

As the Brokenness Dies

By: Meagan McLaughlin

June 21, 2020. Lutheran tradition teaches us that we're all sinner and all saint. We all get lost, make mistakes, and harm others. Pastor Meagan's sermon today is on how painful it must have been for Saul to realize the harm he had done to people of God, getting called out, and being guided into a new path forward.

Readings: [Romans 6:1b-11](#), [Romans 7:19](#), [Matthew 10:24-39](#)

*** Transcript ***

As I read the readings for today, the claim that Paul makes that all of us human beings are sinful, that we aren't perfect, jumped out at me. As I started to reflect on those times when I have been publicly "not perfect," the first story that came to my mind happened my very first Sunday when I was on internship. I was a basket case, and I was struggling to make them think that I knew exactly what I was doing. I was helping to serve communion, and when the line had finished I headed back up the stairs, three levels, to the high part of the altar in that sanctuary. And I turned around and I noticed that, to my surprise I was alone — at the top of the world. The rest of the communion serving team was not done yet. Not even close. I was mortified. The sacristan for the day, noticing my plight, moved his finger in a circle at me. And so I turned around, with my back to the congregation, and I experienced immediate relief. I could no longer see anyone watching me.

After worship was over, the sacristan came to me and said, "Sometimes it helps just not to look at anyone else." Several other people besides that sacristan also made a point of coming up to me and commenting about what had happened — not to make sure I knew I had screwed up (because I certainly knew), but to make sure that I knew it was okay, that we were Lutherans and there is plenty of grace to be spared for a new vicar. It is not the first time that I made a mistake in public, and it has not been the last. And I'm sure there will be plenty more to come. And it is always nice to remember that we are Lutherans, and that grace abounds.

But as I continued to reflect on these readings I realized that there was a much deeper message, burning, as Jeremiah so powerfully describes, to be told. While I was working at the Basilica, I had a phone call one day with a parishioner. The details aren't important but suffice it to say, I spoke that day out of a broken place, a sinful place, in myself — and in so doing, I deeply wounded her. And she called me out. In no uncertain terms, she named for me exactly how I had sounded, and how it had hurt her. And something in me broke. I felt like I had been punched in the gut. A part of me, when I think about it now looking back, died in that moment — a part of me that needed to die, and had for a long time, to make room for healing, and new life, to emerge.

And although I couldn't make sense of it at the time, Paul's letter to the Romans names this very real part of our human experience — the truth of our brokenness, our sinfulness, as human beings — alongside our very deep capacity for change, to grow, to live into new ways of being in the world. And Paul himself was no stranger to this reality. His life as Saul, as a young religious leader, was devoted to uphold all that he had been taught was right and true and good, and destroy all that threatened that. He had, in fact, been complicit in torture and murder of those who had the courage to follow Jesus. Saul was, for everything he knew, like many of us, a good person. He was well-respected by his peers, educated, faithful. He was complacent, as it is so easy for us to be, in his confidence that he was on the right path. Saul, in his zeal, became so caught up in his own experience and his own convictions, that

he completely missed the horror of the events that were unfolding right in front of him. And then, all at once, he got called out. He actually heard Jesus speak, telling him that he had been exactly wrong, and in murdering God's people, he had in fact been murdering Jesus himself. And Saul was struck blind, made vulnerable, compelled to stop what he was doing, and be guided into a new path forward.

We can imagine how painful it must have been for Saul, to realize the harm he had done to people of God. And we, living our human lives, have those moments too. We live our lives, thinking that we're on the right path, doing the right thing, and then something happens and we wake up, and realize somewhere along the way, we got lost. We, perhaps without realizing it, acted out of fear. Or a belief that we would not have enough, if we ensured that others had what they needed. Or a mistaken notion that our experience of the world was shared by everyone. Like Saul, we may have gotten so focused on our own experience that we missed the pain, even the horrors, of events right in front of us. And somewhere along the way, family of faith, we have all made mistakes and harmed others, sometimes those we hold most dear. And then like Saul, we are awakened. Family members or friends or coworkers may let us know that something we did was hurtful, and they're in pain.

With ears that are opened by George Floyd's calls for his mother, we hear our black siblings as they tell us one more time the realities of racism, and what has been happening to them while we in our ignorance have been looking the other way. With our eyes focused on our health care system and essential workers, our vision sharpened by our experience of COVID-19, we can see more clearly the injustices that exist as so many people live without health care, or a living wage, or safe and affordable housing, or the ability to care for themselves and their families when they are sick.

We are awakened, as Saul was, and something within us dies. This was such a profound change for Saul that he even got a new name, and Saul became Paul. What needed to die was gone, and new life could begin. As Paul writes, "The death Jesus died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." And we hear in Paul's letter just a few verses after today's reading that this was not the one and only time this process needed to happen for him. "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do," he writes in Romans, chapter 7. Paul struggled, as we all do. He claimed his need for God — and we all need God, to bring healing and transformation and new life.

And just as I experienced in my internship congregation on my first Sunday, and with the parishioner from the Basilica when I called her back and apologized for the profound harm I had done and shared what I had learned, there is abundant grace. Our readings today, as violent and as scary as they may seem, remind us of this. "A disciple is not above the teacher," Jesus tells his disciples. "It is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher." Jesus never expected his disciples to be perfect. Paul makes it clear that we can't be. Lutheran tradition teaches us that we're all sinner and all saint. We all get lost, make mistakes, and harm others. And we all have the capacity to live in Christ, who brings healing and new life as the brokenness dies. We all have, as Jeremiah prophesies, the fire in our belly that burns with truth and justice and hope, opening our hearts to see our neighbors with the compassion of God and to see ourselves in that same world.

Thanks be to God.

*** Keywords ***

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