

SAINTS AND SINNERS
BLC – B. HULL SOMERS – 9.2.18

Deuteronomy 4:1-2a, 6-9, James 1:17-27, Mark 7:1-8, 14-18, 21-23

I have been haunted this week by the story of a pastor of a California megachurch that took his own life last Friday. At only 30 years old and father to three young children, he was so buried by the depression and anxiety that he did not see another way out.

This was a man whose job it was to proclaim the Good News and yet he killed himself inside his church the morning before a large celebratory worship service. He had been frank with his congregation and had even taken a months-long sabbatical to deal with his mental health issues but ultimately succumbed to his pain.

This story has been heartbreaking to me as a pastor or Christian who knows just how lonely it can feel to buy into the lie that a pastor has to be perfect somehow. Thankfully, you all know I am far from perfect, and as Lutherans we have a strong theological foundation for embracing our simultaneously sinner and saint selves. Thank you for not holding me to sainthood; now do the same for yourselves.

Even though we have this foundation, it is so easy to get caught up in the temptation that we need to be perfect.

Then something like this happens – a person who has spent their career pointing to hope in Jesus, who looks perfect on the outside with success and good looks and everything our culture calls winning – succumbs to hopelessness and mental illness and the foundations shake.

This young man suffered from mental illness. Depression is debilitating and terrible and present in so many, through no fault of their own. Folk who are depressed cannot simply snap out of it – if they could, they would; no one wants them to be free from this affliction more

than the afflicted. When that young man went back to church after his sabbatical, he hoped he would get better. He did not and he died.

We all have our weakest weaknesses – for some it is anxiety and depression like the young pastor from California, for others addiction, for others deception, others greed, others still poverty that grips like a vice, for some the afflictions of those they love the most, others divorce, some chronic illness, insomnia, and the list goes on and on.

The Pharisees in the first century had ideas about why people were afflicted and tormented and poor and sick. They said that people experienced these things because they were not faithful enough. They said that these people suffered because they were somehow not holy.

The Pharisees – like many people even today who hold fast to religion and law over the freedom of Spirit – had some pretty concrete ideas about why people suffered affliction, hardship and pain. They said that people rightly experienced these maladies for not fulfilling the law. For breaking the rules that they themselves had made up.

They cited things such as cleanliness and religious rites and food laws.

Jesus was not having it.

Jesus knew that the people who were not fulfilling the law as the Pharisees interpreted it were not doing so because they could not. The Pharisees had the resources and the time to do all the little nuances of the law; they had the money to buy the right food and to have pure water for the purification process. Jesus knew that the working class folk who suffered and fell short on the details of the law were actually too poor and did not have enough time or

resources to fulfill the law as interpreted by the religious authority. The rules that they could not afford and that God did not require.

Jesus deconstructed the arguments of the religious authority that had been used to manipulate, control and place guilt on so many and said this: there is no ritual, no magic, no special rule that can make someone pure...it is what is inside of each of us that matters the most.

It was a blow to the heart of the hypocrisy of their teaching.

It is tempting to read this Scripture and think: right, it is not about what kinds of rituals we do; it is about how perfect we are on the inside. But that too falls short on the mark.

As Lutherans we know that God's love, grace and forgiveness always comes down, and it is absolutely not contingent on what we do, say or believe. Not only are you not expected to be perfect to earn your salvation, the fact of your imperfections actually acts to amplify the love and grace of God. As our James passage this morning states, every good and perfect gift comes down from above...so accept it. Look in the mirror and tell the truth about yourself and accept God's grace and move forward without shame.

This is where transformation happens. It does not happen from being guilted into religious ritual. It does not come from being punished. It does not come from threats of a made-up afterlife. It comes from the outpouring of our thanksgiving to God for free gift. Put simply: our love for Jesus.

People who are under compulsory obligation do good things because they have to – but when someone is the recipient of FREE grace and love and forgiveness not contingent on the ability to be perfect or fulfill rules, they respond with their lives.

The goodness has been implanted in us – thanks be to God. And we get to tell the truth and love others as we are. With that fact firmly holding our simultaneously sinner and saint selves, our weaknesses do not become something that we spend all of our time hiding and compensating for – but instead they can be brought into the Light and Life and God, and walked through with compassion and patience.

I wish that whatever those weaknesses are that they would be healed without caveat. I do. But they may not be. Like the wounded healer that has saved us from lives of meaninglessness, even if we are healed completely from what ails us we will still show scars...that is part of this earth-bound existence.

But those weaknesses is where God can show God's strength. God can show up in extraordinary ways through our weakness. No one will hear the Good News that God loves them, no matter what, through you appearing perfect. No one will absorb the Good News that we all belong to God and each other by adhering to a set of rules. No one will be healed by our ability to hide what ails us.

We are healed by the God who lavishes love and grace on us by looking full in the mirror at our own brokenness and not shying away; by giving it all to God and trusting that it is enough; by looking at our siblings in this world and knowing that they too are recipients of this radical love and acceptance; and by living like it as much as we are able. By being in love with God day by day.

Look full at yourself in the mirror and live in truth.

Jesus has freed us from the rules of the law, from the pursuit of perfection, from the expectation of others – even those in authority over us – to be ourselves. To embrace the grace and love that comes down from the God of lights and to live in this truth.

You are a saint of God, a sinner of God's own redeeming. Never perfect, but full of holy possibility. Amen.

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