



Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
Rev. Jonathan Stepp
February 16, 2020

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

An airline pilot died and went to heaven. He came to the pearly gates, told St. Peter his name, and St. Peter looked him up in the book of life. “Ah, I see you here,” he said, “you were an airline pilot and you are allowed to enter heaven – here’s your silk robe and your golden crown, enter into joy.” The pilot took his vestments and went through the gate.

The next guy in line behind the pilot was a priest. When he stepped up to St. Peter’s desk and told him his name St. Peter said, “Ah, I see you here in the book, you were a priest and you are allowed to enter heaven – here’s your cotton robe and your wooden crown, enter into joy.” And the priest said, “wait a second, why did the pilot get a silk robe and golden crown and I only get a cotton robe and a wooden crown?”

And St. Peter replied, “well, here in heaven we go by results: when you preached people slept and when he flew people prayed!”

Don Holland had good timing in sending me that joke this week because Jesus talks about entering into the life of the world to come in our gospel text today – in fact, he threatens us with hell twice. Living today in a way that prepares us for the life of the world to come is one of the themes of this section of Matthew, which we call the Sermon on the Mount. That theme is probably best expressed by the words we heard Jesus say last week: “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Since such weighty matters are at stake, let’s take a moment to be sure we understand what Jesus is teaching us in today’s reading and then we’ll think about how we respond to that. First of all, Jesus tells us that we need to learn to resolve conflict in healthy ways. That makes sense – heaven won’t be very heavenly if we have to live forever with people that we can’t get along with. He also tells us not to use other people for our own selfish desires, specifically with regard to lust. That also makes sense – heaven won’t be very heavenly if

we are constantly trying to use other people in ways that satisfy us and hurt them. Jesus also tells us to let our “yes” really be a “yes” and our “no” really be a “no” – and that also makes sense, because what kind of heaven will it be if we all just keep lying to each other for eternity and have to keep coming up with more and more elaborate ways to swear that we’re telling the truth just to get people to believe what we say?

And, of course, Jesus also talks about divorce. Here it is helpful to have some context. The Rabbis of Jesus’ time extensively debated the question of divorce because the Law of Moses is not entirely clear about it. Some Rabbis believed that a man could divorce his wife for any reason and some thought he could only divorce her for adultery. As far as I know, none of the Rabbis believed a woman could divorce her husband. The stance that Jesus takes is actually protective of women in a society where women had very few rights. Jesus says that women can’t just be discarded when their husbands are tired of them – and this explains why Matthew places the teaching about divorce immediately after the teaching about lust. The common theme between the two is that in a society where men have all the power they had better not use their power to hurt others.

And that makes sense, doesn’t it? How can heaven be heaven if those who have power use their power to harm others? In all of these teachings, including what he says about divorce, Jesus is trying to help us understand that we have been baptized into a new kingdom – we have been baptized into a new way of living that looks like the future God has planned for humanity. We have been baptized into a kingdom built on principles such as healthy conflict resolution, care and concern for those less powerful than ourselves, and a strong commitment to honesty.

So, now that we’re a little clearer on what Jesus is teaching us, how are we to respond to it? Jesus has set a high standard, hasn’t he? He is calling us to a way of living and a way of treating other people that is holy, beautiful, and wonderful, but it is also a way of living that is very difficult to achieve. We can try, and we should try, but we know that we won’t always live up to these ideals.

This is where I think it is helpful to step back and think about the big picture of Jesus’ mission and ministry. If we only see Jesus as a teacher who came to lay down a new law, a stricter law, that replaces the law of Moses, then we may become locked into one of two false choices: either we despair of ever being able to live up to God’s standards or we simply shake our heads and walk away, deciding that Jesus’ demands are too much for us. I don’t believe that Jesus just came to teach – I believe that Jesus also came to reveal. He came to reveal something about humanity that we could not have known otherwise: he came to reveal that, through his

life, we are all included in God's life as God's children. Jesus, the Son of God, reveals to us that we are sons and daughters of God because he is sharing his relationship with God with us.

If we view Jesus' teaching in the context of our adoption as God's children then it changes our perspective on it. Jesus' high calling to us in the Sermon on the Mount is not Jesus saying "if you follow these rules then God will accept and love you." It is Jesus saying "God accepts and loves you and this is what it looks like to live like someone who is accepted and loved by God."

This is why we call the message of Jesus the gospel. The word "gospel" is an older English word that means "good news" and the good news of Jesus is that we belong to God forever, that we are accepted and loved the way a good Father or Mother loves their children, and God is inviting us into a life of healthy, heavenly relationship. Our calling is to say "yes" to that good news and enter into the joy of that life with God and with each other.

Amen.