

It's easy to love someone when they are at their best.

It's easy to love someone when they are all dressed up, when they smell good, when they have makeup on, when they are freshly shaved, when they are clean and healthy. It's easy to love someone when they get first place, when they win the blue ribbon, when they cross the finish line first. It's easy to love someone when they make good choices, use their brain, are smart and sensible and clever and bright.

But sometimes it's hard to love someone when they are at their worst. Is it just as easy to love someone when their head is in the toilet with the stomach flu? Is it just as easy to love someone when muscle turns flabby, when the satin complexion of youth becomes pocked by acne or creased by wrinkles? Is it just as easy to love someone when they are getting their stomach pumped or when they are in jail? Is it just as easy to love the one who takes dead last place, or the one who just can't finish the race at all? Is it just as easy to love someone when they are at their worst—when their choices and decisions are humiliating and shameful and embarrassing?

For me, it is easy to show others my good side. It is easy to show others things I am good at, even proud of. The same is true for you, I am certain. We don't mind it when others see us at our best, in those fabulous moments when we shine. But it is an altogether different thing to reveal those sides of us that are tender, things that are vulnerable, things that are tough to admit, choices we are not so proud of.

But this is why I love being a Lutheran.

Because today we celebrate two amazing men in the history of Christianity—Peter and Paul—and rightfully so. These two apostles remain shining examples of what it means to live and suffer and die for the sake of faith in the name of Jesus Christ.

Peter followed John the Baptist before he followed Jesus; he sacrificed having a normal family life in order to follow the leaders of his faith. Peter was bold, and was always the one asking the tough questions. Peter's rock-like faith even led him to the cross, where he was crucified, but upside down, because he didn't feel like he was worthy to be killed in the same way Jesus was.

And Paul was a traveling missionary after Jesus was crucified and resurrected. He traveled all over the Mediterranean and Asia, spreading the good news of Jesus Christ. He suffered imprisonments and persecution for the sake of his faith. He started churches everywhere he went; his written letters comprise much of our New Testament and are still our models for what it means to be the church.

It's easy to love these men, easy to praise them and revere them. They are saints in the best sense of the word.

But they are also saints in the worst sense of the word. And this is why I love being a Lutheran. Because Paul calls himself “chief of sinners” and yet in the eyes of Jesus, he is still a saint. SO why would Paul, whom we honor today, call himself “chief of sinners?” Because he was a murderer. He killed Christians before he became one

himself. The first Christians trembled in fear when Paul, then called Saul, came into town.

And Peter, whom we also honor today, wasn't always rock-like in his faith. He was also a coward...let's not forget how he denied even knowing Jesus when Jesus needed him the most the night he was arrested and tortured, the terrifying night before he was executed....Peter turned tail and ran.

So these men, both pillars of faith in the eyes of the church, are also a murderer and a traitor.

They are easy to love today, when we remember those shining moments when they got it right. They are easy to love when they are on the mountaintop, when they convert and preach and baptize. They are easy to love when they are all cleaned up and making good choices.

But Jesus also loves them when they are at their worst...when they run off into the night, afraid and alone...when they are ravaged by guilt over a terrible past...when they hold up bloody hands instead of spotless ones.

And this is exactly how Jesus loves you...when you are at your best, yes, when you are easy to love, when you are shined up and tucked in and decked out in your Sunday best...but he also loves you when you are in the gutter, when you are sunken and weak and staring off into space...when you cry alone, when you rock yourself to sleep, when you pray to die.

This is what makes Peter and Paul saints in the eyes of Christ...not for having a perfect track record, but for running the race as best they could. And this is why you are a saint, as well, not because you have a perfect track record, but because you are in this race, but you are never, ever in it alone. You are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses like Peter and Paul who cheer you on so that you will have the strength to run as best you can, to the very end, where Jesus waits for you at the finish line. You might not look or feel your best by that time, but thankfully, that doesn't matter one bit, because Christ will still embrace you.