

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

August 23, 2026

Bodily Worship

[Readings](#) [Bulletin](#)

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

There is something deeply important about where Jesus asks the question in our Gospel text today. Matthew does not place Jesus and his disciples in the quiet safety of the temple. They are not tucked away in a synagogue. Jesus does not wait until they are safely removed from the noise of the world, to ask, “Who do you say that I am?” No. Jesus asks the question on the road, in the district of Caesarea Philippi.

Caesarea Philippi was **not** neutral ground. It was a place crowded with imperial meaning. It was a place marked by Roman power, by monuments and temples and symbols that shouted, “Caesar is lord.” A place where political power, religious spectacle, economic exchange, and public life all collided. A dusty crossroads. A street-level place.

That is where Jesus asks this important question. Not in the sanctuary, but in the street. And that matters, because Paul says something in Romans that we too easily turn into a private, inward, disembodied thing. “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” Spiritual worship, Paul says, is bodily.

That almost sounds like a contradiction to us. Because we have often been taught, subtly or directly, to imagine “spiritual” as the opposite of physical. We think spiritual worship means closing our eyes, quieting our thoughts, escaping the distractions of the world, and having some clean, inward, private experience with God.

And of course, there is a place for stillness. There is a place for silence. There is a place for prayer that happens in the hidden rooms of the heart. But Paul will not let us confuse spirituality with escape. Paul says: present your bodies. Your actual

body. Your aging body. Your tired body. Your hungry body. Your body that gets anxious, sick, your body that needs rest, and that takes up space, your body that cannot be everywhere at once, your body that bears wounds, histories, and limits.

That body is not an obstacle to worship. That body is the place where worship begins. So here is the question for us today: What does it mean to worship God with our bodies in the middle of the messy street? Because in an Empire that reduces bodies to objects of utility and profit, presenting our fragile, messy bodies to God in radical relationship is a holy act of non-conformity and resistance.

Paul continues, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.” Do not be conformed. That is not just a call to have better private thoughts. Paul is talking about the shape of our whole lives. Do not let the patterns of the world press you into their mold. Do not let the economy tell you your worth. Do not let fear tell you who your neighbor is.

Because the world is always catechizing us. The world teaches us that the individual is the center of all things. The world teaches us that we are what we produce. The world teaches us that rest must be earned, that weakness must be hidden, that dependence is failure, that success means control, and that people are valuable only so long as they are useful.

That is capitalism without mercy. That is Empire. That is the world Paul warns us not to be conformed to. God creates the material world and calls it good. God forms human beings from the dust of the ground and breathes into them the breath of life. The Word becomes flesh and dwells among us. Jesus touches lepers, eats meals, weeps tears, bleeds blood, dies a bodily death, and is raised in a body that still bears wounds. The body is not the enemy of God.

So when Paul critiques “the flesh,” he is not condemning the physical body. He is naming something deeper and more dangerous. Flesh, in that Pauline sense, is the ego turned in on itself. It is the self curved inward. It is the drive to secure myself, protect myself, exalt myself, and control everything around me, even at the expense of relationship. That is flesh.

And that helps us hear Jesus more clearly in Matthew 16. When Peter says, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” Jesus responds, “Blessed are you,

Simon son of Jonah! For **flesh and blood** has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.”

Jesus is not saying that bodies are bad. He is saying that the truth of God’s Kingdom does not arise from human ego, human hierarchy, human domination, or imperial imagination. “Flesh and blood” here means the ordinary systems of power that tell us what is real. It means the logic of Caesar, the logic of control. It means the logic that cannot recognize God unless God arrives looking like victory, status, conquest, and certainty.

But Peter sees something else, if only for a moment. He sees that God’s anointed one is not Caesar. Not the monument. Not the military machine. Not the spectacle of power. God’s anointed one is Jesus, walking dusty roads with ordinary bodies, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, touching the untouchable, and gathering a community not around domination, but around mercy.

Still, we know Peter’s insight is not yet maturity. Because soon enough, when Jesus begins to speak about suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection, Peter will rebuke him. Peter wants a Messiah without a cross. Peter wants glory without vulnerability. Peter wants a kingdom without the messy street. And if we are honest, so do we.

We are tempted toward a theology of glory. We want faith to make us impressive. We want religion to give us certainty. We want worship to lift us above the chaos and complexity of actual human suffering. We want to preserve the mountaintop moments and avoid the valley where the hurting bodies are.

But Jesus keeps walking down the mountain. Jesus keeps entering the valley. Jesus keeps stepping into the street. And that brings us to last Sunday. Pastor Gerry preached on the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15; that fierce, desperate mother who confronted Jesus in the region of Tyre and Sidon. That story, too, happens away from the safe center. It happens in contested territory, in the shadow of long histories of division, hostility, and imperial pressure.

The story centers on a woman crying out. She makes a scene. She refuses to be invisible. She refuses to let her child be disposable. She brings her body, her voice, her desperation, and her love into the street, and she confronts Jesus.

