

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

February 1, 2025

Blessed for Justice

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

We begin this morning in two very different places: a courtroom and a mountain.

First, the courtroom. In Micah 6, we encounter something extraordinary: God initiates a lawsuit against Israel. Imagine the mountains themselves serving as witnesses and the ancient hills as the jury. The accusation is not outright rebellion or idolatry, but something more subtle and pervasive: *weariness*. God asks, "O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you?"

Today, we might wonder if God asks the same of us as we face the endless cycle of gun violence, the looming threat of the climate crisis, and the growing divisions among us. These injustices wear us down, leading to fatigue. Let the mountains testify to gunshots echoing through our valleys and let the rivers carrying the burden of pollution testify to our carelessness for creation.

Israel has become weary of the relationship. They have substituted genuine, justice-oriented devotion with empty rituals: thousands of rams, rivers of oil, and even the unimaginable sacrifice of their children. The covenant has been reduced to a transaction, a legal obligation fulfilled through prescribed offerings and words. They have forgotten that God desires not burnt offerings, but sincere and passionate hearts.

In Matthew 5, Jesus ascends a different mountain to teach. This setting is not a courtroom, but a classroom. It is not a place of prosecution, but of proclamation. What Jesus declares fundamentally reverses expectations. He does not provide a list of requirements for being worthy before God; instead, he announces who is *already* blessed within God's order. And it is surprising!

God's Kin-dom represents a radical reversal of worldly power, where justice is defined not by winning a case, but by restoring community. The courtroom is transformed into a mountain, the lawsuit into a love song, and those once accused become the blessed.

Let's sit with this reversal for a moment, because it's at the heart of everything.

Paul writes to the Corinthians about God's scandalous methodology: "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are."

This is not merely poetic language; it is the blueprint for the Kin-dom. God centers those who are ignored, the foolish, the weak, and the lowly. Those considered insignificant become significant, not through their own efforts or merit, but because God declares it so.

And then Jesus sits on that mountain and makes it explicit in the Beatitudes:

- Blessed are the poor in spirit
- Blessed are those who mourn
- Blessed are the meek
- Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness
- Blessed are the merciful
- Blessed are the pure in heart
- Blessed are the peacemakers
- Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake

Consider this list. In worldly kingdoms, or within the empire's economy, those regarded as blessed are the powerful and self-sufficient: the winners, the influential, and those who appear to have everything in order. This empire is reflected in our present systems: predatory lending practices, migrant detention centers, the win-at-all-cost mindset. These systems highlight the stark divide, promoting a world where prosperity is achieved by exploiting others. In contrast, within God's Kin-dom, the blessed are the vulnerable, the grieving, the gentle, the hungry, the merciful, the seekers of peace, and those marginalized by the empire.

I'm proud to say this identity reflects who we aspire to be here at St. Stephen. We state clearly in our welcome statement: "We don't expect perfect, put-together people... show up as who you are." This is intentional, because the Beatitudes are not goals to achieve, but recognitions of God's present blessing. Jesus invites us to observe who God has already blessed and where God is already active.

Let us pause for a moment. I invite each of you to think back to a time when you felt truly welcome, with all your imperfections, in this community or elsewhere. Take a brief moment of silence to recall a time when your authentic presence was embraced, not despite your messiness, but because of it. Consider how it felt to belong unconditionally. Such shared stories of imperfect belonging turn our welcoming words into lived experiences, strengthening our bonds and our understanding of what it means to be part of this collective journey.

The reversal is complete: the last are first, the mourners are comforted, the meek inherit everything. So what do we do with this blessing? How do we live into this radical reversal? Micah answers with devastating clarity: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Notice what's *not* required: thousands of rams. Rivers of oil. Spectacular religious performances. Grand gestures that make us feel righteous but change nothing. As we pray in our Offertory Prayer, God doesn't want surface-level do-gooding. God wants transformation.

Let's break down this three-fold requirement:

Do Justice: It is not sufficient to merely contemplate justice or feel sorrow over injustice. We are called to do justice. This is an active and embodied commitment, requiring the dismantling of systems of domination: prisons that incarcerate individuals for profit, labor systems that confine workers to poverty wages, immigration policies that separate families, and healthcare systems that commodify human life. To do justice is to participate in God's restoration project. It's to take the reversal seriously, to actually center those the empire has pushed to the margins.

Love Kindness (or Loyalty, or Steadfast Love): This Hebrew word, *hesed*, is thick with meaning. It's covenant loyalty. It's stubborn faithfulness. It's showing up for

each other in the messy and fulfilling reality of community. To love kindness is to reject the empire's narrative of scarcity and competition. It is to affirm, "Your liberation is bound up with mine. We rise together or not at all."

Walk Humbly with Your God: This is the antidote to self-righteousness. To walk humbly is to recognize that our strength comes from God's grace, not our own moral superiority. It's to remember that we are all the accused in God's courtroom, and we are all the blessed on God's mountain. Walking humbly signifies that we do not pursue justice for self-satisfaction. Rather, we act because God has already made us whole, and we are now called to participate in making the world whole.

Here's the thing about God's Kin-dom: it's not individual. It's collective. We are not saved *from* each other; we are saved *with* and *for* each other. As we affirm in our community, we are called together "for the sake of one another, our neighbors, and creation." The purpose of community is not to form an exclusive group focused on safety and self-righteousness, but to pursue mutual liberation.

When we seek justice for the oppressed, for the blessed poor in spirit, the blessed mourners, and the blessed peacemakers, we are not engaging in charity or assisting distant others. Instead, we recognize that the community attains wholeness only when the most vulnerable are placed at its center.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said it perfectly: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." He also reminds us that "True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice."

This is the true purpose of the Beatitudes. They are not a list of virtues to develop for individual moral achievement. Rather, they present a vision of a beloved community in which all people, especially those marginalized by Empire, are recognized as blessed, whole, and worthy.

Liberation for one is liberation for all. Justice for the most marginalized is justice for everyone. The community cannot achieve wholeness while any of its members are oppressed. This is both the challenge and the promise of the gospel.

So, beloved, here we are. We've stood in the courtroom where God charges us with weariness, with empty ritual, with forgetting what matters. And we've climbed the

mountain where Jesus declares us blessed, not because we've earned it, but because God says so.

Now comes the call to action. In a few moments, I will dismiss you with these words: "Go in peace. Do justice. Love mercy." This is not a nice closing sentiment. It is your marching orders.

You are blessed *for* justice. You are blessed *for* the sake of your neighbor. You are blessed so that the reversal Jesus announced can become reality in your life, in this community, in this world.

We work toward the vision from the Healing of the Nations, toward a world where "the wolf and the lamb feed together," where "the cry of distress is no longer heard," where every tear is wiped away and death is no more.

This is not easy work. The empire will push back. Systems of domination do not surrender without a fight. You will be tired. You will be discouraged. But remember: you are blessed. You are the foolish ones God has chosen to shame the wise. You are the weak ones God has chosen to shame the strong. You are the lowly ones God is using to reduce to nothing the things that are.

We trade dominance for the Way of Life. We trade power-over for power-with. We trade the empire's economy of scarcity for God's economy of abundance. We trade winning the case for restoring the community. We are Blessed for Justice. Now let us go and do it. Amen.