

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

*St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA*

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## **Blue-Collar Love**

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Grace to you and peace from the One who comes from below, Jesus Christ, who welcomes us, and in whom we learn how to welcome one another. Amen.

We often romanticize love as a mood or warm feeling, like a Hallmark-card glow. Even in church, we talk about "love" without addressing its messiness; no need to care for a body, make a call, change a policy, or risk misunderstanding.

But the love we encounter in Jesus is not an abstraction. It is a practice. It is not merely something you feel; it is something you do, carry, endure, and build with other people. Jesus defines love in concrete, material terms: bread, touch, shelter, welcome, truth-telling, and water.

And that leads us to the Incarnation, the idea that God enters human life not from the palaces of power, nor from the protected center where people can avoid the consequences of their decisions. God comes from below. God comes into the thick of it, close enough to be tired, interrupted, in danger, misunderstood, and poor.

The Incarnation is not about God visiting us as a dignitary; rather, it is God joining us as a laborer. It involves God's choice of the grit and the ordinary; embracing vulnerability through dependence on food, water, shelter, a borrowed home, a borrowed boat, a borrowed donkey, and a borrowed tomb.

Today, in Matthew 10, Jesus makes a powerful statement that should make us take note, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me... and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones... will not lose the reward."

A simple cup of cold water; not a sermon, a donation, or a spiritual feat. A small act of kindness given to a "little one," someone easily overlooked, minimized, dismissed, or ignored. In a setting marked by extreme poverty and political violence, where scarcity extends beyond physical needs to systemic, Jesus names

water as holy, welcome as divine, and small mercies as resistance. Because if empire runs on scarcity and fear, then a cup of cold water says, “You do not have to vanish for me to be safe.” It affirms, “Your life is valuable,” and rejects the false notion that some lives are expendable.

That’s what I want to call blue-collar love. It is not sentimental; it has water and a towel in it. It has phone calls and rides and paperwork and advocacy and hard conversations in it. It has showing up again, when you are tired, when you would rather scroll away from suffering, when you would rather keep your head down.

It’s love when somebody drives a neighbor to a doctor’s appointment and waits in the parking lot. It’s love when somebody watches the kids so a caregiver can breathe. It’s love when somebody brings groceries not as a performance but as an act of solidarity. It’s love when somebody tells the truth about harm rather than protecting their own comfort. It’s love when somebody learns a name and uses it. It’s love when somebody refuses the gossip that dehumanizes. It’s love when somebody says, “I believe you.” It’s love when somebody makes space at the table and then notices who still can’t get to the table because the world has erected barriers.

Then Jesus claims that welcoming the vulnerable is truly welcoming Christ, and in turn, welcoming Christ is welcoming the Creator. Not, “when you welcome the vulnerable, you’re doing something like welcoming God.” But rather, you **are** welcoming God.

Welcoming God means creating safe, life-giving space for people the world reduces to labels or ignores entirely. It means making room in our lives and our systems for those who have been told there is no room for them. When we’re talking about welcoming God, we’re not mainly talking about getting the right feelings in worship or holding the right ideas in our heads.

Here is where we have to be honest. We are trained in a model that looks like love but is not love. We are trained in transactional charity. At its worst, charity preserves power differences. It keeps one group as the “givers” and the other as the “receivers.” As long as the relationship is structured that way, one party giving, the other receiving, a power imbalance remains. The “giver” gets to feel righteous. The “receiver” gets managed. And often, the system stays exactly as it is, because

charity can become a pressure-release valve, just enough help to reduce visible suffering, not enough justice to stop producing it.

So the gospel presses us beyond charity into solidarity. Solidarity is not “I help you.” It is “Your life and my life are tied together.” It is a reciprocal relationship that breaks cycles of inequality. Solidarity says, “I’m not here to be your savior. I’m here to be your neighbor.” And neighbor is not a sentimental category; it’s a political one. It means I am implicated. It means your housing is my issue. Your water is my issue. Your safety is my issue. Your dignity is my issue. A formula that is familiar if you have read Luther’s explanations of the Ten Commandments. Because the God who comes from below has bound God’s own life to the lives of the vulnerable.

