

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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In last week's gospel, we heard the Beatitudes where Jesus blessed the poor in spirit, the grieving, and the persecuted. In today's reading, that story continued as he looked at the crowd and said, "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." And in English it can sound like Jesus is pointing at individuals – you are salt, and you are light. But in the original Greek, that "you" is plural. So, it actually reads as: you all are salt. Y'all are light. He didn't say try to become salt and light; rather, it was a declaration about a people that were formed together.

So too, this is at the heart of our first reading. There, Isaiah spoke to a community that was deeply frustrated with God. After all, they had been praying. They had been fasting. They were showing up for worship. And still they cried out to God saying, "Why do we fast and you don't see? Why do we humble ourselves and you don't notice?" These are familiar spiritual questions, especially when we believe that we are trying to be faithful. And still, it feels like God is silent.

In Isaiah, God answered their cry. It was not gentle—but the response was clarifying. God said, "You fast, but you exploit your workers. You pray, but you quarrel and fight. You seek closeness to me while your shared life tells a different story." This was not as punishment, but as truth-telling. Isaiah named the temptation to reduce righteousness to some kind of religious

performance. To believe that faithfulness is primarily about private devotion, right belief, or rule-keeping. And that temptation runs deep, especially for those of us shaped by more conservative or evangelical traditions, where righteousness was often framed as being on the right side of the rules, saying the right things, or believing the right doctrines. Isaiah doesn't mock that desire for faithfulness—but he refuses to let it stop there.

In Isaiah, God asks, “isn't this the fast I choose?” And then the vision widens to explain what God's fasting looks like in concrete terms. God points to loosening the bonds of injustice. Undoing heavy yokes. Letting the oppressed go free. Sharing bread with the hungry. Bringing the homeless into your house. Not hiding from your own flesh. And, notice how none of that kind of fasting can be done alone. For, Isaiah was not describing heroic individual acts. He was describing a community whose shared life bends toward repair. Toward making room. Toward loosening what constricts and restoring what has been broken.

Then, God's promise is named: Then your light shall break forth like the dawn. Then your gloom shall be like noon. Then when you call, the Lord will answer, “Here I am.” What we find is that light is not something we manufacture through moral effort. Instead, light emerges when justice and mercy take shape together.

And, that's exactly what Jesus is getting at when in the gospel when he said he has not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. You see, fulfillment doesn't mean tightening the rules or raising the bar higher. It means revealing the law's deepest purpose is focused on restored relationship—relationship between God and people, and among people themselves.

Jesus went on to say that: “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.” That has often been heard of as pressure. As fear. As if Jesus is demanding even more religious achievement. But, yet again, Isaiah helps us hear it differently. For, greater righteousness is not stricter obedience. It’s deeper repair. It’s not personal purity—it’s communal faithfulness. Righteousness, in Jesus’ vision, is not about being morally impressive. It’s about becoming the kind of people whose shared life reveals God’s reign more clearly.

That’s why what happened earlier in this service matters so much. A few moments ago, Lakelan was baptized. Lakelan was not baptized because he understands righteousness. He was not baptized because he can contribute to justice or articulate. Lakelan was baptized because God had already named him beloved. Period. And in baptism, God did something profoundly communal. Lakelan was not baptized for himself alone. He was baptized into a people—a people who promised to help him grow, to teach him what love looks like, to show him what repair looks like, to walk with him as he learns what it means to be salt and light in a complicated world.

That’s because we know that people become what they are named. When we name children disposable, they grow small. When we name people dangerous, they live under fear. But when God names someone beloved life opens up. And that naming does not remove us from the world. It sends us back into it.

Which brings us to an invitation this morning. In your bulletin or in the LinkTree on your screen, you’ll find an action document. This is an opportunity to respond, as a community, to what is happening right now. It

comes to us from Church World Service of which the ELCA, our denomination, is a member. This suggested action names concerns about lawless practices, about fear being sown in communities, about families detained, refugees targeted, and even arrests in places of worship. This isn't about partisan politics. It's about repeating God's belovedness and acknowledging the community we are becoming. And that matters this week, as our nation debates funding for immigration enforcement with decisions that will shape real families, real neighborhoods, real children.

While Isaiah doesn't give us a policy blueprint, Isaiah does give us a clear diagnostic and a calling. The question are: do these policies and actions loosen yokes or tighten them? Do they restore streets—or deepen fear? Do they reflect a people who refuse to hide from their own flesh?

And the action sheet is one way—one imperfect, faithful way—to let respond to those questions with a shared voice. No one is required or coerced. But all are invited to act together, rather than carry concern alone. And in this act, we already know that we will not do this perfectly. We will get it wrong. We will need repentance and repair ourselves. But we are not doing this alone, and we are not doing it to earn God's presence. For God has already clearly spoken saying, "here I am." God is with us amid our messy world. For, righteousness isn't about keeping rules. It's about the kind of people God forms together for the sake of the world.

And God is still doing that work. In baptism. At this table. In communities that stumble, repent, repair, and keep going. So we don't leave here trying to prove anything.

We leave here named as God's beloved.

We leave here knowing God is with us.

We leave here sent in love. Amen.