sure that everyone is dying to have me do, I would summarize it as something I call Donny and Marie syndrome. Now for those of you who are too young or blessed with the ability to forget traumatic things in your life, Donny and Marie were the offspring of a rather fertile Utah couple, who had a variety show that aired on ABC in the mid to late 70’s. If there is a purgatory and if it follows Dante’s understanding I assume that reruns of this show air regularly on the fifth terrace to expunge people of their excessive concern for earthly things. Anyway there was a regular segment on this show where Donny and Marie would come out and do a musical number that was introduced with a little ditty telling us that Marie was a little bit country while Donny was a little bit rock and roll. Some people apparently believed this but in my estimation Donny would fair about as well in Guns and Roses as Barney the Dinosaur would in the upper Cretaceous Period. And so while neither was actually country nor rock and roll they pretended to be while unintentionally making a mockery of both musical genres.

So now that we are done with that unfortunate trip down memory lane let me explain how it relates to the problems affecting Christianity today. But before I go on let me point out that what I am about to say is going to be based on some fairly broad stereotypes, because stereotypes are fun and require a lot less thinking. I think the fights in Christianity today largely come from groups that forget the issues laid out in Paul’s letter to Timothy and end up being as truly Christian as Donny was Rock and Roll. We will delve more into his specific verbiage in a moment but Paul is basically saying that he was a really rotten person and that Jesus is able to save someone as rotten as him. So getting back to the Osmonds and the dichotomy that exists in the persons of Donny and Marie. There are these two extremes in the Christian church that generate all kinds of trouble. One side, which we will call the Rock and Roll side, will not acknowledge the rotten part of humanity while the country side will not acknowledge that God can save rotten people. Or put in different terms one is a little self-satisfied and the other a little naïve. And both are not fully Christian because they either deny human nature or they deny God’s grace. The New Testament scholar and Bishop N.T Wright put it this way, “There is such a thing as a fundamentalist arrogance that declares that only its own type of Christian is the real thing, and that all others are a sham and heading for hell. But it is equally arrogant – almost equally fundamentalist in its own way! – to insist that, because we must indeed be reticent at this point, we can cheerfully assume that everyone must be ‘in’ and that the warnings of scripture and tradition can be quietly set aside.” Or put more simply one side says that everyone gets into heaven while the other side says that only people who are like me and go to my church get into heaven. And this might just seem like a debate about the afterlife but it has real effects on our day to day lives. If you have spent much time in the Episcopal Church in the past few years you know there has been real damage done to our common life because of these attitudes.

But let’s for a moment listen to Paul and see how things actually work. He says, “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, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life.”

See this is the formula: God moves towards us so that we can move towards him. There is no doctrine of the Christian faith which asserts that we or anyone else are somehow free from sin. This is the state of humanity – we are sinful and we are unable to be reconciled to God through any action of our own. But the thing is and the reason why the word Gospel literally means good news is that God has done something about this and that something is incredibly generous and that is to reconcile us to him through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Let’s step back for a moment and discuss the basic worldview of most Christians. The basic model that people carry around in their head is that we are here on earth and hopefully when it is all over we go to heaven. There are some problems with this model but for the time being let’s stick with it. As a result of viewing life in this way we look for a way to understand it on terms we are familiar with. So the little bit country side makes heaven into a sort of club or university. And in order to get into this heavenly university we need to do certain things like get the heavenly equivalent of a good ACT score. What this model gets wrong is our sinfulness and our lack of ability to do anything about it. In many ways it makes God irrelevant, believing that we decide our salvation rather than trusting in God’s grace. It says salvation is something we can do ourselves. The opposite error and the one that comes from the little bit rock and roll side is to take heaven as something that is available to everyone like a community college. There is nothing we need to do and no behaviors we need to change. We all get trophies. This model eliminates the need for us to be transformed into the likeness of God. If we see grace as something God hands out without realizing that it calls for us to change we get spiritually flabby, like Heinrich Heine when he supposedly said on his deathbed, “God will forgive me, that’s his job.” Well he actually said, “Gott wird mir verzeihen, das ist sein Beruf” for you Lutherans out there. But God’s grace is not a free pass but is rather something transformative.

Part of the reason for the polarization in our day and age is that these two position allow for pride. They allow for us to think we are higher than we actually are either by believing we can earn God’s favor or that by our very nature we are deserving of God’s favor. But the proper understanding that Paul gives to us today is one where the only response is gratitude. God has given us the means to do something of which we would be unable to do ourselves. And our only response to this free gift is to grow in our love and knowledge of God. I think this is a bad example, but let’s say you racked up 20 million dollars in debt with a loan shark and he was just about to break your legs when someone came along and paid off this debt for you. They did something you could not do yourself and they did it not because of anything that you have done. You would probably feel indebted to them for the rest of your life and work to please them. That is the same thing we are to do with God. No we cannot earn it, but that does not mean we are to do nothing. We have to accept it, believe it and ultimately be transformed by it. We are sinful and it is only through God’s grace that we can be saved. And because of this as St. Irenaeus of Lyon tells us: We are born in the image of God but must be transformed into the likeness of God so that we may be God’s own both now and forevermore.