Pastor Gerry reminded us of Albert Schweitzer's "embarrassment principle," if a story was deeply embarrassing to Jesus or to the early church, the likely reason it was preserved is that it actually happened. And let's be honest, that story is embarrassing. Jesus does not come off looking tidy and predictable. He does not respond at first the way we want him to respond. There is discomfort in the text. There is tension. There is something there that we cannot easily smooth over without doing violence to the story.

But maybe that is exactly why the story is so holy. Because Jesus does not hide behind an illusion of perfect, distant control. Jesus is there, bodily present, in a messy encounter with a desperate woman who will not be dismissed. And in that raw and vulnerable meeting, Jesus yields. Jesus changes his mind. Jesus moves, as Pastor Gerry put it so beautifully, from being right to being in relationship. That phrase is worth carrying with us: from being right to being in relationship.

Because how much of our pain comes from refusing that movement? How many families, churches, communities, and nations are trapped because someone would rather be right than be reconciled? How often do we cling to control, certainty, privilege, purity, or power, because real relationship would require us to be changed?

Pastor Gerry defined relationship as "a trust when either party is not in total control." Frankly, that sounds terrifying. But it is also the heart of love. Because if I am in total control, I am not really in relationship. Instead I am managing you, or using you. But relationship requires risk. Relationship requires vulnerability. Relationship requires the possibility that I will be moved by your pain, corrected by your truth, interrupted by your need, and transformed by your presence.

That is what a living sacrifice looks like. Not a dead sacrifice placed safely on an altar. Not a symbolic gesture that costs us nothing. A living sacrifice is a body offered to God in relationship. It is stepping out of the sterile comfort zone and onto the messy street. It is dropping the defenses. It is risking being changed. It is refusing to let the Empire's categories have the final word about who belongs, who matters, who is clean, who is worthy, who is useful, and who can be thrown away.

And this is where the mirror comes in. Because if we are going to present our bodies as living sacrifices, we have to tell the truth about what we are carrying in

those bodies. We have to do mirror-work. I have often defined righteousness as living as we were created to live, being who we were created to be. And who were we created to be? Not isolated, competitive, self-protective individuals. We were created for communion and community. We were created for relationship with God, with one another, with ourselves, and with the whole creation.

Righteousness is relational. So sin is not merely breaking a rule. Sin is the distortion and rupture of relationship. Sin is the ego turned inward. Sin is the false self trying to survive by controlling, consuming, hiding, dominating, or disconnecting. And that means repentance is not about shame for shame's sake. Repentance is the grace of becoming honest enough to be healed.

Mirror-work means standing before God and asking: What am I protecting that love is asking me to release? What patterns of privilege or comfort am I clinging to? What stories have I inherited that keep me from seeing my neighbor as kin? What fears keep me on the sidewalk when Christ is calling me into the street? What forms of respectability have I mistaken for holiness? What defenses keep me from getting into the yoke with my neighbor? Sounds a lot like binding and loosening, doesn't it?

So when Jesus says to Peter, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven," we need to be careful. Because those keys have too often been weaponized. Religious systems have used the language of binding and loosing to control, exclude, shame, and dominate. The keys have been used to lock doors that Christ died to open. But Christ-like authority does not mimic Empire.

The keys of the Kin-dom are not given so that the church can become another gatekeeping institution obsessed with control. They are given so that what has been bound by death may be loosed into life. They are given so that those shackled by poverty, shame, isolation, fear, and rejection may be set free. They are given so that the tombs Empire builds around human bodies might be opened.

That is the church's calling. To bind what destroys life. To loose what sets people free. To refuse conformity to a world that turns people into things. To present our bodies (not just our opinions, doctrines, songs, or our carefully managed religious selves) but our bodies as living sacrifices. Our hands. Our feet. Our voices. Our

tables. Our calendars. Our checkbooks. Our buildings. Our reputations. Our rest. Our labor. Our presence. All of it offered to God.

So beloved, step down from the safe sidewalk of reasonable, quiet compliance. Enter the risk of the messy street. Not because you are unafraid. Not because you have all the answers. Not because you are in control. But because Christ is already there. Christ is there in Caesarea Philippi, asking the dangerous question beneath the shadow of Empire. Christ is there in Tyre and Sidon, being confronted by the fierce love of a desperate mother. Christ is there in the valley, among the vulnerable flesh of the world. Christ is there wherever bodies have been thingified, wherever people have been told they are disposable, wherever love has been made risky, wherever truth has been buried, wherever the keys are needed to unlock a tomb.

So put your body where your mouth is. Let your breathing, living flesh become worship. Let your tired hands become mercy. Let your imperfect presence become solidarity. Let your life be transformed by the renewing of your mind and the offering of your body. And let the church become what it was created to be: one body in Christ, members one of another, hewn from the same bedrock, sent into the messy street as an echo of God's stubborn, boundary-breaking, relational love. Amen.