

The gospel reading is one that we hear every year on Ash Wednesday. It is a pretty tough teaching to hear. Jesus requires that our acts of charity, and prayer, and piety be genuine and sincere. They are not to be coercive. We've all met people who do good things with calculated gain in mind. In fact it is so common it is almost an expectation. It is an election year and there is plenty of cash flowing into the coffers of political candidates; as well as all sorts of other funds to get around campaign finance laws. Wouldn't it be nice if all that money was designated to truly help the democratic process? Wouldn't it be great if that money was used to help the population of our country deeply engage and understand the platforms that the candidates are running upon?

Charitable donations aren't much different. People give money to achieve prestige and praise. They want their name on a building or on a plaque or in the news. Giving money to a worthy cause is often about building a person's public image rather than truly helping the cause.

Jesus says when you do things be sincere about it. Otherwise it is hypocrisy. Underneath all of Jesus' teaching is a fundamental understanding of sin.

When most people hear the word sin they think of something they do that is wrong. They think of something that is choosing evil over good. Or perhaps it is a desire that is not kept in check. They think of something you do - an action.

Jesus takes us to a deeper understanding of sin. Yes indeed destructive behaviors are sins, but there is more. At the core of sin is *self-justification*. Self-justification is the desire to look good. We want others to think highly of us. We especially want to appear morally strong, trustworthy, and in nearly all cases, right.

Yes, we'll admit that we do make mistakes, but we will often go to any ends to excuse them. We will say we didn't have complete information. We'll say our actions are the results of bad parenting or bad luck or the selfishness of another person. We'll do anything to make someone else look wrong just to maintain our status as the right one. We regularly draw a line between good and evil and place ourselves on the good side.

The whole concept of original sin - that is, sin that exists inherently in us and in everyone - reminds us that sin isn't something we can eliminate by working hard enough. No matter how much you read the Bible or go to church or pray and meditate, at the end of the day we are still sinners. According to Martin Luther we are wholly and completely 100% sinful.

The bluntness of this idea makes us uncomfortable. "Come on, pastor, sure we aren't all bad!" we think. And even there sin has got its grips on us. We've already circled back to self-justification. Instead of facing our own sinful thoughts and deeds, we much prefer to focus on other people's mistakes and failings.

Consider this: Whenever a U.S. president says we need to go to war he describes the new enemy as someone dangerous or evil. This then justifies our military action and our ridding the world of this obvious evil enemy. We would never approve of violent action in the name of injustice, but only in the name of justice. Again, we draw the line between good and evil and place ourselves on the side of evil.

In an article about sin in the February 2012 issue of The Lutheran theologians Kristen Lergen and Ted Peters write this:

“One of the best images that Luther used to describe this pernicious self-delusion is the “self curved in upon itself.” Our original state, so to speak, includes such extreme self-absorption that the self becomes the center of the universe - displacing God, shoving aside the neighbor and completely ignoring creation as a whole. What matters is *me* - my interests, my needs and my desires - and everyone and everything else is instrumentalized to serve me. It’s an ugly, lonely, desperate way to live. The only way we can stand is to pile more lies upon lies to convince ourselves that we are good, that we are happy, that we are *right*.”

When Jesus talks about hypocrisy in our gospel reading this is what he is talking about. Jesus is not condemning us for our bad or selfish behaviors. He is desperately trying to help us see the hopelessness of our sinful state. Sin will destroy us. It is horrible. It is ugly. It is more destructive to us than we can even imagine. The only way to hope to begin to free ourselves from it is to admit it, accept our perpetually broken state.

Hear the parable of the Pharisee and the publican: Jesus said, “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself,

was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people, thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other." (Luke 18:10-14)

Self-justification makes virtue just as sinful as vice, and perhaps more dangerous. The publican in this parable, drew the line between good and evil and placed himself on the evil side. That is what made God's justification of him remarkable.

Here's the truly most remarkable thing. God himself has drawn a line between good and evil, and which side did God put himself on? Look up at the cross and you know which side God voluntarily put himself on for you. If you want to find God don't justify yourself. Don't put yourself on the good side. If you want to find God then meet him where he has already put himself to meet you - the wrong side of the line. It is free and gracious gift to you.

Again from the article by Largen and Peters, "Luther spoke dramatically about God's passion for breaking through our self-deceit, which empower us to turn away from sin to grace. One of

the primary ways in which God does this is via reversal: when we draw the line between good and evil, God comes in the form of Jesus to stand with those we have condemned to occupy the evil side. In his eating with prostitutes, befriending the outcasts and dying with criminals, Christ became sin, says Luther in a shocking way."

Today is Ash Wednesday and we put ashes on our foreheads. We do so because we recognize our sinful state. We know which side of the line we are on. We do not have eternal life on our own. "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." It is to admit limitations. It is to admit incapacibilities. It is to admit brokenness. It is to come before God and not even dare to look up to heaven because we are too scared to do so.

It is the beginning of the end for the tyranny of sin in our lives. No, we will never rid ourselves of it, no matter how piously selfless we are. But we can allow God to open the door to rescue us from it. It is to allow God's goodness to begin in us and wholly grasp us - just as sin does.

You'll remember this phrase from Luther - "Simil ustus et peccatur," simultaneously saint and sinner. It is God's work in us. It is God's beginning which God will complete in his own time and in his own way. Thanks be to God for the rescue God provides. Amen