

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

December 15, 2024

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## **“Made for compassion”**

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Repent! John the Baptizer shouts at the crowds. Repent you brood of vipers fleeing the wrath to come! Show yourselves to be good vine branches by bearing good fruit. Fruit of repentance. Fruit of honesty. Fruit of compassion. Fruit, ultimately, of righteousness.

Some of you may recognize the sermon I am about to give, it is one I have preached versions of before. But it is on such an important topic that I find it necessary to regularly revisit it: What does it mean to repent? What does it mean to bear good fruit? What does it mean to be righteous? These are essential questions, and tricky ones, since they can lead us down some dangerous paths (e.g. works righteousness, judgementalism, in-group/out-group thinking).

I find that it often helps to start with some definition of terms. One in particular: righteousness. Now, what does “righteousness” mean to you? Really, go ahead and turn to your neighbor and share your understanding of the word...Now, here's mine: righteousness means being right with God. And how can we be right with God? Simple! By being who God created us to be. By living in relationship with God and with others. And by living in the life-affirming and life-giving Way that God in Christ has shown us.

This journey of righteousness begins with the acknowledgement that, on our own, we cannot be righteous. It is so easy for the world to shift our priorities away from Christ's. Our systems are ripe with opportunities for selfishness and corruption. It is so easy for us to start to take advantage of one another, taking more than we ought, extorting or manipulating in order to gain more for ourselves.

What should we do? The crowds ask. Be honest! John replies. Live as God created you to live: in healthy and honest relationships with others; in healthy and mutually-

beneficial communities based on loving interconnection. Don't take advantage of others, be kind, be compassionate, be gracious, be loving!

Do you think this response disappointed the crowds? After all, they came all the way out into the wilderness to see what all the commotion was about. Then John greets them with "You brood of vipers!" They were probably expecting something other than a simple message of: be honest, be kind. Maybe they were hoping for revolution or something to get back at the Roman Empire. But that's not what John is concerned with.

Instead John points the crowds back to their daily lives, their daily occupations. In the midst of that, their simple, everyday lives, John says: repent, bear worthy fruit, be righteous! Being kind and compassionate, serving others, all that sounds like a nice thing to do, but for John...it's the **only** thing to do!

As followers of the way we recognize that the world and all that is in it belongs to the Creator who made it. We acknowledge that our own human selfishness leads us to turning inwards, focusing on our desires over and against others' needs. John calls us to repent, literally turn 180 degrees. Turn from our inward focus to an outward one. If the world, and all that is in it belongs to God, then we are called to see to the needs of all, to serve the needs of all. Turning outwards means living righteously.

God has made us for compassion and kindness, justice and mercy, grace and love. When we live out these values we are walking the Way. When we approach the world around us with compassion and generosity we are living as we were created to live: righteously.

Let me briefly underscore that all of this comes in response to an encounter with the Word. And John points out that the one who comes after him is fully the Word that John can merely proclaim. That Word has accomplished our salvation already. That Word has overcome death and is overcoming death. That Word has brought in the Kingdom of God and is bringing it in. That Word invites us into the Way, the Way of co-creation and co-Kingdom building. That is our righteousness.

In the 4th century, St. Basil said: "That bread which you keep, belongs to the hungry; that coat which you preserve in your wardrobe, to the naked; those shoes which are rotting in your possession, to the shoeless; that gold which you have

hidden in the ground, to the needy. Wherefore, as often as you were able to help others, and refused, so often did you do them wrong.”<sup>1</sup>

God calls us to loving service towards others. That service is based on righteous compassion and love towards our neighbors. John is announcing to the world the coming of a new Way. And he points to the one who is that Way, Jesus Christ. The one who comes to burn the chaff of our selfishness away.

That’s a part of all this too, let’s acknowledge. The Word of God in Jesus Christ, if we truly encounter it, will catch us up in the compassionate, loving, and honest gaze of God. A gaze in which we will see ourselves reflected, beautiful, but also flawed. And that gaze will lovingly call us to righteousness, again and again. Call us to service and radical generosity.

The headlines this week have been fixed on the murder of the CEO of United Health Care. An act without compassion, but which seems to have struck a chord with some in our country. Why? This violent act has brought into focus the compassion-less system our health “care” has become. There is no compassion in this reality, only violence and death, both personal and systemic.

This compassion-less world is not what the world was created to be! This violent and selfish world stands in opposition to God, stands in need of repentance. And that can only happen if some are willing to start it. So let’s heed to call of John. We don’t need to ask, “what then shall we do?” We know what to do! Be kind! Be compassionate! Be Generous! Be merciful! Be just! Be gracious! Be loving! Be who God made you to be! Be righteous! Just as our creator is. Just as Jesus shows us on his Way. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Avila, *Ownership: Early Christian Teaching* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1983), 50.