

among the dust and ashes. But when we see ourselves through Jesus' eyes, as individuals worthy to be loved by our Creator-God, then we live in the right pocket which is filled with love and affirmation, and we can believe that "for my sake the world was created."

Some days it can be tricky to balance the left and right pockets. We walk a spiritual tightrope between believing ourselves worthy of God's love and recognizing our sinful human nature, or what John Calvin called "but rottenness and a worm." The fact is, we are both. We ARE worthy of God's love because of Jesus Christ, and we ARE "but rottenness and a worm" because of our sins. That's the dual nature of being human. We are, to quote Reformer Martin Luther, *simul justus et peccator* ("at once justified and a sinner"). We are both saint and sinner.

Applied to our parable this morning, this means we are BOTH the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. The Pharisee was morally righteous, he observed the law, prayed, and tithed. He was an upstanding and learned citizen. A saint. But he was also a sinner because he compared himself to others, looked down on those he deemed unworthy, felt himself to be superior and privileged, and he forgot about his own human need for God and God's grace. The Pharisee is arrogant: he stands and speaks to God as an equal. The Pharisee is deceived: he asks nothing of God – no grace, no forgiveness – because he thinks he has already earned God's favor by his good works. He is a sinner, but he didn't know it.

The Tax Collector, by contrast, owned his sins: he knew that he cheated people and that he collaborated with the Roman oppressors. But the Tax Collector was repentant: he stood far away from God and bowed his head in penance. The Tax Collector recognized his need for God and God's grace: his prayer asked God to be merciful to him, a sinner (Luke 18:13). At the end of the parable, Jesus says: "I tell you, [the Tax Collector] went down to his home justified *rather* than the [Pharisee]; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 18:14).

The Pharisee is sent home unjustified, unloved, unblessed, because he puts himself in the place of God. The tragedy of the parable is that the Pharisee doesn't know that he lives in life's left pocket. The Tax Collector is sent home justified in the eyes of God, loved as a sinner redeemed, and blessed to be called a child of God. The joy of the parable is that the Tax Collector now lives in life's right pocket. When the Pharisee relied on his own efforts, he failed to balance life's dual nature. When the Tax Collector asked God to help him, he achieved balance in his life.

It's no easy thing to keep life in balance, but maybe we can take a lesson from the environmentalist movement. There is a saying that works as well to define our spiritual nature as it does our responsibility to the health of this planet: "Think globally, act locally." Here's how that plays out spiritually:

- As sinners, we may not be able to change the world, but as saints, we may be able to change our communities.
- As sinners, we may not be able to change our communities, but as saints we may be able to change our neighborhoods.
- As sinners, we may not be able to change our neighborhoods, but as saints we may be able to change our homes.
- As sinners, we may not be able to change our homes, but as saints, we may be able to change ourselves.
- As sinners, we may not be able to change ourselves, but as saints, we may be able to offer ourselves up to the grace of God and experience nothing less than a changed world.

Our spiritual longings for a better life and a better world must never be sidelined simply because we know we may always fall short of our goals. With God's help we can "think globally and act locally."

There is a beautiful, fictional story about one such saint/sinner. The story begins in 1913. The narrator is a young man hiking in the French Alps. The hiker soon becomes lost and runs out of water. In a desolate valley filled only with wild lavender and crumbling buildings and an empty well, the narrator meets Elzéard Bouffier, a shepherd tending sheep, who takes him to a nearby spring.

Bouffier tells the narrator that when he lost his wife and farm, he sought solace in the solitude of the mountains. The country Bouffier settled in was once beautiful, but no more. Countless armies deforested and devastated it. There was barely enough grass to nourish his small flock, and even then, he had to keep moving them on to new pastures. Gradually, it dawned on Bouffier that the terrible lack of trees was keeping the land blighted and all who lived within it struggling to eke out a living.

So, Bouffier began to plant trees. Every day, as he wandered the empty, pitted land, he carried with him the seeds of a new forest. With every step he used his shepherd's crook to pole holes in the ground, into which he dropped a seed and the potential for a new tree. On a good day, Bouffier could plant nearly one thousand trees.

Bouffier continued to plant seeds for the next 50 years. He planted different types of forests: beech, oak, birch, maple. Slowly the trees took root and matured, and gradually a miracle transformed the devastated land. Where there had been barren wasteland, there stood majestic forests. Streams clogged with eroded earth began to flow again and feed the meadows. Farms and whole communities reclaimed the region as a joyous home.

Elzéard Bouffier was neither saint nor sinner: he was both. Though he intended to cut himself off from his fellow human beings, he succeeded in shepherding a reborn creation into existence, and brought new possibility for life to his neighbors. Bouffier chose to take his hand out of life's left pocket, out of the ashes and dust, out of the heartache and suffering, and to put his hand into life's right pocket, into a life of purpose and rebirth, into a life of joy and contentment.

It's not easy to choose the life Bouffier chose. It takes determination and courage. It's no easier to choose, as the Tax Collector did, to own up to our mistakes and to ask God's help and forgiveness. Choosing to put your hand in the right pocket means choosing the more difficult road, but the better road, the right road.

Prayer: Reforming God, we give you thanks for your forgiveness and your blessing. We pray for ourselves and your church throughout the world. Fill us with a spirit of openness to your Spirit, to hear and receive your promises and to keep our covenant with you. Where we are corrupt, purify us. Where we are in error, direct us. Where we are in need, provide for us. Where we are divided, reunite us. And where we are close-minded, reform us and make us new. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Sources:

- John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 1, Chapter 1, Section 3. Visited 10-23-2018 <https://www.biblestudytools.com/history/calvin-institutes-christianity/book1/chapter-1.html>
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Life's Two Pockets

Reformation Sunday, October 28, 2018
Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Luke 18:9-14

There are two kinds of days: good days and bad days. Some days it's "Good morning, God!" Other days it's "Good God, it's morning!" Fortunately, thankfully, most of our days fall somewhere between these two extremes. A steady diet of either kind of day would only succeed in making us either insufferably arrogant or debilitatingly depressed.

There is a dual quality to human existence that is reflected in our experience of "good" days and "bad" days. The Jewish theologian-mystic Martin Buber (1878-1965) observed that our spiritual life has this same dual quality, what he calls our spiritual nature's two "pockets." Buber said, "Everyone must have two pockets, so that he can reach into the one or the other, according to his needs. In his right pocket are to be the words: "For my sake the world was created," and in his left: "I am dust and ashes." In the right pocket, then, we find happiness and fulfillment in life: for my sake the world was created. But in our left pocket we find sadness and frustration: I am dust and ashes.

This is exactly where we human beings struggle the most. We work hard to keep the balance between the right pocket and the left pocket, between happiness and sadness, between fulfillment and frustration. We accept in our minds that "for my sake the world is created," but it has yet to seep down practically into our lives. Too often we dwell, instead, in the dust and ashes.

Psychologist and Pastoral Care minister Dr. Kelley James Bonewell challenges us to think about that statement: "for my sake the world was created." He says that Martin Buber only got the quote partly right. "If we are to be entirely correct and biblical," says Bonewell, "we would need to add to his words — 'for the sake of being in relationship with God, we are created.'" The Creator of the universe, the great I AM, *Elohim*, *Yahweh* created you because God wanted to have a relationship with you. God deeply desires to be close to you.

This is heady stuff! God seeks you out and wants to know you better. Sadly, few of us really believe it. We're far more familiar and comfortable with the "I am dust and ashes" part. If we base our worth on our work, our social standing, our income, or our lineage – anything other than our relationship with God – then we will always live in the left pocket