When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than the angels, and crowned them with glory and honor (vss. 3-5).

Good morning, Saints!

Good morning, Sinners!

It’s All Saints’ Sunday, a day when we pause to remember and celebrate the lives of those church members who have died in the last year. We call them “saints” in the way Saint Paul called the Corinthians “saints,” meaning that even if they weren’t very saintly, they were still considered saints simply because they had been baptized, because they had trusted Jesus to forgive their sins, and some of them had more to forgive than others. When I was a boy I would sometimes come in from playing in the back yard so covered in mud that my mother would plunge me into the bathtub immediately. When I got out there would often be a dirty ring around the tub right at the water line. I remember baptizing a man in one of my churches who came back later to see if he had left a ring around the baptistery, because he had been such a notorious sinner. And yet, when that man died, and when All Saints’ Sunday rolled around, his name was read along with the name of that dear, elderly woman who had rocked babies in the church nursery for the last thirty years. He wasn’t a saint because of what he had done for God; he was a saint because of what God had done for him. And yet, from the day of his baptism forward, he tried to live a different and better life.
In my own efforts to live a different and better life I sometimes go on a 24-hour personal retreat. Last week I ended up camping at Pocahontas State Park, just a few miles south of here, and sitting by the campfire reading a book called *Pastrix* by Nadia Bolz-Weber. Nadia is now a Lutheran minister, but the way she got there is a story all by itself. She’s a little over six feet tall, has tattoos up and down both of her muscular arms, and, by her own admission “swears like a sailor.” She is a recovering alcoholic who at one time believed she wouldn’t live to be thirty (and the stories she tells about those years will make you shudder). But then she met Matthew, a tall, good-looking seminary student, who took her to church. First she fell in love with Matthew, and then she fell in love with Jesus. She decided to become a Christian, and to join her boyfriend’s Lutheran church, but in order to do that she had to attend the adult confirmation class, taught by the church’s hopelessly old-fashioned minister: Pastor Ross.

He started by writing the word *Grace* on the chalkboard, and then he turned around and said to the class, “Everything I’m going to tell you goes back to this.” Nadia says she hoped he was telling the truth. What she had learned from the church of her childhood was that she was created by God, but was bad because of “something some chick did in the Garden of Eden,” and that she should try really hard to be good so that God, who is an angry [so-and-so], wouldn’t punish her. Grace had nothing to do with it. But Pastor Ross told her that it did. He wrote on the chalkboard, “1. God’s grace is a gift that is freely given to us. We don’t earn a thing when it comes to God’s love, and we only try to live in response to the gift. 2. No one is climbing the spiritual ladder. We don’t continually improve until we are so spiritual we no longer need God. We die and are made new, but that’s different from spiritual self-improvement. 3. We are
simultaneously sinner and saint, 100 percent of both, all the time.“

And that’s the part I couldn’t stop thinking about.

I sat by my campfire for nearly two hours, staring into the flames and wondering what it meant to say that we are “simultaneously sinner and saint, 100 percent of both, all the time.” Was I one hundred percent sinner sitting there by my fire? That wasn’t so hard to believe. One hundred percent saint? That was a little harder. Both at the same time? How could that be? I found out later that Pastor Ross, the Lutheran minister, got his information straight from the source, from Martin Luther himself, who coined the catchy Latin phrase *simul iustus et peccator*, meaning “simultaneously righteous and sinful,” saint and sinner.

Here’s how one Lutheran scholar explains it:

Every Christian “has a twofold nature.” We are at once body and soul, flesh and spirit, sinner and saint, “outer man and inner man.” These “two men in the same man contradict each other” and remain perennially at war. On the one hand, as bodily creatures, we are born in sin and bound by sin. By our carnal natures, we are prone to lust and lasciviousness, evil and egoism, perversion and pathos of untold dimensions. Even the best of persons, even the titans of virtue in the Bible—Abraham, David, Peter, and Paul—sin all the time. In and of ourselves, we are all totally depraved and deserving of eternal death. On the other hand, as spiritual creatures, we are reborn in faith, and freed from sin. By our spiritual natures, we are prone to love and charity, goodness and sacrifice, virtue and peacefulness. Even the worst of persons, even the reprobate thief nailed on the next cross to Christ's, can be saved from sin. In spite of ourselves, we are all totally redeemed and assured of eternal life.

That kind of thinking may have worked for Martin Luther, back in the 16th Century, but I don’t like to think of myself as divided by these two natures, as if half of me were a saint and the other half were a sinner. I want to be more integrated than that. I want to have more *integrity*, which I often define as “being the same person in private as you are in public.” I think that’s why Pastor Ross told his adult confirmation class that
when it comes to these two natures we are “100 percent of both, all the time.” There’s not an “outer man” and an “inner man”; there’s just a man (or a woman) who is simultaneously sinner and saint. That’s who we are.

Which brings me to my text for today.

It’s not one of the lectionary readings, but as I thought about saints and sinners last week I thought about Psalm 8, and about David, the shepherd boy, lying on his back on a grassy hillside somewhere, looking up at the night sky and thinking, “O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth…. When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than the angels, and crowned them with glory and honor.” The psalm goes on to say, “You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!”

