

Simul Justus et Peccator

[Romans 7:15-25](#)

All Saints Day/Luther Sermon Series: 1

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Today, we begin a preaching series on Martin Luther, in honor of the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, which many would argue began on October 31, 1517, when Luther first published his 95 criticisms of the institutional church. My partner Will teaches English as a Second Language, and his Western history book for middle school English language learners sums it up perfectly, I think: “A German priest named Martin Luther had some complaints about the Roman Catholic church,” it explains. “And the Roman Catholic Church was *very angry* at Martin Luther.”

In fact, the the Reformation was a very long and complex process that involved many people, many sides, and far too much bloodshed. But it didn't just change Christianity. It changed the world.

And the truth of the matter is, modern Protestant denominations such as the United Church of Christ owe their very existence to the Reformation. Martin Luther is one of our spiritual ancestors, and that's why Todd and I want to preach some of his most important and revolutionary ideas and consider what they mean for us today.

The idea that I want to tackle this morning is very personal to me, and not only that, I think it's very appropriate for All Saints Day.

Here's a true fact: I have been able to quote a bit of Martin Luther from a very young age. In Latin.

It's the title of the sermon.

*Simul justus et peccator.*

It means: at the same time, a righteous one and one who sins.

Or to put it another way, at once a saint and a sinner.

Yep, Luther famously wrote that. He was inspired by the early theologian Augustine, who said that all Christians were partly saints and partly sinners, trying their whole lives to improve the proportions. It's important, however, to hear the sheer *totality* built into Luther's version. According to Luther, while one is alive, one has the capacity to be a complete saint and a complete sinner at the same time. We carry equal and opposite potential for each in us.

Completely one way and utterly the other. Both/and. A walking, breathing paradox.

*Simul justus et peccator.*

So what was a small child doing quoting this? In Latin?

Now, I did not grow up Lutheran. As many of you know, I grew up back East, in a landscape dominated by the steeples that were Congregational and Roman Catholic and American Baptist.

My parents were both United Church of Christ ministers, serving in the heart of Puritan New England.

As clergy in the Reform tradition, they were widely read and influenced by Luther. I think his frank, critical, earnest wrestling with the institutional church appealed to them, as did his earthy, often deeply funny turns of phrase. Luther reportedly said some things that cannot be repeated from a pulpit, you know. What's more, my parents did not put Luther on a pedestal, as none of us should, particularly with regard to his anti-Semitism, which was deep and disturbing.

But I think they respected much of Luther's theological outlook.

Thus:

For my father's birthday one year, my mom went to the local mall and found a kiosk that made custom clothing. There, she commissioned a baffled teenage worker to apply letters across a large white men's t-shirt, creating a very unique statement. Can you guess what it said?

*Simul justus et peccator.*

Yes, this is the t-shirt, My father loved it.

I asked my mom last week, “Why did you give him that t-shirt?”

“Well, you know we loved how Luther could create such pithy phrases!” my mom said.

“But why this one?” I asked. “Why *simul justus et peccator*? On a t-shirt?”

She paused, and then said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world, “Because it captures the human condition!”

My father wore the t-shirt while taking his early morning runs.

I really like to imagine my father, who died just over ten years ago, running out there in the predawn light, the local Congregational minister silently proclaiming the human condition to the douglas firs and the birds and the moose.

Here’s the thing: that t-shirt? It was a joke, and it *wasn’t*.

Both/and.

The older I get, and the more I understand who my father was, the more I realize how very much he embodied Luther's phrase. *Simul justus et peccator*, at once a righteous man and also a sinner. It could have been his personal motto. He was a wonderful, smart, complex man who had no illusions about human nature, including his own. He could look unblinkingly at the messes we are capable of making.

What I'm dancing around here is sin; the sin that rests within each and every one of us. In my experience, sin can be really hard to talk about in churches like ours. That's because many of us, especially clergy, are aware that the word "sin" has been used like a bludgeon. It's been used as form of social control, to shame and divide us, with certain people and behaviors labeled as sinners in order to marginalize or disempower them.

For example, I know what it's like to have what I experience as the most life-giving, sacred part of my life—my marriage—described as sinful. It hurts deeply. So sometimes it's tempting just to avoid that word altogether, because it feels tainted, toxic, ruined.

But let's try to let go of those stereotypical definitions of sin, for a moment, and recalibrate.

What if sin were not a label to be used as a weapon by humans against humans, but a language for humans to describe a reality that is inherent to our existence?

Perhaps, from 500 years in the past, we can hear Luther challenging us to rethink sin, to admit, in a frank and simple way, this basic truth: we do not always do what we ought.

Luther was heavily influenced by Paul and the Scripture we heard earlier. And frankly, I think there's also a basic psychological truth here: sometimes, we act out of fear, or cowardice, or shame, or greed. Sometimes, we give into our worst impulses.

Luther, following Scripture, following Augustine, understood that there is an epic conflict going on within each of us. We could give the sides of the conflict many different names, really: it's the conflict between good and evil, between grace and shame, between woundedness and healing, between self-destruction and wholeness, between cruelty and compassion, between greed and

generosity... the list goes on. We all have these various inclinations, right? These competing needs?

Well, according to Luther, no matter who you are, whether you are the most powerful person in the room or the least, you contain these multitudes.

No one is immune to this truth.

Here's the thing: I think, sometimes, when we don't acknowledge something, when we ignore it because it's not very nice to talk about, we give this scary thing power to grow beneath the surface, to metastasize. This happens in families a lot: families that are keeping secrets about alcohol or abuse or other dysfunctions.

Look at the entertainment and news industries right now: so many terrible sins are coming to the surface. So many supposed saints—actors, producers, directors—falling from grace. As painful as it is, there is power in naming these truths, in revealing the abusers for what they are, in exposing the failures in our systems to hold people accountable.

It must be admitted, over and over again: even our most beloved industries and institutions—including our colleges and our churches—are human inventions, sometimes vulnerable to human frailty.

But there is good news. There's always Good News.

Remember Luther's full point: this tragic capacity for sin is matched, equally, with a capacity for something else: the capacity to be *exactly* the people God calls us to be. Luther believed that only in death could we hope to know the *full* transformation of God's saving grace.

I think we may also trust that we can have glimpses of that transformation in *this* life. Those amazing, redeeming moments when we manage to get it right. When we do exactly what we need to do. It happens all the time, in large and small ways. Like when we find our voice when we thought we couldn't speak, or when we know when to step back and follow someone else's lead, or when we summon up courage from deep within to receive

hard news. I think these moments of sainthood are all the sweeter when we can begin to be honest about our sins.

It also gives me to hope to imagine that every instance of human sin is matched, somewhere, somehow, by an equal and opposite force of grace. Like there's some sort of divine physics at work, something I can't always see or understand, repairing this very broken world. And we're called as a church to do our part to help this repairing along as best we can, knowing the work began long before us and will continue long after us.

We began worship today with a remembrance of our saints. Now, I'm not advocating that we rename it All Saints and Sinners Day, but I do challenge us to remember our loved ones in their totality, trusting that they will be received *fully* into God's amazing grace—and that the same will be true for all of us.

Amen.