

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT | APRIL 4, 2022

ISAIAH 43:16-21 | PSALM 126 | PHILIPPIANS 3:4B-14 | JOHN 12:1-8

We're starting to fill up our theological toolbox. We've acquired four tools so far, and we have two left. This week, we're going to talk about anthropology. How do we talk about the human condition? And in our expression, we sum this up as "sinner and saint."

And this is another one of those concepts that's easier to get if you can get your head around the context it came from. Back in the medieval church, 1200s or so, the common view was that people were born in a state of sin. And being in the state of sin is dangerous because if you die in a state of sin, you go to hell. So people get baptized, original sin is washed away, and they enter into what's called a state of grace. And if you die in the state of grace, you go to heaven. So you want to stay in the state of grace. And when you sin, you go back into the state of sin. So you need to go to confession and get back on the right side of that line. You are a sinner. Or you're in a state of grace. And it just depends what side of that line you're on.¹

Luther gets rid of that idea by taking it a step further. And he says you're not either a sinner or a saint. You're both. All the time. This becomes clearer if you go back and read this in the original Latin. The phrase is "simul justus et peccator."

"Peccator" is sinner. Our confessional documents describe sin not as a bad action but as a lack of trust in God. Instead of trusting God, we trust ourselves.² So we're people who are turned away from God and turned in on ourselves. "Sinner" isn't a label we put on certain groups of people when they do something really bad. It's a kind of pre-existing condition for living. As soon as we show up in the world, we're always being formed and shaped by people, cultures, institutions that are turned in on themselves.

"Justus" usually gets translated as saint, but the root here is the same as "justified." If you remember the first week when we talked about justification, one image of being justified was being lined up the right way. We are oriented or lined up to God correctly. This is sort of like what's meant by state of grace in the old model.

But the most important word in that phrase is *simul* or *at the same time*. Think *simultaneously*. We're not fifty percent sinner, fifty percent saint. Or ten, ninety. Or, God forbid, ninety, ten. We're one hundred percent sinner and one hundred percent saint at the same time, all the time. So when you win a Nobel Peace Prize for solving world peace, you are still a sinner. And when you drive your obnoxiously big pickup truck in the bus lane while talking on your cell phone, you are (somehow) still a saint.

¹ There's a good summary of this in David J. Lose, *Making Sense of Martin Luther: Participant Book* (Fortress Press, 2017). Kenneth G. Appold, *The Reformation: A Brief History* (John Wiley & Sons, 2011) also has a good summary of the medieval/sacramental system.

² Off the top of my head, Augsburg Confession Article II?

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So how can that be true? How can we be both? Well, sinner and saint aren't parts of ourselves. They're not states, either. They're perspectives. Different angles on the same thing. How do we look based on our own merits and actions? We look like sinners. We can't get ourselves to where we need to be. But how do we look through Christ? We look like saints. Because we've brought into relationship with God through Christ. Those things are both true at the same time.

There are a few benefits of this way of thinking. One is that it helps us speak honestly about ourselves and the world we live in. Even after we receive God's grace, do we still sin? Even after we are baptized and receive communion and all the rest, are we still turned away from God? The answer, of course, is yes. After we are justified, made saints so to speak, we still go on living as sinners. We grow in faith and love and live as children of God, but we never get to a point where we make ourselves into saints. We can be real about that and not have to put up a façade.

So one way we can use "sinner and saint" is to dislodge our obsession with "good people." These people are good people. These people are bad people. And we are good people. I can't tell you how often someone comes my office and the first thing out of their mouths is that they're a good person. And you see it in our public life, too. It's not a coincidence that our hyperventilating debates about critical race theory and "cancel culture" are mostly about whether we're "good people" or not.

But "Good Person" is not a helpful theological category. Whenever we think that we are infallible or that people we love who can do no wrong or that some institutions should be above criticism, "sinner and saint:" asks us to slow down a bit and to be realistic about the human condition.

And it goes the other way, too. We might be sinners drawn away from God, but we are always forgiven sinners. So speaking honestly about our propensity for turning inward on ourselves isn't cause for despair. And it isn't cause to just throw up our hands and give up on making the world more reflective of the kingdom of God.

But it invites us to reflect on the ways that God draws us out from ourselves and into relationship with one another. We are saints not because we are talented or devoted or patient or whatever, but because that's how God considers us in Jesus. So even though we always carry histories with us, there is always the possibility of God doing something new in and through us.

We heard a nice example of that in today's reading from Isaiah. The Israelites have been deported and sent into diaspora. They've failed to live into the calling God has placed in their lives. Things are not going well. But what does the prophet declare? *Do not remember the former things. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?*

The facts on the ground still exist. The people of God might be stuck in exile. But God is capable of doing something new. The people are both incapable of getting

it quite right. And God is still going to bring something new from them anyway. *Simul Justus et peccator.*

One of the best examples of sinner and saint is in the commendation we use in funeral liturgies. This is usually the last blessing we give. And how does that commendation go? *Acknowledge, we humbly beseech you, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming.* A sinner of your own redeeming. A sinner you have made a saint.

And that sums it all up. In Jesus, God does a new thing, adds a new perspective on our lives. And why would you ever want to be good when you could be redeemed?

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor