

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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Counter-Mimesis

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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.

Imagine, for a moment, stepping back two thousand years into the ancient city of Thessalonica. It was a major port and a strategic hub on the Egnatian Way, where Roman military and commercial power moved like blood through the empire's veins. Public life there was marked by Roman authority, by imperial imagery, imperial claims, imperial economics, and imperial fear.

Into that world Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy arrived with the Gospel. And out of that visit grew a small, vulnerable assembly of believers, ordinary people learning a new way to live, a new way to desire, a new way to belong.

When Paul writes to them, he does not write with panic. He writes with gratitude and amazement. Listen again to verse 6 from our epistle reading, "And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of affliction you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit..." Notice the word Paul uses, imitators. In Greek, *mimetai*, from which we get mimetic and imitate.

Scripture has always known what psychology and sociology keep rediscovering, that human beings are profoundly mimetic creatures. We learn how to be human by copying others. We mirror the emotional tone around us. Put a group of people in a room where anxiety is high, and soon the room vibrates with anxiety. Live in a culture where anger is treated as wisdom, and we begin to breathe and speak anger and mistake contempt for courage.

Paul looks at this little church and says, you did not simply copy the empire's emotional weather. "In spite of affliction," in spite of pressure, conflict, and hardship; you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit.

My siblings in Christ, in a world where rage travels fast, Holy Spirit joy is not denial. It is not cheap optimism. It is not pretending the world isn't bleeding. It is a different kind of contagion, a counter-contagion, a counter-mimesis that interrupts what is being passed around.

We do not have to look back to ancient Thessalonica to recognize what emotional contagion feels like. We encounter it every day. And we often carry its machinery in our pockets.

Many of us live inside what people sometimes call an outrage economy; environments (digital, political, and cultural) where the loudest voices and strongest reactions are rewarded. On many platforms, content that provokes fear, anger, or disgust tends to spread farther and faster than content that cultivates patience, nuance, or compassion.

The result is predictable, a culture of contagious rage. We are trained (often subtly) to see neighbors not as whole human beings made in God's image, but as caricatures, threats, or obstacles. When people are reduced like that, to votes, data points, stereotypes, enemies; we lose the capacity to see the *imago Dei* in one another. And when that happens, the very center of our spiritual life begins to erode.

In Matthew 22, religious leaders try to trap Jesus with a question designed to force a binary answer, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" If Jesus says "no," he can be accused of treason. If he says "yes," he can be accused of betraying his people. It's a trap.

Jesus sees through it. He asks for the coin used for the tax, a Roman denarius. He holds it up and asks, "Whose image is this, and whose title?" They answer: "The emperor's." And Jesus replies, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

We often read that as a passage about taxes, or about the separation of church and state. And it certainly has something to say about political life. But I also hear another question underneath Jesus' words, a question about allegiance at the level of the heart. Whose image is stamped on your attention? Whose voice gets to govern your inner life?

Caesar can stamp an image on a coin. But Caesar did not stamp the image of God on you. Caesar did not breathe the breath of life into your lungs. The empire may claim our money. It does not get to claim our souls. And when we allow rage, especially the kind that turns neighbors into objects, to govern our emotional lives, we hand over to Caesar something sacred that belongs only to God.

Paul praises the Thessalonians because they received the Word “in spite of affliction, with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit.” Let’s be clear about what that joy is, and what it is not. Holy Spirit joy is not toxic positivity. It is not a superficial smile that ignores grief. It is not telling the suffering to “cheer up.” It is not a way of dodging the realities of poverty, racism, war, addiction, housing insecurity, or ecological destruction.

The Thessalonians were not living a pain-free life. Paul’s word for affliction is the kind of pressure that presses in. Joy did not remove the pressure. Joy met them inside it.

Holy Spirit joy is a stubborn, grounded clarity rooted in the presence of God. It is the deep conviction that *Emmanuel*, God-with-us, is present in the valley, present in the wilderness, present in the middle of what we cannot fix in a day. The writer Alice Walker once described something like this, calling it “furious dancing” in hard times; refusing to let suffering steal our capacity to love, to create, to build community, to delight in beauty.

