Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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November 22, 2026

May these words of my mouth and this meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our Shepherd and our Grace. Amen.

As a young child, I was incredibly preoccupied with the concept of my own sinfulness, and how best to avoid it. This was but one of the unexpected side-effects of bringing me to church every single Sunday of my childhood. Despite what my mother believed, and despite what my behavior in the pews might have suggested, I did actually pay attention and absorbed a great deal of what was said and sung during the hour-long service each week.

I had come to understand that sinning was bad and to be avoided. God did not want me to do it, Jesus died because of it, and if I did it too much, then there was apparently this thing called eternal damnation and suffering that awaited me. Now, that didn't sound all that appealing to me, so I devoted a lot of time and energy trying to ensure that I would never sin ever again. I knew that I was supposed to love my neighbor, I knew I was supposed to treat others the way I wanted to be treated, but I also knew I was prone to making mistakes here and there. In other words, I was prone to sinning.

But one Sunday, while my Dad was giving a sermon about something I had decided was less important than the fate of my eternal soul, I found a solution. "I've got it," I thought to myself "I'll just not do anything for the rest of my life. That way, I won't be at risk of committing a sin, and I'll forever

remain sinless and in God's favor and eventually welcomed into the gates of Heaven." What a simple solution to such an awfully vexing question. Young me could not believe nobody else had ever thought of this.

Imagine, then, my surprise when I returned to worship the following Sunday. I was riding a wave of confidence and assuredness that could only accompany having found the solution to remaining sinless at the age of 8 years old, when I started to read aloud the words of the order of confession: "We confess that we have turned from you and given ourselves into the power of sin. We are truly sorry and humbly repent. In your compassion forgive us our sins, known and unknown, things we have done and things we have left undone."

Excuse me? You mean to tell me, that I could sin by NOT DOING THINGS?! To my young self, this was an unmitigated disaster and I left church that day feeling dejected, defeated, and at a loss for how to continue my life. If I could commit a sin against God and neighbor by doing nothing, then how was I to ever know if I had done right by God???

Thankfully, as I aged, I grew less rigid in my understanding of sinfulness and the machinations of the afterlife, while also developing a more robust and far-reaching understanding of Grace and its necessity. It was in college where I first came across the concept of sin as "missing the mark." Without getting too thick into the weeds of biblical translation, suffice it to say that humans sin when we try and fail to uphold the standard of God's kingdom.

I share this story, because, even though today's Gospel reading doesn't explicitly talk about sin, Jesus does share a message to his disciples spelling out who is to inherit the kingdom. In this message, all the nations

are gathered before the Son of Man and he separates them out as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. One his right hand go all the righteous, and on his left, the accursed. And, we are told the reasoning for this separation. Righteousness is the marker of all those who fed the hungry, satiated the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, and visited the sick and imprisoned. The accursed nations are sent away due to the fact they did not do these things to their neighbors. They left these things, undone.

I find it interesting and especially important to note that Christ's favor is not given because of one's ability to recognize and see God and therefore knowingly serve God. Neither the accursed nations or the righteous nations in this allegory managed to recognized God in their neighbors. Neither were privy to the fact that they were either serving or dejecting God. Both question the words of the Son of Man saying, when was it that we did these things? When was it that we failed to do these things?" In both instances, the point is not "how well do you recognize God?" rather "how well did you serve the marginalized among you?" Because, it turns out, that is the ultimate metric of righteousness. It lies in the actions we extend to those upon the margins of life.

This Advent season, we have been exploring the interplay of artificial intelligence and Advent Incarnation, with today's specific theme being "AI and the marginalized." I must admit, in my preparation of this sermon, and in observing the vastly unregulated explosion of generative AI tech such as Large Language Models over the last 3 or so years, I struggle to see AI as it is currently being implemented as anything other than an accelerant of already disastrous marginalization.

It seems every few months there is an announcement that some major company is laying off another round of tens of thousands of employees, whose work is to be replaced by AI. Thousands of people removed from their livelihood as well as their access to benefits and thrust into one of the most competitive and abysmal job markets of the modern age. What's more, the CEOs of these AI companies try to push this as a good thing. Ai replacing jobs is, in their words, a positive because then folks are no longer tethered to their place of employment. Removing someone's livelihood without replacing it though, is not good. The human cost is ignored, it seems, to me, the mark has been missed.

I am also deeply concerned about an effect that researchers call "cognitive offloading," a phenomenon that occurs when the human brain becomes overly reliant on AI for simple tasks. Every time an individual turns to AI to answer a question, draft an email, write an essay, send a text, create a poem, or generate an image, the human brain learns that it does not need to maintain its areas that were previously responsible for those tasks. In short, the brain forgets how to think, and becomes reliant on the technology. It seems, to me, the mark has been missed.

Hand-in-hand with the replacement of ordinary tasks and cognitive offloading is the way AI chatbots or agents can confidently provide false information. The prevailing consensus seems to be that an AI google summary or ChatGPT answer is of the highest quality, though it has been proven time and again to provide entirely false information, in a tone that suggests total assuredness. In a world where literacy and critical thinking skills are already in dire circumstances, generative ai is hemorrhaging

people’s already impaired ability to critically engage with a given topic. It seems, to me, the mark has been missed.

Accompanying this unregulated surge of AI is the narrative that this is, somehow, an altruistic endeavor. That AI is some necessary project to ensure the endless promulgation of the human species. There is no shortage of figures in the tech world that talk about making decisions today based upon the billions, even trillions, of human lives that might exist in the future and that the relentless pursuit of AI today is saving untold numbers lives of tomorrow. And yet, I cannot help but look upon the cost of these decisions and feel as though they are anything other than the “leaving things undone” that so convicted my conscience as a child.

It seems the endless pursuit of the “next big thing” has led to an entire ethos where progress is no longer a means to an end, but has become the end within itself. In other words; progress for Progress’ sake alone. This self-interested progress of AI asks us to pay no mind to the needs of our neighbors. Pay no mind to the fact that the United Nations has issued a statement that we are entering a reality of freshwater bankruptcy, because data centers that consume upwards of 2 million gallons of fresh drinking water daily, simply must be constructed. Pay no mind to the rust-colored sludge that trickles out of the drinking faucets of predominately black, brown, and impoverished neighborhoods, the data centers are apparently solving the world’s problems. Pay no mind to fact that increased sickness, disease, wildlife, and livestock death are occurring near AI data centers. Pay no mind to the thousands of individuals who have attended city council meetings to oppose new datacenter construction, just for their voices to be ignored and the construction approved. Progress for the sake of it.

No matter whatever altruistic visions of saving future generations might be held, the fact of the matter is that there is an overabundance of real issues affecting real humans here and now in this very age. I'm reminded of another of Jesus' teachings from Matthew's gospel: "do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today." My siblings in Christ, we have so many neighbors in need, and sitting idly by is, unfortunately not an option.

I fear that there is an untold story behind the usage of generative artificial intelligence. It is more than an app on your phone or laptop, it's not just some lines of code. It is datacenters constructed in marginalized communities consuming precious drinking water. It is artists who struggle to pay their rent and bills waking up one day to find their own work, their life's passion has been scraped to train AI and reshared without ever giving their consent or receiving credit for their work. It's the oligarchal leaders of these tech companies waxing about an imagined future where "intelligence is a utility" that is metered and paid for, effectively putting up a financial barrier to intelligence itself. My friends, I fear, the mark is being missed over and over.

It's hard for me to ignore the ways that generative AI is so severely impacting our world, and our neighbors. And, at the risk of sounding like a scared reactionary, I do believe our calling is to examine the human cost of this progress, and act accordingly. As Christ taught teaches us through his words in today's gospel, justice and righteousness is not merely the absence of harm, it is the presence of loving and compassionate actions.

May we love our neighbors even if it means going against the flow of progress. May the Holy Spirit provide us courage, fortitude, and

assuredness as we pay mind to what it is our neighbors need. And, may we be stalwart in our efforts to leave no act of love and compassion undone. Amen.