

Justified and Sinful

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

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Some days, we probably feel pretty good about ourselves. All is right with the world and God is good. Other days, we probably feel bad about ourselves. We feel empty, hurt, and insignificant. Why would God want anything to do with a sinner like me? This flipping back and forth can wear us out and make us very unsure of ourselves. What are we doing wrong?

In all three of our scripture readings this weekend, we come across key biblical people who struggled with this very same issue.

In the first reading, *Isaiah* was enjoying a vision of the glory of God. He saw the high and lofty throne with angels singing, “holy, holy, holy.” Yet, in the midst of this vision, Isaiah started to feel so unworthy and he immediately changed: “woe is me, I am doomed. For I am a man of unclean lips.” The contrast between God’s glory and his uncleanness was too much to bear. By the end of the passage, however, Isaiah changed again. He overcomes his despair and when God asks, “whom shall I send,” he happily answers, “send me!”

Likewise, in our second reading from *First Corinthians*, Paul states that he is the least of the apostles and not fit to be one. He knows his sinful past and how he persecuted Christians. Yet, within a matter of verses he is OK again and claims to be filled with grace. He says, “God’s grace to me has not been ineffective.”

Finally, in our Gospel from *Luke*, we come across Simon Peter. When Jesus told Peter to cast his fishing nets into deeper water, Peter must have been frustrated. “Master,” he said, “we have worked hard all night and have caught nothing.” Nonetheless, Peter obeyed and was soon overwhelmed and astonished with the large catch of fish. Jesus was right and it was a miraculous sight to behold. Within moments, however, Peter was so ashamed and said, “depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.”

Isaiah, Paul, and Peter all struggled with this back and forth feeling.

Martin Luther, the first reformer in the Protestant Reformation, taught that all humans are 'simil justus et peccator,' which is Latin for 'simultaneously justified and sinful.' While this position has never been adopted by the Catholic Church for good reason, there is still something very true in it. It speaks to our experience as being both a saint and a sinner; as being loved by God but also not always feeling it; of being in awe of the holy but also being ashamed by our own sinfulness; of having high ideals but always falling short...all at the same time. We are justified and sinful simultaneously.

Christianity doesn't take away our mixed feelings about ourselves, but it does give us the strength to accept what is.

Question: Do I give up in frustration whenever life keeps flip-flopping on me?

The experience of being justified and a sinner simultaneously is stressful, but it isn't something we have to overcome, as we may assume. We learn to live with it. This is not a resignation to failure or giving into a negative self-image. It is the beginning of spiritual freedom, for this is the point when we can say with St. Paul: "by the grace of God I am what I am."