That’s the shape of Holy Spirit joy. It is not denial. It is resistance. It is the refusal to imitate cruelty. When the world hands you contempt, returning Holy Spirit joy is counter-mimesis. It says, you may pressure us, but you cannot force us to hate. You cannot force us to become what harms us.

And look what happens when a community practices this. Paul says the Thessalonians became a model for other communities of faith. Rage is contagious, yes. But so is joy grounded in God’s faithfulness. So is compassion. So is courage. So is neighborliness. So is hope that does not lie.

To become imitators of Holy Spirit joy requires something honest and uncomfortable, mirror-work. Mirror-work is the self-reflection that makes repentance possible. It is slowing down long enough to notice what we are imitating, and why.

Paul talks about “the flesh,” and we often misunderstand him. “The flesh” is not the body. God created bodies and called them good. God took on flesh in Jesus. “The flesh,” as Luther put it, is *homo in se incurvatus*, the self turned inward on itself.

It is the ego grasping for control, power, and moral superiority at the expense of relationship. And let’s be honest, outrage can feel good to the ego. It offers a cheap rush of righteousness. It lets us point at “those people” while never having to do the hard work of love, repair, or humility.

Mirror-work asks, what does my outrage do for me? What does it protect? What fear is underneath it? What wound is it trying to cover? And here is the grace, when we dare to do that work, we do it under the compassionate gaze of God. We will see our complicity in broken patterns, yes, but we also see our belovedness. And when we know we are loved, we no longer need outrage to feel real. We can loosen our grip. We can breathe again.

I want to invite us to practice counter-mimesis together. Wherever you are sitting, take a deep breath. Now bring to mind one moment from this past week when you felt your blood pressure rise; a headline, a post, an argument, something that left you angry or defensive. Notice where that feeling lives in your body; jaw, shoulders, chest, stomach. Notice what it urges you to do; to judge, to dismiss, to dehumanize, to pass it on.

Now take another slow breath. Imagine setting that outrage down in your lap. And hear Jesus ask, “Whose image is stamped on your attention?” You do not belong to the rage machine. You belong to God.

Now, look around this room. If you feel comfortable, turn to someone near you; someone you know, or someone you don’t. If you’d rather not speak aloud, you can simply offer this as a silent blessing in your heart. But if you can, make it simple. Offer a five-second blessing. Say, “I am glad you are alive today, and your presence is a gift.” Go ahead. Amen.

What just happened is small, sure, but it is not merely sentimental. It is a circuit-breaker. It is counter-mimesis in practice; refusing to pass along contempt, choosing to pass along life and blessing instead.

When we step out of these church doors into a world vibrating with anger and anxiety, we carry this counter-mimesis with us. Psalm 96 calls all creation to sing, “Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice... Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord; for he is coming to judge the earth with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth.”

Notice that creation does not wait for perfect circumstances before it sings. The trees do not wait for the empire to fall before they clap their hands. They praise because they know who the true King is.

Paul celebrates how the Thessalonians “turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God.” Our modern idols may not be carved statues of Caesar. They may be outrage, cynicism, tribalism, and the belief that contempt will save us.

Turning to the living God means turning away from those dead idols. It means choosing community over isolation, repair over escalation, dignity over “thingification,” and Holy Spirit joy over contagious rage.

So, St. Stephen, go out this week as circuit-breakers. As practitioners of counter-mimesis. When you encounter rage, refuse to copy it. When you encounter cynicism, offer a word of grace. When you encounter someone weary or crushed, stand with them. Share your bread. Protect the vulnerable. Delight in creation. Practice unearned blessing. And yes, dance, even in hard times.

Remember that you are salt. Remember that you are light. Remember that you are held in the unbreakable, compassionate gaze of God. Go be human, be humanity, be righteous, be who God created you to be. Amen.