

There are two times every year that I make sure to wash and press my alb: The week before Christmas, and the week before Holy Week and Easter. Sure, I'll wash it occasionally at other times throughout the year, but it's those two weeks that I always, always do it and do it well, making sure to pre-treat and add the OxyClean to deal with all the spots it's accumulated, and taking it out of the dryer right away to laboriously iron it to make sure there aren't any wrinkles. Because at Christmas and Easter, I want the church to put its best foot forward. I want people to see us as sparkly saints of God.

Now here's what you, gathered here on a regular Sunday, know: then the rest of the year sets in, and on any given "regular" Sunday you can probably find an assortment of spots on this thing: makeup, wine, dust, pen marks...and it gets wrinkles around the waist and at the shoulders...despite the good scrubs at the holidays and hasty washings in between my alb never stays bright and gleaming...

So it goes with the church. At our holidays, at our big events, whenever the church wants to attract people, we polish and prime and clean everything up, and we sweep our congregational conflicts under the rug. Literally and metaphorically, we OxyClean church's spots and iron out its wrinkles so people can see us as shiny, sparkly saints of God.

But then comes all the other times. The spots and wrinkles set in again. Simple "spots" like getting snappy with someone, missing a meeting we said we'd attend, not saying that prayer for the person we said we'd pray for.

Sometimes, more serious wrinkles and folds increase. Someone says something about another person they're not sure--or they know--isn't true. We refuse to accept when we're wrong, we dismiss someone who doesn't share our political opinions. The church never stays bright and gleaming...

Our gospel-writer Matthew makes no illusions about the true nature of the church. Yes, it is full of saints building the Kingdom of God, but it is not free from spots and wrinkles. We know this because Matthews remembers and records Jesus talking about the times someone in the church will hurt us or we'll hurt them.

In other words, Jesus knows we'll get wrinkles in our albs. Conflicts will inevitably happen within the Christian community. "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." Talk it out. One on one. "If the member listens to you," great! "you have regained that one." No more ironing needed.

The real problem begins when someone is *unwilling admit* that their alb is wrinkled or that they habitually stain other people's albs. This person thinks they can get away with living a wrinkle-free life. And here, when one person sins, the sin ropes in the whole community. Jesus asks one, two, three witnesses, the whole church to step and say, "Actually, it isn't as hidden as you think; everyone sees your spots and wrinkles."

Now Martin Luther was someone MOST concerned about his spots and wrinkles. As a Christian and a monk, he tried endlessly to eliminate every wrinkle and stain and smallest spot from his life. Eventually he came to

understand that he couldn't: He was in bondage to sin and could not free himself. And so, he came to see, were all people. Everyone and all of us are self-serving sinners who will always have spots and wrinkles all over our baptismal garments. Luther explains it this way, in an imagined, instructive dialogue: "Brother," one friend says to another "it is impossible for you to become so righteous in this life that your body is as clear and spotless as the sun. You still have spots and wrinkles."

But he doesn't end his thoughts about people there: "And yet," he writes, "you are holy," "...and a child of God." "A Christian is righteous and sinner *at the same time.*"

Luther's vision of the church became one where *all* people wear around their spots and wrinkles, not just the one sinner picked from many, as is the case in the gospel. In this dual-natured saint-and-sinner life, Luther says: "Feel and acknowledge sin--this is good." But do not despair. We've all got spots and wrinkles.

So admit. Confess. Believe. Luther reminds us that in life with Christ, God's default setting towards us is righteousness, resolution, and restoration. It's no wonder, then, that when Luther developed liturgy for the church, Luther made sure there was a moment when we could all feel and acknowledge sin but not despair. A point in the service when, together, we could admit, confess, and believe regularly:

It's Corporate Confession and Forgiveness. We begin most Sunday mornings with the Good News that yes, while sin still remains in us it

doesn't stay assigned and stuck to us. Because for the sake of Christ, God forgives us, takes away our sin, and gives us Christ's righteousness instead.

This is what we mean when we Lutherans say that we are "simultaneously saint and sinner." In our Corporate Confession, we say to one another, "Your alb has got spots and wrinkles? Mine too. Welcome to the club." Christ promises to take care of the rest.

"For where two or three are gathered, I am there among them," Christ promises. I, Christ, the agent of reconciliation. the one who can make you whole and healed, the one who takes away the sin of the world. Whenever you acknowledge your spots and face your wrinkles...Christ is there too.

In the church, with the Rite of Confession, two or three gather in the name of Christ, and God's reconciling grace comes among us and into our most sinful, human ways and systems. And it is through Christ's reconciling grace alone that we become God's community of saints and sinners.

Being a saint of God and a sinner in the world is not about the deep cleanings, nor the fancy housekeeping, or even living a perfect-seeming life. Our albs are going to get spots and wrinkles again after Christmas and Easter. Being a saint of God and a sinner in the world is about embracing the dual-life of faith: one in which we can count on getting spots and wrinkles and one in which we can count on God's forgiveness and restoration through Christ even more.

AMEN.

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Lutheran Church of Our Saviour
North Chesterfield, Virginia
October 1, 2017
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary texts from Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon series observing the 500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation
Topic: Saints and Sinners
Romans 13:8-14
Excerpt from Luther's 1535 lecture on Galatians
Matthew 18:15-20