

February 8, 2026

Fifth Sunday After the Epiphany

“Who Reacts to Whom”

Isaiah 58:3-9a, Matthew 5:13-20

It's Superbowl Sunday so I thought I'd use a football metaphor. If the defense is being forced to react to what a very skilled offense is doing, they are at a disadvantage. The quarterback is really the one in charge of things. But if the quarterback is scrambling around being forced to react to a penetrating defense, then his offense is at a disadvantage. Of course, in football anything can happen on any given Sunday, but if you can pick out who is reacting to whom, you can more or less know who is in charge on the field.

When it comes to living under our Creator God we, like ancient Israel, can have difficulty seeing and living in the reality of who is reacting to whom.

In our Old Testament reading Isaiah says Israel is complaining, asking God, *“Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?”* Isaiah says God's answer is this, *“Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers.”*

It seems the Jews felt that if they fasted, humbled themselves and followed the religious rituals, then God should react favorably to them, regardless of their attitude and behavior. They were very wrong. Isaiah goes on to explain how God desires they show love and mercy and generosity to those in need. Very much implied there is that this is done in reaction to the love, mercy and generosity God shows to His people Israel. They are to react to God, not God to them.

You and I can slide into the same misconception. I don't think we do it consciously, at least not most of us. But we go to church and say our prayers, try to lead pretty decent and upright lives, we repent of our sins, receive forgiveness in the means of grace, and life goes along relatively well...and we just start to think that's how it works; we live a good and pious life and God reacts in making that life nice and afterward, we will be with Him in heaven. Even when life isn't so nice we keep the faith, and because we keep the faith, God reacts to our faith with salvation.

Jesus blows that whole idea to smithereens. *“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”* The scribes and the Pharisees were considered the best of the best, the most moral of the moral, the pious of the pious. This was a shocking statement that would make entrance to the kingdom of heaven seem impossible. Why? Because one obviously cannot be good enough to make God react favorably to you!

These words of Jesus have the same effect on us. Our piety and pretty decent and upright life? Our keeping the faith? Does it measure up to the impossibly high bar Jesus sets? We're fooling ourselves if we think it does. The Law and the prophets Jesus speaks of—no one in all of Israel was able to keep their demands no matter how much God blessed or punished, no matter what incredible signs and wonders He gave. All failed. As do we. The last thing any of us would ever, ever want is for God to react to our behavior.

Thanks be to God that He does not react to our behavior, at least not in the way we deserve. If God reacts to anything it is to Himself; to His steadfast love and mercy. He reacts in love by promising and then sending the Savior, Jesus Christ.

In this very challenging piece of Scripture Jesus says, *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”* And He does, for our sake. He keeps the law perfectly. He fulfills all prophecy. He brings about the covenant promise of God to reconcile us, not by God's just and right reaction to our sin, our lack of righteousness, but by His action

of taking our guilt upon Himself, God's wrath being poured out fully on Christ His Son so that we, undeservedly, can now be counted righteous—by Christ's righteousness that does indeed exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees.

Standing baptized into His righteousness and gifted with faith in His salvation work, we react to Jesus. We react in living lives or repentance, of course, for we know we fall far short of keeping God's good and holy law. But Jesus lives, so we ultimately react in joy, praise and love for our Savior! The reaction naturally results works of love toward our neighbors, especially those in need around us.

Why? Well, it's kind of right there in Isaiah's prophecy as it shifts from God decrying Israel's lousy attitude to exhorting them to faithfulness: *"Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?"* Though pointing to how Israel should act, Yahweh is actually describing what He does for us in Christ! He looses our bonds to sin and frees us from the oppression of Satan! Likewise as He exhorts the feeding of the hungry and clothing of the naked and such, this is exactly what our loving God does for us in providing for our material needs.

We react to God's goodness, His action of love toward us that we did absolutely nothing to deserve. God acts with love, mercy, generosity, forgiveness and every other good thing. We react in like manner, toward God and toward the humanity around us that He loves so much.

Yet we manage to mess this up. I already noted how we can think we possess some virtue to which God should react in kindness as if we deserve it. But I think we also can do the flipside of that, reacting not to God's goodness, but instead to our own sinfulness, allowing our guilt to be the main feature when we come before God...or maybe avoid doing so. Yes, you should see your guilt and repent of your sin, but when you see Christ's cross you have to recognize the love of God happening there! Christ paid for your sin there. Your sin is ugly, but it's dead! Rejoice in the Gospel and react in joy and praise because God has acted to make you holy, redeeming you unto life everlasting!

I really messed this up as a young man. On those rare occasions I was in church on Sunday I'd sit in the pew trying to be repentant enough, sorrowful enough, guilty enough for my sins so that when I got to the rail for communion God would react well to me with the forgiveness of sins. I'd walk away still feeling guilty because I knew I still wasn't worthy; I couldn't make God react. What a nitwit! All of Christ's action to forgive my sin was there by the action of sheer divine grace, and I was missing it, because I wasn't reacting to Him. I was looking for Him to react to me.

So many denominations get this wrong with the blessed Sacraments. They think baptism is our act of faith, our committing ourselves to God to solicit a favorable reaction. No! God acts in these to deliver the gifts out of His love for us. Receiving the gift, we respond in thanks and praise and joy and love.

Recognize who is reacting to whom. Our self-centered nature likes to think everything is a reaction to us: our piety, our faith, our good works, or our doubts, our temptations, our sins. But God is God—you can't force any reaction from Him! He simply acts, has acted, out of His steadfast love to redeem the people He so dearly loves despite our many failings.

We need to work at getting our heart and minds oriented on His action for us, and then simply react to that love in love for God and for others. So keep this in mind when you start thinking that what you do or say or think is going to cause some reaction from God. Stop thinking so much on you and think about what He has done and still does to and for you in Christ. Let that warm your heart, calm your fears, increase your joy and assure your eternity. Then...react in love.

Amen.