

Trinity Lutheran Church, Gillette, WY
July 6, 2008

Saint & Sinner

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, amen. The text for the sermon this morning comes from the Epistle, which was read earlier.

Do you understand who you are? You may be a father or a mother. You may be a shift worker or a teacher. You may be many things, but do you fully understand who you are? Paul did not understand who he was. He was a saint and a slave to God, yet he was also a sinner and a slave to sin. Was he a sinner or a saint? Paul was both. So let me ask you who you are? Are you a sinner or a saint? You are both. Martin Luther coined the phrase, *Simul Iustus et Peccator*, simultaneously saint and sinner. He was fond of talking about himself as saint and sinner at the same time. He knew in a most personal way the struggle of St. Paul. He, more than most, desperately struggled to control his every thought and action, but to no avail. It was only after he found the secret of God's forgiveness through faith in Jesus Christ that he could boldly confess he was saint and sinner, but living moment by moment in God's forgiveness. Paul's passionate struggle and search for an answer helped Luther and other heroes of the faith and is capable of helping us experience God's good news for us today.

Paul realized in our text that that was exactly who he was: a saint and a sinner. It is a realization that all Christians can make, and should make, of themselves: throughout our lives as baptized children of God, we are, and always will be, simultaneously saint and sinner.

Some Christians miss the point of our text. They suggest that Paul is talking about his life before he was converted. Some Christians even make the assumption that after conversion, it's possible to live without this tension. Paul is talking about his personal struggle after his conversion experience. He's talking about the Paul who Jesus confronted on the road to Damascus. He's talking about a Paul who had the courage to face councils and governors. He's talking about a Paul who could give thanks and sing for joy, even in a prison cell. Paul, who was a hero of the faith, cried out, *"For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing."*

That is the same message which we exclaim as well. We don't do the good which we want to do, but we are able to do the evil which we don't want to do. Why is that? It is just as Paul tells us: *"For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out."* That is the story of our lives. The sin which plagues us all causes us to do what is wrong, what is evil. We know right from wrong, we have God's Word to direct us in the ways in which we should go, yet we do not or are not able, to do what God's Word commands us to do. This comes down to a struggle between the flesh and the spirit.

What does Paul mean by "flesh," or "sinful nature?" Paul is referring to the corruption of sin which infects every human being since Adam's fall. Without spiritual rebirth a man remains entirely flesh; because of his sinful nature he is unable to please God. Nothing morally desirable can be detected in the flesh, not even in the flesh of a Christian. The Christian discovers, as did Paul, that this sinful nature corrupts his understanding in spiritual matters, overrides his will and provides the ideal cover for the intruder called sin to lurk within him.

When Paul talks about the struggle of the flesh against the spirit, he's talking about a force that permeates every part of us, our mind, spirit, soul, and body. Because of our sinful flesh, it brings about our selfish purposes, our greed, lust, anger, hatred, and murder. It is that sinful flesh which keeps the true Spirit of God from working in us. In contrast, when talking about the spirit of the law of God, he's talking about another force which permeates every part of us. It's an energy, a desire, which empowers us to love, to serve, to give, to affirm, to care, to risk our self, to share, or in other words, to be motivated by God's Spirit for life and peace. However, there is a problem. The flesh and the Spirit struggle against one another, and in the end, only one can win out. The question is which will win: the flesh or the Spirit? It's the struggle between two different kinds of energy that Paul and we experience. It's a struggle of sin and the Law at work within us and the force of God's Holy Spirit. That's why, many times, what we want to do, we don't, and what we don't want to do, we do.

What is the solution? Can the tension ever be resolved between flesh and Spirit? What's the answer? **Is** there a solution? **Is** there an answer? Where does one find hope in all of this? It would be easy to answer "Jesus Christ," but what does that mean? All too often, Christians act as if the conflict does not exist. Luther once said that the "*World at its best, is the world at its worst.*" In the best of human action, there is often the assumption that the struggle no longer exists. It assumes a goodness in human kind which is not there.

The Old Testament lesson for today gives us a clue. The word from Zechariah is a joyous one: "*Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he,*

humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” The children of Israel were able to receive the message of Jesus Christ. Their liberation was not coming from themselves or anything of this world. All of these had failed. They were in exile and they knew it. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was delivering them, and it was a different King of King who was to do the job. They had given up on trusting themselves. They had recognized their plight, and at that juncture, they were capable of receiving deliverance, not from themselves, but from God.

The Gospel for today gives us the answer. The fear we experience, the struggle we experience between flesh and spirit, all comes because there is something in life which makes us think we can solve our own problems, justify our own actions, and become our own righteousness. Paul talks about this as law. There is something in our own makeup that tries to find security in ourselves. The message of Jesus is just the opposite. Listen to the Gospel for today: *“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you....”*

The yoke of Jesus is acceptance. We can depend on someone other than ourselves. There is forgiveness. Paul concludes this discussion about the struggle of flesh and spirit in Romans 8 with these words: *“If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?”* That’s the yoke of Jesus. That’s the message we need to live in the tension between the flesh and the Spirit.

The power of the Spirit gives wholeness and we become an integrated person. That’s what Luther is talking about when he calls himself a saint and sinner at the same time, living moment by moment in God’s forgiveness. That’s a different life style, and

it's why Paul could say, *"Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"* You and I, too, can live in Christ's forgiveness as saint and sinner at the same time. The yoke of Christ is easy. His burden is light. The Law can't condemn. Flesh and Spirit both are accepted and loved. We're free, at last, made whole. In the name of Jesus, amen. Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through in Christ Jesus, amen.