So, this is the way I see it: it’s not that we are half sinner and half saint, with a line drawn down the middle; it’s that in terms of our existence we humans are somewhere between the animals and the angels. If I were explaining it to a kindergarten class I might say, “God’s up here, at the top, and then the angels, and then us, and then the animals, and then…broccoli.” But that makes me wonder: what separates us from the animals? What separates us from the angels for that matter? As David puts it, “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, O Lord? Mortals, that you care for them?”

I’ve been trying to figure that out all week.
I don’t know much about angels and, honestly, the people who pretend that they do don’t know much either. The Bible takes angels for granted, as if we already knew what they were and why they show up from time to time to tell us something important (like Gabriel telling Mary she was going to have a baby). The Bible also seems to take animals for granted, but we know a little more about them. We can look at them, study them, and try to figure out what makes them tick.

- If we say that what separates us from the animals is our **superior intelligence** there might be people who would disagree. I might be one of them. I remember visiting the Washington National Zoo on one occasion and standing on the other side of a thick, plate-glass window from a female Lowland Gorilla who was sitting there looking out of it. We made eye contact, and in those eyes I saw more intelligence than I have seen in many people. She seemed to be saying to me, “Why are you on that side of the glass, and why am I on this side?” I had to look away.

- If we say that what separates us from the animals is our **capacity for love** there might be people who would disagree, and again, I might be one of them. I have seen how my daughter’s three dogs respond when she comes home from work. I might have been with them all day at her house, but when they hear the sound of her feet on the front porch they leap off the couch, tails wagging like crazy, and when she comes in through the door they jump up on her and try to lick her face. You can tell me that’s not love, but try greeting your wife that way next time she comes home, and then tell me what she thought it was.

- If we say that what separates us from the animals is our **freedom of choice**, there
still might be people who would disagree, and again, I might be one of them. I have watched a cat turn up its nose at a perfectly good dish of dry cat food only to jump up on the table and drag a pork chop off my plate. It used its freedom of choice to choose my dinner!

I could give you other examples, but it seems to me that in almost all the ways we human beings are clever and creative and capable there are animals capable of the same. And yet, according to Scripture, there is something we have that they don’t have. In Genesis 1, after God has finished making all the animals and fish and birds and broccoli, God says to someone (maybe the angels) “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness” (Gen. 1:26). Pastors and theologians have agreed through the years that it is this—the image of God—that separates us from the animals. But what does it mean to say that we bear God’s image? What is it, and where is it, and how does it make us different?

Molly Marshall, who is a fine theologian, and who was one of my professors in seminary, says that human beings were not made “according to their kind, like the other creatures, but for a special caring relationship to God, other humans, and all of creation.” Whereas animals may be able to relate to one another and even to humans, it appears to be only humans who can relate to God. I read somewhere recently that Margaret Mead, the famous anthropologist, observed that in every human culture, no matter how primitive, there is evidence of some kind of religion. In fact, humans have been called, “the animal that worships.” Molly Marshall says that this is what it means to be made in the image of God, and that it tells us a great deal about our status and our calling. She says that of all the creatures God made, only humans had the capacity to relate
meaningfully to God, only humans could listen for the voice of God and respond in kind, and that in some ways “all of a person’s life is a response to God—either a yes or a no.”vi

C. S. Lewis once wrote:

Every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different than it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing into a heavenly creature or a hellish creature: either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, and with its fellow creatures, and with itself. To be the one kind of creature is heaven: that is, it is joy and peace and knowledge and power. To be the other means madness, horror, idiocy, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness. Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other.vii

Maybe this is what it means to be “a little lower than the angels.” Maybe it means that instead of being like the animals, who don’t have the choice to know God, or like the angels, who don’t have the choice not to, we humans have a choice. We can turn our faces toward God or away. And to the extent that we do turn our faces toward God perhaps they begin to shine more and more with God’s glory. Maybe that’s why, on the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus’ face was shining like the sun. And maybe that’s why you and I have had the privilege of knowing some ordinary human beings whose faces seemed to reflect the glory of God, some whose names we have called today. Maybe it’s because, when Jesus held out his hand and invited them into relationship with God, they took it, and maybe, when he showed them how to turn their faces toward God again and again, they followed his example.

Suppose we did the same? Suppose that in Jesus Christ we trusted the grace that Pastor Ross talked about, believing that it wasn’t a matter of being really good so that God wouldn’t punish us, but a matter of trusting God’s love more and more, living in that
love more and more, delighting in that love more and more, until our faces, too, began to
shine? It’s not impossible. We are human beings, after all, made in the image of God,
And only a little lower than the angels.

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2 Ibid, pp. 48-49.
4 This quote is from the NRSV with some modifications. The NRSV says, “a little lower than God,” which is one translation of the Hebrew word *elohim*. It can also be translated “divine beings,” or “angels.” I have chosen the latter, simply to avoid confusion.
6 Ibid., p. 44.
7 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*