Living in the eighth century before Jesus, Isaiah challenged the people of Jerusalem to practice social justice, which means to treat all people fairly, judging them by the same standards, and offering them the same respect. “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean,” he said; “remove your evil deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do good; seek justice; rescue the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow” (1:16-17). Bible scholar Brevard Childs says that the prophet delivered these words “to a corrupt, complacent and self-righteous population.” Can you think of another people who might be called corrupt, complacent, and self-righteous?

Jerusalem was full of corrupt leaders who spent time with thieves. Greed was rampant, bribery was everywhere, and people loved chasing gifts for themselves. They overlooked the poorest of the poor: the orphans and the widows (1:23). The rich got richer, and the poor got poorer. Again, sound familiar?

Isaiah issues the same challenge to us today: To wash ourselves and make ourselves clean, so that our words and deeds are no longer like filthy cloth. Doing good, in the eyes of God, has everything to do with caring for the most vulnerable people around us: those treated unfairly, those who are oppressed, those without family, and those with support.

So, how do we get rid of our filthy deeds and words? Tim Keller, a Presbyterian leader who died earlier this year, said that the “first facet of biblical justice is *radical generosity.* While secular individualism says that your money belongs to you, and socialism says your money belongs to the State, the Bible says that all your money belongs to God*,* who then entrusts it to you.” That’s right! Our money does not belong to us or to the State. It belongs to God, who allows us to use it.

When we practice generosity, we begin to cleanse the filthy cloth of greed and selfishness. Since our money belongs to God instead of us, we are to use it in line with God’s purposes. This means that we practice God’s justice by feeding the hungry and housing the homeless, so that all may have the food and shelter they need. Your money is in your control “and no one must confiscate it from you,” said Keller. “Yet you have moral obligations to both God and your neighbor to use your money unselfishly and with great generosity to love others with it, according to both your ability and to their needs.” Using different words, Isaiah asks us to remember this call to radical generosity every day.

We can also be cleansed by seeing that God “works for those who wait for [God]” (64:4). God helps us when we turn to God in prayer, but often in ways we do not expect. The whole point of prayer is not to change God, but instead to change ourselves.

One of the most well-known modern prayers is the Serenity Prayer, said first by Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr during World War II. It is now central to the recovery from addiction being achieved in thousands of 12-step groups: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.”

Notice that God is not being asked in this prayer to heal anyone miraculously. Instead, the prayer asks for God to give people the qualities they need to lead sober and healthy lives. God works for those who pray to God, turning them into people who can live with serenity, courage, and wisdom. As Isaiah promises, God meets “those who gladly do right” and who remember God’s ways (64:5).

We can be thankful that God is not finished with us. We are not pieces of garbage that God is anxious to toss into the dump. Instead, we are “the clay,” according to Isaiah, and God is the potter (v. 8). We are the work of God’s hands, and God is continually molding us into the people that God wants us to be. There are times, however, when the shaping of the potter is not enough. We also need forgiveness. To be fully cleansed of our filthy deeds and words, we need God to “tear open the heavens and come down” (v. 1). We need for God to put away God’s anger and choose not to “remember iniquity forever” (v. 9).

The saying goes, "one person’s trash is another person’s treasure." Another person could easily find a purpose for a thing you consider has no value or is useless. But such things are often just thrown out, maybe because it is too much work to find a person to sell it to or to give it to, or maybe the person throwing it out really thinks that no one could possibly use it. Fortunately, God is a “fixer” of persons. In God’s eyes we are never garbage, no matter how much of a mess we’ve made of things. We can always be cleansed, always be redeemed.

God did this in the coming of Jesus the Redeemer. In the ancient world, the role of a redeemer was played by someone who paid a debt for a debtor or freed a captive through the payment of a ransom. In the Bible, the role of Redeemer is played best by Jesus, the one who gives us “redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace” (Ephesians 1:7). Jesus is the Redeemer who buys us back from slavery, pays our debts and cleanses us from sin.

We celebrate this redemption every time we gather at the communion table. Here, we recognize our worth when we hear Jesus words: “This is my body broken for you.” Here we claim our status as children of God when we hear, “This is my blood shed for the forgiveness of sins.” At the communion table, our hurt no longer has the final word. We discover a union, a connection, a fellowship, a friendship with an everlasting God, with everlasting creative redemptive stories of bringing good out of bad, growing in us an everlasting hope that with the help of God and friends, that will be our story too.

At the communion table, we take and eat and drink together. We are encouraged to look around, to look at the eyes and the bodies of a community of imperfect, wounded, sinning, beautiful, messy fools who have messed up like us, who have been hurt like we have, and who are loved by a beautiful God and are on the same journey of recovery and discovery as we are.

We are re-membered to a community called the Body of Christ, where we are encouraged to love and accept one another. To welcome one another, our whole selves, just as we are, as Christ welcomed us, so that we can find our welcome, and our next chapters, and our new and beautiful stories and purposes together.

“Do not fear,” says God through the prophet Isaiah. “I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine” (43:1). With the help of God, we are never destined for the trash heap, no matter how messy our lives become. We recycle ourselves by seeking justice, practicing generosity, being changed by prayer, and receiving the gift of forgiveness. In the eyes of God, we are never garbage. We are people renewed, redeemed, recycled, reclaimed. Let us pray: Loving God, we come to You in humility of heart and ask that You make and mold us into vessels that are pleasing to You, for Your praise and glory. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

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**Garbology and God**

Sunday, December 3, 2023 [Isaiah 64:1-9](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah+64%3a1-9&language=en&version=NRSVUE)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Theology is the study of God. Geology is the study of the earth. Zoology is the study of animals. And the study of trash? Garbology! Professors such as Stephanie Hughes of Santa Clara University take students on tours of paper recycling plants, sewage treatment plants, and household hazardous waste facilities. You need a very strong stomach to handle her garbology class.

Hughes believes humans are different from other species because we produce “things that cannot be used again in nature.” In every other species, waste from one animal will naturally become nutrients for another. But we humans end up with stuff we cannot use, and we call it “garbage.” Humans are the only species that needs a trash can.

What about the garbage we generate in our relationships with family members, friends, neighbors, and even with God? There is no robot that can clean up *that* mess. The prophet Isaiah offers a prayer of confession in which he says, “We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away” (64:6). Isaiah admits that our words and actions are unclean in the eyes of God. We decompose like leaves in a compost pile, and our sins take us away to a garbage dump. Is Isaiah suggesting that we combine a study of trash with a study of God? Yes! In Isaiah’s “Garbology and God” class, we discover that God provided a way for us to deal with our garbage.

We begin by admitting that we all produce unclean words and filthy deeds. Maybe we make a critical or mocking comment on Facebook, trying to get a reaction. Maybe we gossip about a neighbor or stab a colleague in the back. Maybe we cheat on a test at school, tell a lie to a boss, or betray a spouse or a friend. These words and actions are the garbage that cannot be easily recycled or turned into something that is helpful or useful to someone else. They are simply trash, and they stink.

God spoke through the prophet Isaiah to reveal God’s will to the people of Israel, and to call God’s people to return to the right path. Although the prophet sometimes spoke about the future, he was not primarily a fortune teller. Instead, Isaiah is best understood as a truth teller, bringing words of challenge and comfort to God’s people.