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Of Saints and Sinners

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A popular slogan of the Reformation period is “Justification by grace through faith”. Another comes to mind today as the Gospel story of Zacchaeus coincides with our observation of All Saints Sunday. It is a favourite of Lutheran theologians. In the original Latin it is “Simul justus et peccator”. That phrase was coined by Martin Luther in describing the Christian person as one justified by grace through faith rather than by works: “Simul justus et peccator”—“Simultaneously a saint and sinner”. It seems to me that that is an appropriate description of Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector.

As many of you will remember, to be identified as a tax collector in those days automatically labelled a person as a sinner—as an undesirable and outcast in the social as well as the religious community. As a chief tax collector Zacchaeus would have been even more despised and mistrusted as a chief among sinners. Sure enough, that’s what we see in the Gospel. When Jesus called Zacchaeus out of that tree and announced he was going to visit his house that day, the crowd became indignant. “[Jesus] has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.”

Here the story takes a surprising twist. Instead of repenting and confessing his sinfulness—as the tax collector in last Sunday’s Gospel had done—Zacchaeus declares his innocence! “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold.” The crowd had told Jesus Zacchaeus was a sinner; Zacchaeus had told Jesus he was a saint. And Jesus seemed to acknowledge
that Zacchaeus was "simul justus et peccator"—a saint and sinner at the same time. "Today salvation has come to this house."

In that declaration Jesus reveals something timeless and deeply significant. Salvation had not come to Zacchaeus because of his apparent generosity toward the poor or his intentional pursuit of justice. Salvation had not come to Zacchaeus because of his good works, but because of his faith. Faith had motivated Zacchaeus to climb that sycamore tree, to go out on a limb to see what Jesus was all about; and it was faith that led him to respond joyfully to our Lord's invitation: "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today."

What changed that day for Zacchaeus was not his behaviour but the circumstances in which he lived. Because of his faith—his willingness to encounter Jesus and risk yet another rejection—Zacchaeus changed from being a person others rejected to being a person some one else accepted. When Jesus came into his life Zacchaeus went from living a life of loneliness and separation to living a life of fellowship and community. Even though Jesus, alone, had accepted him, a sense of community and belonging was established for Zacchaeus. The point is clear: salvation cannot be realized in isolation from other people. The experience of salvation is a shared experience, celebrated in the community of God's people. It had not been Zacchaeus' good works or honesty that made him a child of Abraham, as Jesus had called him. Zacchaeus had been a child of Abraham because of the grace of God. God had chosen Abraham; Abraham had not chosen God. It was God who established the covenant with Abraham and fulfilled the promise of salvation by blessing him and Sarah with their son, Isaac. And God's covenant produced countless descendants of Abraham, among whom Zacchaeus, Moses, Paul, Luther, those people listed in our bulletin, as well as you and I are all numbered.

Those countless descendants of Abraham have been identified by a variety of names through the ages: "The Children of Israel"; "The House of Jacob"; "The House of David". In the Christian era other names have become more common to us: "People of the Way"; "The Household of Faith"; "The Body of Christ"; "The Priesthood of All Believers". But there is one
Of Saints and Sinners

designation that stands out for me on this All Saints Sunday. It is one of the most commonly used descriptions of the Christian church, yet it is one of the most misunderstood. We use it almost every Sunday in our worship. In the Apostles’ Creed we profess belief in the “communion of saints”.

The word “saint”, like the word “sinner”, is usually associated with certain specific behaviour. If “sinner” means one who behaves in an evil way, “saint” means one who behaves in a holy way. But just as Zacchaeus was no more a sinner than any other person, people like St. Paul or St. Luke or St. Theresa or St. Francis are no more saintly—in the proper understanding of “saint”—than you or I.

“Saint”, in the New Testament, refers simply to any and all members of the Christian church. Thus we “believe in the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins...”. There’s that connection between saint and sinner again! Our creed affirms that the church is a community where people are “simul justus et peccator”—saints as well as sinners simultaneously. This section of the Apostles’ Creed becomes more meaningful when the word “communion” is understood as “community”. We “believe in the community of saints” is belief in the church as a unique fellowship of people, set apart by God to be a holy assembly in which forgiveness of sin is the basis for life and where salvation—which means healing, wholeness and fulfillment—is the shared experience of the saints. The promise of Jesus, to be present whenever the community is gathered in his name—even if only two or three, is best understood in this light.

Am I saying that belief in God is impossible for those who are not members of the church? No, I don’t think I am. Zacchaeus believed in God, though he was not a member of the faithful community. Of course, in his case it was the community that rejected him, not he that rejected the community. In the same way today, those who don’t want the church can still believe in God. But their experience of salvation remains beyond their reach. I’m not talking about judgment or their quality of life after death. either. That is God’s territory. I’m talking about experiencing salvation in this life—today, as Zacchaeus did! To the extent to which people remain apart from any community life they deprive themselves of salvation in this life. And it is in the life of the community gathered in the name
of Jesus Christ that the health, wholeness and fulfillment God intended for his people is most fully revealed and experienced on this side of heaven!

Luther once claimed that "... outside the Christian church [that is, where the Gospel is not] there is no forgiveness, and hence no holiness" (Large Catechism, The Book of Concord, ed. Tappert, 418). To be sure, people in the church can be equally as unforgiving as people who are outside of its fellowship. We need only remember the shabby treatment Zacchaeus received from the faithful community of ancient Jericho! Nonetheless, our faith in the church, in that faithful community of saints, believes every gift needed for our corporate life of holiness has been provided by God through his Holy Spirit. We believe, further, that every member of the church has been endowed with gifts intended to enhance our life together. In I Corinthians— the study of which has just been completed by the Adult Class— St. Paul states: "To each (saint) is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (12:7). And so, even in times of disunity and strife within the church or within a congregation, our faith in God's sanctifying presence and involvement provides the framework by which unity and peace—the fruits of salvation—may be restored. As people who believe God is active in the church, in the communion of saints, you and I remain open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit which comes to us in a variety of means—through preaching; through the encouragement or admonition of a brother or sister in Christ; through worship and prayer; through the body and blood of our Lord in Holy Communion; or through the many other ways God in Christ comes into our lives, as he came into the life of Zacchaeus, offering salvation.

Luther isn't the only one who believed that salvation is impossible apart from the church. That position has a long history in Christianity. However, it is not a popular idea; nor is it one I am personally completely comfortable with. It has a judgmental ring to it. Yet, there is a sense in which I must affirm that it is true. That doesn't mean community life doesn't happen apart from the church. It does indeed. But the means by which people become members of other communities are significantly different from the means by which you and I have become and remain members of the community of saints.

Forgiveness is not at the heart of life in the communities gathered in the name of politics or business and industry or
the judicial system or military service or professional sports. Nor is forgiveness the basis for membership in our social or service or country clubs, nor for residence in a particular town or neighbourhood. In those communities outside the church our failures and our mistakes—or the prejudices and misconceptions others may have about us, as the people of Jericho had about Zacchaeus—have an isolating and often devastating effect. In contrast, our mission as a church and Christian congregation is to invite others to discover what you and I have discovered in our common life in the light of God's grace: that in fellowship with the community of all saints people can outlive their failure and mistakes, and grow through them to experience the healing, the wholeness, the peace and fulfillment God has offered the world in and through Jesus Christ. Today salvation comes to this family of God's saints! Today salvation has come to your house, to your life and mine!