

Both Sinner and Saved

(Acts 3, 1 John 1, Luke 24)

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I think of Easter as a season of celebration, and so it is. But the first two readings sound more like condemnation than celebration, and I think that needs to be addressed.

In the reading from Acts, Peter basically condemns a gathering of people who have just witnessed a healing done in the name of Jesus. “Why are you so surprised at this healing,” he asks them. And then he harshly reminds them that they are the very people who called for Jesus’s crucifixion. “You”, he says, “you killed the author of life” and then he calls on them to repent. It’s an in your face, reminder of their sin and a sideways shot at us, to remind us of ours.

The second reading also calls attention to our sinfulness. In fact, you may recognize that it contains one of the historic Confessions that we often recite here:

“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just, will forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness”

Only after making sure that we are fully reminded of our sin and our need for repentance, does the schedule of readings allow us to return to our focus on Jesus’s resurrection. Why this emphasis on acknowledging our sinfulness, even as we celebrate the resurrection?

It seems to me that the reason is similar to why Jesus draws attention to the wounds on his resurrected body. Showing us his wounds is his way of helping us to understand that when we take refuge in his resurrection, it doesn’t mean that

suffering will be erased from our lives. But it does mean that our understanding of suffering will be transformed.

In a similar way, reminding us of our sin, even as we celebrate Jesus's resurrection tells us that our place in his resurrection also does not mean that our personal sinfulness is suddenly no longer a problem. We are still sinners, even as we are being saved by the grace of God.

As far as our lives in this world are concerned, even as we are freed from the power of sin and suffering to destroy us, they continue to be challenges that we need to face up to. As long as we are on this earth, we will make mistakes, we will misunderstand things, we will hurt ourselves and hurt others by behaving out of short-sightedness and ignorance. Human infallibility is not a thing.

And so, our ability to admit that we make mistakes and that we are never free of engaging in some wrong doing, even as we are being saved, is a blessing. It grounds us in reality. And conversely, when we give in to the temptation to believe that God's great love for us somehow means that we have been made wholly righteous in all we do, is an illusion that separates us from reality and from the truth. The fact that God has given us a place in the resurrection of his Son, does not erase the fact that God is still God, and we are still not God. We may now be of immeasurable value on account of the presence of his love alive in us, but we continue to be afflicted by our own sinfulness.

The reformer Martin Luther used a Latin phrase to describe this. He said we are “simul justus et peccator” which is translated, simultaneously saved and sinner. And I think this is a very important thing for us to think about as Christians. It is important for us to know that God’s love can free us and raise us to the fullness of life, while at the same time knowing that we are not fully able to live up to what has been done for us.

There is still always some sense in which we are holding back and withholding some part of ourselves from God; some sense in which we secretly override God’s claims on us, and insist on keeping our place in the drivers seat over and against God’s will for us. And so the prayer warns us: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.”

I think that it is so important for us to recognize our own fallenness as something that we have in common with people everywhere, and that we admit to it publicly. Scripture does not teach us that people whom God has saved are wholly good and that others who are lost are wholly evil. Instead, we are to understand that good and evil is present in all of us, whether we consider ourselves to be saved or not, that each of us is a mixed bag. And when we admit this, it prevents us from setting ourselves on a pedestal above other.

The Sin of Having a Double Standard

Confessing that we too are undeserving sinners, and refusing to elevate ourselves above others, I believe, prevents us from indulging in a flattering, but false double

standard, where we allow ourselves to see others as somehow less precious or less important than ourselves.

I don't think that any one of us is completely free from living by a double standard. We value what we know. We exult in the way God has gifting us with intelligence, with the ability to envision and design great things, with a capacity for love, with deep and complex emotions, and the ability to recognize beauty and to live morally. God has indeed blessed us and put us on a pedestal.

But none of this should prevent us from recognizing the fundamental truth that, in the eyes of God, none of these things elevate us above others. The reality is that all human beings are endowed by God with these amazing potentials. Wherever others comes from, whatever they look like or smell like or whatever language they speak, they were created in the image of God, just like we were, with all the same needs and capabilities and the same temptation to sin. The reality is that there is no such thing as categories of people, descending in importance. There is no such thing as groups of people or individuals who are more important precious or more expendable than others in God's eyes.

Someone Like You or Me

I'd like to wrap up with a short story about a guy that I know. This man was born with some advantages in life and some disadvantages. As a child he was somewhat insecure, not sure that he had value. And so in order to decide whether he had value he compared himself to the other kids around himself. He paid attention to who got picked first and last for a game of kickball, he worried that his

teachers might think he was not very smart. He saw that the world was putting him into a box, into a place in a pecking order and it seemed somehow wrong.

So, when others got picked last or got lower grades in school, he was secretly kind of pleased, because their failures gave him confidence that he at least had a respectable place in the pecking order. And if he did better than others, that gave him confidence too. If others were winners, he felt like a loser, and if others lost, he felt like a winner.

In some ways his anxiety was based on the belief that somehow there was not enough dignity to go around; that this was a tooth and nail world, where you had to fight for your place in the pecking order or perish. He saw others around him as competitors who would take the limited number of spots at the top and that this would strip him of whatever dignity and self-esteem that he had.

Of course, the person I'm describing is partly me and it may be that you will see something of yourself in that description. Whatever our history, each of us has faced the fear of being dismissed as irrelevant or inadequate; of not being taken seriously as a person. It's a terrible feeling. And each one of us has a place inside us in which we tell ourselves that the only person who can ensure that we are taken seriously is ourselves.

But this is not how Jesus envisions the world. In his eyes, we are not here to rank ourselves in order of value in relation to each other. And our true value does not come from where others place us in a pecking order. Our dignity and value don't come from fighting for positions that are in short supply.

Our value comes from God, who's love and forgiveness is abundantly available to all of us. All we have to do is turn and receive and share that same love and acceptance that God offers us. And in doing so, our own infinite value is revealed. It is not based on the judgments of others, but on the experience of being instruments for God's love.

How can there be a need to waste energy on worrying about the pecking order, once we have experienced the infinite value we have as servants of God's love. When God's love becomes the motivating force in our lives, there is no longer a need to seek self-esteem by comparing ourselves to others. The evidence of our value is already within us; it is the love of God that has chosen to dwell in our hearts, in spite of our sin.