

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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Collective Righteousness

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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.

The prophet Isaiah has had enough. In today's reading from Isaiah 58, God speaks through the prophet with a voice that doesn't mince words: "Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet!" And what follows is one of the most blistering critiques of religious practice in all of scripture.

The people are fasting. They're wearing sackcloth. They're going through all the motions of piety. They even have the audacity to complain to God: "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" They want credit for their spiritual practices. They want God to acknowledge how very, very good they are at being religious.

But God sees right through the theatrics. Because on the very same day they're performing their spiritual disciplines, they're exploiting their workers, pursuing their own interests, and quarreling with one another. Their worship has become what we might call "performative," it's all about the show, all about how they look, all about their own spiritual vibes, or demonstrating their moral superiority.

This kind of worship is inward-facing. It's worship as self-service. And Isaiah makes clear that God is not impressed.

We must remain vigilant regarding faith communities, and honestly examine our own hearts, when the focus shifts from the collective to the individual. When salvation is reduced to a private transaction between oneself and Jesus, disconnected from our treatment of neighbors, societal organization, or the justice of economic systems, we accept a falsehood. Salvation that disregards systemic injustice is not true salvation.

So what does real worship look like? Before we delve deeper into this, let me propose a central thesis: real worship births justice. Now, what does it mean when Jesus says in today's Gospel that he came not to abolish the Law but to fulfill it?

We need to understand something crucial here: the Jewish Law, the Torah, is not what most of us think of when we hear the word "law." We tend to think of rigid, humanly devised rules designed to protect private property and maintain "law and order," enforced differently depending on your skin color and economic class.

But that's not what Jesus is talking about. The Jewish Law that inspires such passion in the Psalmist is something much more alive than rigid rules. It refers to the ways everything is created to be in right relationship with everything else. The Law is relational; it reflects how we are always impacting and being impacted by the world around us. Consider a family deciding on its household budget: each member's needs and wants must be acknowledged to maintain harmony, much as the Law seeks balance in the community. Or think about neighbors resolving a dispute about a shared fence. Here, mutual respect and understanding are paramount to finding a resolution, mirroring the Law's call for right relationships. In everyday scenarios, the principles of the Law reveal themselves, guiding us toward compassion and interconnectedness.

Jesus fulfills the Law by exemplifying mutual, loving relationships rather than promoting inflexibility or moral superiority. His intention is not to create rule-followers but to guide individuals toward authentic humanity, vitality, and connection. This collective way of living is what Paul calls the 'wisdom of God'. To the world, which prizes individual success and 'law and order,' centering the marginalized seems foolish. But this is the 'Mind of Christ,' a logic of interdependence rather than individualism.

At this point, the imagery of salt and light becomes especially significant. Jesus tells his followers, 'You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world.' Imagine sitting down to a meal and discovering that the dish before you is missing something; it feels flat and uninspired. Now, picture adding a pinch of salt, and suddenly the flavors come alive, each ingredient revealed in its full potential. This is the power of salt, illustrating how our presence can transform our surroundings, enhancing them in vibrant ways.

Thus, we see that salt's value is in its relationship to what it touches. Yet there is a deep grace here: it is actually impossible for salt to lose its saltiness. You can mine it, crush it, or dissolve it, but it remains salt. This means your inherent Sacred Worth is not something you have to *work* for; it is **who you are**. Really, the only way salt loses its saltiness is if a foreign substance is introduced, contaminating it with something that isn't salt. In our lives, that foreign substance is often the labels and dehumanizing systems we allow to settle on us.

Light works similarly. Light is changed by the shadow of everything that passes near it. Light reveals truth, guides the way, and makes things visible that were hidden in darkness. And here's the thing, light is not more valuable than shadow. Both are necessary. Both are part of the whole.

To say we are salt and light is to say that we are fundamentally, unavoidably relational. Our humanity is found not in individualism but in connection. Living righteously means fulfilling every letter, every stroke of every letter, of the Law... The Law that involves mercy and forgiveness... not seeking revenge and instead loving your enemies. That's what this is about. Living as we were created to live: in right relationship with God, with one another, with all of creation. Living righteously.

Now, this vision of collective righteousness stands in stark contrast to much of what we've inherited from Western culture. The Enlightenment philosophers who shaped our modern democracy offered important insights into human dignity and rights. But they also operated from a troubling assumption: that human beings are inherently *brutish*, a word that literally means *animal-like*, selfish and violent, needing laws primarily to protect individual property and keep us from destroying one another. Imagine the Enlightenment individual, secluded behind a locked gate, guarding personal assets and seeking isolation for self-preservation. In contrast, picture the Biblical neighbor, welcoming all to an open table, fostering communal bonds and shared prosperity. This vivid juxtaposition highlights the tension between these worldviews: one focused on the self and on defending against others, the other inviting connection and collective well-being.

This philosophy elevates individualism, celebrating the self-made person and the ideal of self-reliance. This has resulted in *thingification*, a process in which people

and objects are reduced to mere commodities, diminishing the sense of the sacred in the world. (Taylor, n.d.)

But the biblical vision is entirely different. Psalm 112 describes the righteous person whose “righteousness endures forever.” And what is the result of this righteousness? Not isolated individual success, but collective flourishing: “They rise in the darkness as a light for the upright; they are gracious, merciful, and righteous... They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor.”

