

Six Great Ends of the Church  
 V. The Promotion of Social Righteousness  
 First Reading - James 3:13-18  
 Second Reading - Isaiah 58:1-12

You've signed up for the football team. You've had your physical; had your parents sign the waiver form and purchase your \$230 Nike Alpha Menace (Saquon Barkley signature) cleats. You've arranged for a ride home from practice. You've even added a line to your college applications, highlighting this extracurricular activity. However, you are almost immediately confronted with a dilemma at the first practice when the coach instructs the team to divide up by positions to work with the various position coaches. Everyone immediately jogs off to their assigned area of the practice field, leaving you alone at the 50-yard line.

So, the coach sees you looking lost and asks, *Son, what position do you play? ... I don't rightly know ... Well, you look a bit small for a lineman. What about receiver? You run down the field and the quarterback throws the ball to you ... Yeah, I don't see myself running, really. That's why I quit the cross country team ... So, maybe linebacker. You get to hit somebody. In fact, it's your only job ... I don't want to hit someone. That sounds medieval. Someone could get hurt ... Well, that rules out running back, too, so go on over to the receivers line. You won't have to run too far ... But will I get hit?*

*... Not if you run fast enough ... But son, do you even know what football is? Ever been to a game? Ever read a book about it. ... No, but the helmets are fit! And colleges dig athletes.*

Sometimes our stated intentions do not match our will or effort.

You go to the opera but hate the music and can't understand the words. You're miffed because you paid \$200, only to hear a soprano sing so high and loud she drowned out a passing fire truck. You bought a boat but get seasick. You lined up for the marathon, but have never run farther than the mailbox, and then, only in winter. You bought a tuxedo, but hate social events; built a bookshelf but haven't read a book since freshman lit.; bought a sports car but can't get out of it; remodeled your kitchen but don't cook. Once as a kid, I embarrassed my parents at a restaurant, asking the server if I could order the pecan pie without the pecans. Sometimes in life, we sort of miss the point.

Could your life be described as a living, breathing contradiction? Does your identity resemble a question mark, your friends often greeting you with a question — *What's wrong with this picture?* Do your convictions bear a resemblance to your behavior? Do your choices reflect your priorities?

Your words match your deeds? Your beliefs sync with your politics? Does your worship harmonize with your week?

The prophet Isaiah is struggling to discern much integrity among God's people. The setting for today's text is during or soon after Israel's return from exile late in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BCE. A prolonged exile came as a result of Babylon's strength and Israel's collapse after generations of widespread indifference to the covenant faith into which God had called them. Earlier, through Isaiah, the Lord observed — *"This people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me"*

Their indifference to, and often rebellion against, the demands of covenant faith, with each person seeking their own prosperity and chasing their own idols, made the nation vulnerable to a strong and organized outside force. Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon seized the opportunity, destroying Jerusalem and its temple and sending many of its citizens into exile in Babylon. Nearly fifty years later, the exiles were granted permission to return to Jerusalem and Judah.

However, as this was taking place, Isaiah witnessed the resumption of the contradictions between the covenant faith the people claimed and the behaviors they exhibited.

*“Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God.”* In the Lord’s eyes, it was a classic example of a people talking the talk, but not walking the walk (ordering pecan pie and scraping off the pecans, or putting on shoulder pads but refusing to block). The contradiction wasn’t only self-destructive, but was also detrimental to the welfare of the community around them — *“Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist ... Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high ...*

The Lord sees their meticulous observation of worship rituals, but the Lord also sees the disparity between the splendor of their praise and the injustice in their treatment of their neighbors. *“Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high ... Is not this the fast that I choose: to*

*loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?"*

The question has always been and will always remain — Does our worship match our ways? Do our stated beliefs translate into love and concern for our neighbors? The prophet states out loud what has always been a tension among God's people — The command to love our neighbor versus our resistance to what that entails. Throughout Scripture there is a consistent, persistent message from which we cannot escape but against which we often chafe, and that is God's concern for the poor, the vulnerable, the outsider, the disenfranchised, the alien, and the oppressed.

