

Sermon for Sunday, February 5, 2023
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany -Annual Meeting Sunday
“Be Who You Are”
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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Beloved People of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Our righteousness must exceed that of very morally upright people, or we won't enter the kingdom of heaven? I've been wrestling with that statement all week. For one thing, the word righteousness carries a lot of baggage. I sometimes feel very righteous and virtuous, like when I'm shopping at the Coop with my reusable produce bags. It's good that I'm caring for creation by avoiding single-use plastics, but sometimes I'm also silently judging everyone who's not. (Which is ridiculous because half the time I forget my fancy reusable bags and there's still a ton of plastic in my life.)

I'm pretty sure that a misguided sense of moral superiority is not what Jesus wants for me. That doesn't feel good, much less like the kingdom of heaven. I think Jesus wants us to focus less on trying to be right and more on loving others. And self-righteousness is an obstacle to love. So why does Jesus say our own righteousness needs to be exceptional?

At the pastor's Bible study this week, Pr. Mike Wilker, from First Lutheran Church, shared a story about real righteousness and the kingdom of heaven. The story has stuck with me ever since. He gave me permission to share it with you and I'm describing it the way I imagine it happened.

A woman, I'll call her Mary, volunteered regularly at a shelter for women and children who were unhoused. It was Mary's job to prepare and serve breakfast for the shelter residents. Mary was the model volunteer in many ways. She was always on time, never missed her shifts, followed all the checklists about health and safety and food preparation. But she never left the kitchen. She never went to sit and talk with the residents, never shared a meal or a laugh with them. Mary stayed firmly behind the counter.

Until one day there was a commotion beyond the dining area, a commotion that drew everyone outside, including Mary. The husband of one of the residents had been stabbed on the front steps of the shelter. Mary found herself holding this man as he lay there bleeding while they all waited for the ambulance to arrive. The man survived and recovered.

Yet he wasn't the only one who experienced healing that day. As the ambulance raced away, the shelter residents grabbed each other's hands and came together to pray for him. They drew Mary into the circle. As she held hands with the women, the barriers that she'd put between them fell away. As she joined their prayers, she experienced the kingdom of heaven. She felt the presence of God through them. She was righteous, in right relationship with the women around her.

This story is such a beautiful picture of the righteousness that brings us into the kingdom of heaven. It isn't about checklists or moral superiority or self-righteousness. When we hear about righteousness in scripture, it means right relationship. This story also reveals that entering the kingdom of heaven isn't something that happens after we die. We experience the kingdom of heaven

here on earth through right relationships with others - through relationships marked by mutuality and humility, compassion, mercy, and forgiveness.

But it can be so hard to experience these relationships. Our baggage gets in the way. We get stuck behind our own counters, afraid to get too close to other people and their needs. The boxes on the checklists get completed, but we miss the person right in front of us. We side-eye each other at the grocery store. We beat up on ourselves for things like acting superior, forgetting produce bags, forgetting someone's name. That gets us fixated on ourselves rather than the people around us. Our ways of worship and hospitality become rigid, as does our thinking, our politics, our preferences.

The good news is that these obstacles don't stop God from making us righteous, drawing us into right relationship. Jesus is always working to break down what separates and to bring us together. Jesus, in essence, takes our hands and draws us into that circle of prayer outside the shelter. We may not feel an actual tug on the sleeve, but Jesus uses concrete, physical things to grab hold of us and draw us in.

Jesus works through other people and stories, water, bread, wine, words of promise, music, visual art, creation and so many concrete things. Jesus works through these things to say to us: you are loved, you are forgiven. You don't have to focus on yourself - on all your faults, on all your good deeds. You're freed from worrying if you're OK in comparison to everyone else, from trying to build yourself up at their expense. You are created good in God's image. You are loved just as you are. You are forgiven and set free for life in the kingdom of heaven here on earth.

You all are the light of the world. That light is in all y'all, Jesus tells us. Let it shine so that others know the love of God. Be a beacon of courage for that woman behind the counter. Put down your checklist and see the twinkle in someone's eye. Let go of trying to be right, correcting others, reflect love instead.

These are important reminders on the day of Good Shepherd's annual meeting. In all we do together as a congregation, we are to be salt, tending to relationships. We are to shine with the justice and joy of God, the righteousness of God that brings healing to human relationships, to relationships with creation.

Today, we experience the kingdom of heaven in Christ's presence so that we might be who we are - salt of the earth, light of the world, bearers of love.