Paul echoes this in 1 Corinthians when he speaks of the wisdom of the Spirit, a wisdom that the world sees as foolishness. The world’s wisdom says: look out for number one, accumulate wealth, climb the ladder, protect what’s yours. The Spirit’s wisdom says: we belong to one another in a Web of Love. We long to thrive together, for Compassionate Relationship to be the law of the land.

How, then, can we embody this vision? How do we resist the persistent pressure toward individualism and instead embrace our collective calling to serve as salt and light? Let’s take a moment to pause and reflect together. Consider the cultural forces we encounter daily that pull us towards self-focus. I invite each of you to name aloud one such pressure that you face in your own life. By sharing these aloud, we create a communal awareness and forge a collective resolve to move beyond these constraints.

Living in collective righteousness starts with recognizing shared humanity in all its messy, beautiful complexity. In my previous sermon on this text from 2023, I talked about how we’ve developed a terrible habit of reducing people to labels, to problems that need fixing, to threats that need controlling. We do this with children in schools, with employees in corporations, with immigrants, with people who are unhoused, with anyone who makes us uncomfortable.

Consider a student named Alex. Alex has trouble focusing in the classroom and often “acts out.” In many school systems, Alex would be labeled a “problem child,” a disruption to the lesson plan, a data point in a spreadsheet that needs fixing. This reductionist language is distressing because it strips away Alex’s humanity, treating him as a malfunction rather than a whole being who might be struggling with things we cannot see.

But collective righteousness demands we look deeper. Imagine a teacher who refuses to see a *problem* and instead sees a *neighbor*. This teacher discovers that Alex's disruptions are actually a frustrated desire to connect. When Alex is invited to lead a project or help a peer, he isn't being fixed; he is being allowed to be *salty*, to be the person God created him to be. By recognizing Alex's humanity, the teacher doesn't just change Alex; they preserve their own humanity as well.

This dehumanization is, quite literally, taking the saltiness out of salt. It's easier to assign people to convenient boxes, to treat them as nothing more than the labels we've given them. It makes our lives simpler, quieter, and more comfortable. But as I said before, there is no quicker way to lose one's own humanity than to dehumanize one's neighbor.

And here's something crucial we need to remember: Jesus wasn't speaking these words about salt and light to the powerful. He wasn't telling Roman emperors or wealthy landowners that they were the light of the world. He was speaking to marginalized peasants in an occupied territory, to people the powerful considered nobodies.

So when we ask what it looks like to seek the "city on a hill," we need to be looking in the right places. We need to look to modern-day movements of people who are deemed unimportant by the powerful. If we truly believed that a people's movement like Lavalas in Haiti was the light of the world, the place where salvation enters the earth, how would that reorient our politics? This people's flood seeks to shed light on a history of enslavement and predatory lending that the powerful would rather keep in the dark. Today, despite numerous challenges, Lavalas continues to inspire with its ongoing hope for social change and equality. This arc of struggle and resilience not only illuminates the path sought by those pursuing justice but also strengthens our collective resolve.¹

Collective righteousness means listening to those voices, centering those who have been pushed to the margins, recognizing that salvation is not entering the earth through the powerful but through those pursuing liberation and right relationship. Being fully human, pursuing righteousness, makes the world far more complex. Recognizing that the people around us are whole humans, always more than their

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fanmi_Lavalas

labels, always more complex than we want to consider, makes life messier quickly. But it also makes life more true, more abundant, more full.

Who have you labeled and inadvertently dehumanized? And are you willing to recognize their humanity instead of their labels? Beloved community, the call to be salt and light is not an invitation to moral superiority or performative piety. Rather, it is a call to recognize our inherent relational nature, created to influence and be influenced by our surroundings.

It's a call to move from worship as self-service to worship that births justice, loosening the bonds of injustice, letting the oppressed go free, sharing our bread with the hungry, bringing the homeless poor into our homes.

Additionally, let this vision translate into a practical task for us all: spend five minutes this week actively listening to someone who has been labeled as other. Do this without interruptions, providing a safe space for their voice to be heard. This small act can become a significant step in daily discipleship, embodying our commitment to justice in everyday life.

It's a call to collective flourishing rather than individual accumulation. It's a call to see the image of God in every face, even (especially) in those the world tells us don't matter. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Not because of what you do, but because of who you were created to be. Salt cannot lose its saltiness; it can only be salt. And you, beloved, cannot lose your inherent sacred worth.

So go be human, be humanity, be righteous, be who God created you to be. Go be salt and light in a world desperate for flavor and illumination. And remember: we do this not alone, but together, as the Body of Christ, as the Web of Love, as the people who believe that compassionate relationship is meant to be the law of the land.

Imagine a future neighborhood where this Web of Love has taken root. Picture streets filled with vibrant gardens where neighbors cultivate not just food, but friendships. Envision community centers buzzing with activity, offering spaces for learning, sharing stories, and mutual support. See children playing freely in safe, welcoming parks, their laughter a testament to the nurturing spirit that binds the community together.

In this neighborhood, the elderly are cherished and seen as vital storytellers, while the youth are supported and guided as torchbearers of hope and future change. Efforts to alleviate suffering are not just institutional mandates but heartfelt actions stemming from a shared commitment to justice.

Such a place does not just exist in dreams; it is within our reach when we embrace our call as salt and light. Let this vision propel us forward with hope and determination. Amen.