This means we can’t claim to follow Jesus if we ignore our neighbors’ material reality. A salvation that disregards systemic injustice is not true salvation. Yes, give the cup of cold water. Absolutely. But the moment we give water, the gospel also presses a deeper question into our hands: Why is the person thirsty? Why is clean water inaccessible? Why is housing precarious? Why is healthcare a maze? Why is disability punished? Why is poverty treated as a moral failure? Why do we keep building a world where survival is something you have to earn?

That question leads us to Romans 6. Paul contrasts the “wages of sin” with the “free gift of God.” Wages are what you get paid in an economy that measures worth by output. They are what you receive when survival is conditional, when you must prove you deserve to live.

We know that economy. We live under it. Empire (ancient and modern) runs on wages. It runs on the cruel myth that people must earn their right to survive. It shames the poor and the unhoused. It humiliates people who are disabled, sick, or aging, as well as people whose labor goes unseen. It trains us to ask every human being, “What are you producing?” as though being made in the image of God were not enough.

Paul calls that system what it is, slavery. “When you were slaves of sin,” he says, you were “free” in the sense that you had no obligations to justice; but that “freedom” was only freedom to be consumed, to be used, to be swallowed by a system that kills.

But then Paul announces the deepest good news, God does not relate to us through wages. God does not run a transactional economy. Grace is not a paycheck or the reward for spiritual productivity.

Grace is gift. “The free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” This means you are not loved because you are useful. You are loved because God is love. You are not held because you have earned it. You are held because God has chosen to hold you. God’s economy is abundance, not because resources magically appear, but because in God’s reign, people are not treated as disposable and the hoarding that creates scarcity is confronted.

And here is the liberating turn, if salvation is a gift, then our blue-collar love is not a strategy to earn God’s approval. It is not a way to pay God back. It is not a spiritual ladder. It is our joyful, gritty response to being loved.

We are freed from the exhausting project of proving our worth to empire. Freed from the anxious, competitive scramble. Freed from the lie that we are what we produce. Freed for something better, to become people who share what we have received.

Paul says, “Present yourselves to God... and your members to God as instruments of righteousness.” In other words, put your body in this. Put your time in this. Put your voice in this. Put your money in this. Put your relationships in this. Put your ordinary days in this. Blue-collar love is what it looks like when grace takes on flesh in a community.

So what does that mean for us, this week, not in theory, but in practice? It means the Kin-dom of God is built in the everydayness of life. It’s built when we share a meal. When we sit with grief without trying to fix it. When we show up for court dates, hospital visits, and hard conversations. When we organize for housing because shelter is not a luxury, it is a form of neighbor-love. When we interrupt hate speech in public because dehumanization is violence. When we deliver groceries, yes, but also when we ask why wages are not enough, why benefits are denied, and why systems punish the vulnerable. When we listen to people most harmed and let their truth change what we think is “normal.”

And maybe for some of us, the call today is very simple: Give a cup of cold water. Make the call. Offer the ride. Write the note. Bring the food. Tell the truth. Apologize. Repair. Start small, but start real.

And for some of us, the call today will be to step out of charity and into solidarity; to build relationships where we are not the hero, do not control the story, and where we do not keep the power. To practice mutual survival. To let our lives be interrupted by other people's humanity.

Here is the promise at the heart of Matthew 10, God meets us. Not only in sanctuaries. Not only in beautiful songs. Not only in tidy prayers. God meets us in the dirt and grit of everyday service; in the kitchen, in the parking lot, in the hospital corridor, on the hot street, in the long meeting, in the awkward conversation, in the shared work of keeping one another alive and whole.

Whenever you extend a cup of cold water to a thirsty world, whenever you offer welcome, safety, dignity, and solidarity, you are not merely doing a "nice thing." You are entering the presence of the Divine. So go, not to earn love, but because you are loved. Go, not to pay God back, but because grace has made you free. Go and practice blue-collar love; the ordinary, unglamorous, holy labor of mutual survival. Amen.