In Leviticus 19, where we find the *love your neighbor* command, the law begins to lay out what that entails, stating — *"When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien. In the same chapter, we read, "When an alien resides with you in*

*your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. Similarly, in Proverbs we read — “Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy. Likewise, the Psalmist counsels — “Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”*

The prophet Jeremiah joins the chorus — *“He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? declares the Lord.”* The prophet Isaiah offers a directive, later confirmed in today’s text — *“Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause.”* In the New Testament, James warns us — *“Where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.”* In Acts, Paul states, *“In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”*

And, of course, God's concern for the vulnerable is most clearly revealed through Jesus Christ, who said, "*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.*" In what has been referred to as the only question on our final exam, Jesus said — "*I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me ... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.*"

From Genesis through Revelation, we cannot escape the fundamental truth of God's particular and steadfast concern for the vulnerable, the poor, the oppressed, the dispossessed and disenfranchised, the stranger, the alien, and the persecuted. And since the first time ancient peoples gathered for worship until today, there has been a tension between the proclamation and the hearing of this word. Moses felt it. Jeremiah felt it. Isaiah felt it. Jesus certainly felt it as the nails pierced his wrists. And so has every soul who has risen to a pulpit through the church's history. The vast majority of pastor search forms express a desire for a preacher who "preaches from the Bible," the subtext of which in most cases is — *We don't want some fool bringing*

*politics into the pulpit.* And yet, you cannot preach from the Bible without touching the issues that must be addressed through public policy. The overlap is unavoidable.

And Isaiah is very clear to say that if we do not address the issues that compel civic involvement, we ignore the Bible and fail to consider the plight of our neighbors, thus rendering our worship superficial if not empty. The prophet laments — *“day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God ... Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers ... Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice ... Is it not to share your bread with the hungry...”*

Yet, as disheartened as I am in observing faith-touting public officials and proud pundits ignoring the plight of the vulnerable and enacting policies laced with cruelty, I am encouraged and amazed by the real acts of compassion, mercy, and care consistently and humbly performed by you — The dedicated tutors at Smithfield Elementary, coming back energized by the sparks of recognition and learning they have witnessed in their students; the joy of those toiletry titans who filled ... bottles with body wash to be



shared with the unhoused; the photos of sponsored students in Haiti; the photos of our youth who could be found at Crisis Assistance Ministries, Nourish Up food ministry, and singing at a nursing facility. The elder who made a commitment to provide equal educational opportunity for all as a school board member. I am encouraged and amazed by drivers selflessly taking patients to doctor's appointments; folks engaged in meaningful conversations about public issues, understanding that while they may debate best policies and practices, they still have a shared commitment to address the issues that have resulted in suffering both here and abroad.

I'm encouraged by your witness of shared commitment to not judge the poor for being poor or see diversity as a threat. You may or may not make signs and march, but you are mutually engaged in reducing suffering. All of this is evidence of taking the Word of God and worship of God seriously, and gratefully responding with intention and purpose.

In the 1970s, Presbyterians, in a time of reflection and looking ahead, came up with a document called *A Declaration of Faith*. Offering an honest assessment of the church's place in society, it said, "*Across the centuries the company of believers has continued its pilgrimage with the Lord of history. It is*

*a record of faith and faithlessness, glory and shame. The church has been persecuted by hostile societies, but it has also known times of privilege and power when it joined forces with dominant cultures ... We confess we are heirs of this whole story. We are charged to remember our past, to be warned and encouraged by it, but not to live it again. Now is the time of our testing as God's story with the church moves forward through us. We are called to live now as God's servants in the service of people everywhere.”*

We play a role in the pursuit of the common good, never self-righteous, acknowledging our times of complicity with injustice, using our hearts and our hands, our minds and our feet to improve conditions for all, remembering we serve the God of all Creation, who values all that God has made, and wills the wellness of all, knowing each person carries a spark of God’s own image.

The promotion of social righteousness. Remember, righteousness is not about moral superiority, but is about fulfilling the demands of relationship, serving God by loving all.

If you signed up for this race, don’t just settle for the t-shirt, it’d be a shame not to run it. Amen.