

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

February 22, 2023

Righteousness

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

There's a small phrase early on in the Sermon on the Mount that often gets glossed over. Not long after the Beatitudes in chapter 4 we read this verse: "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."¹ After uttering this warning Jesus spends the rest of this sermon, including our reading today, describing what righteousness looks like.

Righteousness means being mindful of our anger and where it is directed.² It means not reducing people to less than full human beings in our lust.³ It means keeping our promises.⁴ It means pursuing forgiveness, reconciliation, and loving even our enemies.⁵ It means pursuing the values of God,⁶ being intentional with our thoughts, words, and deeds,⁷ and trusting in God's providence.⁸

This is the righteousness that exceeds that of the religious professionals of that time. It is the righteousness that forces us to center neighbor and God rather than centering ourselves. Jesus makes that theme abundantly clear in our reading this evening too. Although this time those religious professionals are referred to as "hypocrites" instead of by their roles.

So going back to oft-glossed-over verse 4:20 again, we could almost read it as: For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the *hypocrites*, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Let's take a moment to let this scene really sink in. Jesus, in his first big public sermon in the Gospel of

¹ Matthew 4:20 (NRSVUE)

² Matthew 4:21-26

³ Matthew 4:27-30

⁴ Matthew 4:31-37

⁵ Matthew 4:38-48

⁶ Matthew 5:1-18

⁷ Matthew 5:19-23

⁸ Matthew 5:24-34

Matthew, is outright attacking the hypocrisy of two of the main groups of religious leaders of his time.

It was the scribes and Pharisees that loved “to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others”⁹ and to “disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting.”¹⁰ In their hypocrisy...in their unrighteous living, they have received the natural outcome of their display...being seen and judged by others as “better than.” Unfortunately, this outcome is of the shallowest sort. And they have lost out on the far better outcome, the outcome of righteousness.

What is the outcome of righteousness? Or, as I prefer to put it, living as we were created to live? Beloved community! The kingdom of heaven in the here and now! That’s the ultimate outcome of righteous living. That’s the far deeper outcome of centering God and neighbor. Deep connection that forms the basis of authentic and beautiful community. That’s what Christ is calling us towards, that’s what hypocrisy gets in the way of.

So more than anything this Lent, I pray that you all are equipped for righteous living. I pray that you find the strength and courage to be who you truly are with the people around you. Avoid the masks you are so tempted to wear, and trust that our community is pursuing righteousness, not hypocrisy. Following the Way of Christ means daring to be our most authentic selves and trusting that we will be loved and accepted as who we are.

Dropping our masks can be scary...it’s a vulnerable thing for us to do. But it is the only way to righteous living. It’s the only way our righteousness will exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. It’s the only way to experience the deeper outcomes that lead to life. It’s the only way to the sort of connection and community that the Way of Christ is leading us towards.

Go ahead and pursue the traditional Spiritual Disciplines of Lent – prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. They are all good and wonderful practices! But as you pursue them (or other practices) also pursue authenticity! Please take some time this Lent for reflection and self-examination. Explore who you are and what motivates you. And seek to bring that more to the fore; show up for your friends and families in a more complete way. And as you show up, create space for others to show up too! Amen.

⁹ Matthew 6:5b

¹⁰ Matthew 6:16b