

Twentieth Weekend after Pentecost (RCL/C): "Saints & Sinners"  
Psalm 84:1-7, Luke 18:9-14  
October 22-23, 2022  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Let's listen again to our Gospel in the more modern lingo of *The Message*:

*9-12 [Jesus] told his next story to some who were complacently pleased with themselves over their moral performance and looked down their noses at the common people: "Two men went up to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax man. The Pharisee posed and prayed like this: 'Oh, God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, crooks, adulterers, or, heaven forbid, like this tax man. I fast twice a week and tithe on all my income.' 13 "Meanwhile the tax man, slumped in the shadows, his face in his hands, not daring to look up, said, 'God, give mercy. Forgive me, a sinner.'"*

*14 Jesus commented, "This tax man, not the other, went home made right with God. If you walk around with your nose in the air, you're going to end up flat on your face, **but if you're content to be simply yourself**, you will become more than yourself."*

(Luke 18:9-14, *The Message*)

Content to be ourselves: saints and sinners at the same time! We're talking a lot about that "both saint and sinner" paradox in our *Small Catechism* class. Lutheran theology teaches that each of us is both a saint **and** a sinner. Luther's the one who coined the phrase: *simul iustus et peccator, simultaneously saint and sinner*, but he got the concept from St. Paul. And it's so – true. Wouldn't we all admit we have shining moments and also selfish moments, often in the same day?? We all fall somewhere on the spectrum between Ted Bundy and Mother Teresa – continually "shuffle-boarding" back and forth between virtue and vice. I'm not either/or. I'm both/and. This is why I need a Savior.

I am a "saint" because I am a baptized child of God, "sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever," just like Baby Theo becomes a baptized child of God and therefore a "saint," this weekend. The root meaning of saint is *holy*. We're holy because of the One to whom we belong, not because of who we inherently are. Even the chalice on the altar is holy, not because of what it is (a cup) but because of what it holds

(the Blood of Christ in, with and under consecrated wine). Each of us is holy because we are temples of the Holy Spirit. My “housekeeping” of that temple may not be up to Martha Stewart standards, but spiritual dust bunnies and dirty windows don’t change the architecture or purpose of this “building,” this temple of the Holy Spirit that is my body, that is your body.

The tax man in today’s Gospel, by virtue of his profession, **was definitely guilty** of theft, charging exorbitant rates and pocketing a good share of the proceeds for himself, rather than turning over **all** the money to his employers, the Romans. BUT what he didn’t have in honesty he made up for in humility, sincerely asking God’s forgiveness. The Pharisee, by virtue of his particular brand of religion, had some virtuous habits in which he could take holy pride. He only **had** to fast once a year (on the Day of Atonement), but he **chose** to fast twice a week; he only **had** to give a tenth of the seed from his field, but he **chose** to give a tenth of all he owned. BUT he turned the pluses into minuses by bragging about his spiritual disciplines before God and using them to shame his neighbor. The reality is that each of them was a saint and a sinner at the same time: just like us.

About that tithing: it’s stewardship season here at Holy Trinity ☺. So I **might** be tempted to point toward the Pharisee as a great role model of financial generosity -- but I **won’t** because he’s using his above-and-beyond giving as a way to climb a ladder of righteousness, to self-justify. It seems like he’s decided that God’s mercy toward him is unnecessary because he somehow deserves God’s praise for his goodness. No, no, no! His words in the Temple are more a speech than a prayer – and maybe they’re more directed at himself than God! People who know these things say that the Greek words translated into English as *“The Pharisee, standing by himself”* could also mean *“praying with himself”* or

*“talking to himself.”* It’s like he’s showcasing all the reasons he should get some kind of reward. His arm must have gotten tired from all that patting himself on the back.

The Pharisee’s egotism is pretty distasteful, but isn’t even the worst of it. He’s **brutal** toward others, toward all the people in his world he considers losers, including “that tax collector” over there. This self-righteous religious “expert” has taken out a billboard that screams at everyone who passes, “I’m better than you!” **We** know, though, that anybody who needs to do that is trying to silence a little voice deep inside themselves that says, **“You’re** the loser...”

Let’s remember to whom our Lord addresses this little story: *“[Jesus]... told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.”* (Luke 18:9) The whole point is that we have no righteousness in and of ourselves, regardless of how often or whether we tithe or fast or pray. Those are good and holy things to do, and place us in closer communion to our Lord and to our community, but they are how we **respond** to God’s blessings and not how we **reap** a reward. Jesus has **already** done everything necessary for us to stand before God as beloved children. That’s because a “Great Exchange” has happened, as Luther put it. Jesus takes our garbage and gives us His treasure. He takes our sin and gives us His forgiveness, His righteousness. Jesus takes our poverty and gives us Heaven’s wealth. He takes our sickness and gives us spiritual health. Jesus takes our sorrow and gives us joy. And in the end, Jesus takes our death and gives us Life with a capital L. It’s the Great Exchange, the Joyful Exchange. But we have to let go of our **self**-righteousness before Jesus can swap out our trash for His treasure.

It takes energy to convince ourselves that something is true that is actually false (or vice versa). We would only be wasting precious energy maintaining that we're either a "good for nothing" or that we're "the second coming." Much wiser to see ourselves as God sees us, both saint and sinner at the same time. Much wiser for us to pray as the tax collector did: "*God, be merciful to me, a sinner.*" (Luke 18:13) It's a prayer that's already been heard and answered, if we can **trust, have faith**, that it is so. For this is most certainly true. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham