



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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The Sixth Sunday after Trinity: More Righteous than the Pharisees St. Matthew 5:20-26 & Romans 6:3-11 Fr. William Klock

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What does it mean to follow Jesus? To believe the gospel? To repent and to believe? What does it mean for us? Who does it make us? What's our mission? What do we do and where are we headed? What does Jesus expect of us? Last Sunday we read Jesus' calling of Peter, James, and John. "Follow me and from now on you'll be catching people," he told them. But how? From what? And why? Do you ever feel like that? I know I do. Jesus and the Spirit have incorporated us into this community of people called the Church, a people chosen and called to be salt and light, to proclaim the death and resurrection of Jesus, to announce to the world that he is Lord. He is in the process of setting this broken, sad, and messed up world to rights and one day he will wipe away every last bit of sin and even death itself in a great act of redeeming judgement. He will make all things new in the same way he was made new in his resurrection and in some way for which our new birth in the power of God's own Spirit is a foretaste. We're called to prepare the world for that great day. But how? What do we say? What do we do? And when do we say it and when do we do it? How do we do it? Some days it's overwhelming. Some days you just want to retreat into your private devotional life or into the church and just be a good person, read your Bible and say your prayers and wait for Jesus to come back and sort it all out. And that's what a lot of people do. But think of Peter, James, and John and think of the rest of the disciples, not just the twelve, but the

seventy and all those others who were there on Pentecost and the thousands—tens of thousands—more who lived through those days of trial and tribulation in Jerusalem and Antioch and Ephesus and Rome—many of whom were martyred for their witness to Jesus his kingdom. What does it mean, what does it look like to be this new Israel, this new people of God centred in Jesus the Messiah?

Peter, James, John and the rest of them wanted to know, so it makes perfect sense that as St. Matthew tells us Jesus' story, the very next episode after Jesus calls his disciples is Jesus taking them up a mountain to teach them. They've believed his message that the kingdom is soon to come. They've believed that it will come with this great act of the Lord's judgement on his faithless people even if they don't quite understand what that's going to look like. But what do they do in the meantime? And so Jesus sits them down and teaches them all those things that have almost sort of become Christian cliches. Jesus begins with those announcements of blessing on the humble and the mourners and the seekers after righteousness, because they will be the ones who will inherit this new thing that the Lord, through Jesus, is inaugurating, they will be the ones to inherit that new state of affairs that would be on the other side of the judgement coming at the end of their generation. And Jesus wraps up this long teaching with a series of warnings. Many within Israel are following an easy and broad road to destruction. They are like a fruitless tree that the Lord will cut down and cast into the fire. Israel—or many of its people at any rate—have built their house on sand and when the stormwaters rage, it will all come crashing down around them. And in the aftermath of that judgement on faithless Israel, Jesus will be vindicated as Messiah before the eyes of the watching world—and so will his people, this new Israel transformed and empowered by the very Spirit of God. And finally, through this people

and their Messiah, the gentiles, the nations will see the God of Israel and come to give him glory—finally!

But in the meantime, in the middle of all that, as they proclaim the kingdom, what does life following Jesus look like? This is where our Gospel lesson today picks up. Look at Matthew 5:20. Jesus said to his disciples:

Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

I wonder how this fell on the ears of Peter and the others. Was it exciting or discouraging or overwhelming? Maybe all those things. Because the Pharisees were the most righteous people around. If you want to understand the Pharisees, understand that they purposed to live their lives—from the little things to the big things—everything, as if they were living in the temple itself, that place where heaven and earth intersected, that place where God dwelt in their midst—or at least where his presence had dwelt at one time in the past. That was the problem. Since the exile, the Lord's presence had been gone from the temple. But if everyone in Israel would do the same as the Pharisees, they thought, then the Lord would bless his people. He would hear their cries, he would return to the temple, he would judge their enemies, and he would set everything to rights. And now what Jesus is saying is that the Pharisees were on the right track. If Israel wants the Lord's blessing and the Lord's deliverance, and all of that, then righteousness—living in the presence of God—that's the key. That's what Israel had always been called to do, ever since the Lord had called Abraham and especially since he'd delivered them from Egypt and given them his law. They were to be a people who truly lived that way, a people would truly honour God. And a people like that would bring the nations to give him glory. But instead, Israel had been unfaithful and the nations mocked her and mocked her

God. Even the Pharisees weren't righteous enough. And so Jesus goes on in verse 21:

You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the fire of Gehenna.

The righteousness of the Pharisees, Jesus has warned, is not enough. When judgement fell on Israel, it would fall on the Pharisees along with all the rest of the faithless. And that's because the letter of the law simply isn't enough. Do you remember the summary of the law? Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and your neighbour as yourself. That's the heart of the law. If you love your neighbour, you certainly won't murder him, but neither will you nurse hatred for him in your heart. Jesus sets a higher standard. The Pharisees were right in thinking that Israel needed to live mindful of being in the Lord's presence. But they were hypocritical—thinking they could fulfil the law by keeping the externals while ignoring the internals, by honouring the lord in their actions, even if they didn't in their hearts. Jesus raises the bar. But he's really just reminding them of where the bar always was for the people of God. The Pharisees will be swept up in the judgement to come, in the war with Rome, along with all the rest of the unfaithful in Israel. That's what Jesus is getting at when he talks about the "fire of Gehenna"—or as the ESV puts it the "hell of fire". I wish our modern translations would just use the word Jesus' uses—Gehenna—instead of translating it as hell, because the translation masks over the way that Jesus is pointing the disciples back to the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah used the image of the Valley of Hinnom, a place where human sacrifice to the

god Molech had once taken place. Jeremiah warned that when the Babylonians defeated Jerusalem there would be so many dead that the bodies would be heaped up in that valley. Jesus' point is that it's going to happen all over again, this time with defeat at the hands of Rome. Josephus describes the city so filled with the dead that the bodies were dumped into that same valley by the thousands. If you draw line from Jeremiah to Josephus is runs straight through Jesus' warning here. The Sadducees, the Zealots, and even the Pharisees will find themselves under the Lord's judgement on that awful day—and Jesus' point to his disciples is that so will they, so will everyone, who continues to live out the law by the low standard that had become the norm in Israel. So will everyone who fails to truly live as the people with the Lord in their midst. Why? Because the Lord had called and chosen this people to be his witnesses to the world, to be salt, to be light, to show the world what it looked like to be the people who lived in the presence of God—so that the nations would see and be drawn to his goodness and give him glory. Instead, again, the nations mocked the God of Israel because of the unfaithfulness of his people. And God will deal with them soon. His faithfulness and his glory will be manifest one way or the other: if not in blessing, then in his discipline.

So Jesus gives his disciples the alternative. If you love your brother, go and reconcile with him.

So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have

paid the last penny. (Matthew 5:23-26)

What's the point here? Brothers and Sisters, always remember the story and remember why the Lord called and chose a people to represent him in the world. He called Abraham and his family in order to make himself know through them to a world that had forgotten him. Through his people, the Lord was working to reconcile this lost and sinful world to himself. And so Israel was called to live out in her daily life the reconciling love of God for the sake of the world. For the most part Israel failed. And so the Lord came himself in Jesus to show his people what that reconciling love looks like in real life—even to the point of giving his own life for their sake—and Jesus called a new people from within Israel to live that reconciling love themselves. And even though this new people of God, just like Jesus, would be mocked and hated and even martyred, in the end the Lord would vindicate them just as he vindicated his Son. And in that, the world would finally stand up and take note of the living God and return to him. This is what it looks like to be God's people. This is what it meant for Peter and John and James to follow Jesus and to fish for men and women and to prepare Israel for that coming day of judgment.

But how could they do it? I expect the disciples were sitting there listening to Jesus and thinking that this is all well and good, but if the Pharisees can't meet the bar—and if Israel had been failing to meet it all along—how are we going to meet it? For that we turn to St. Paul and to our Epistle from Romans 6.

Somehow Israel—and then the rest of the human race—needed a change of heart, a transformation from within. Hearts set on sin and on self had to be turned to back to the Lord and filled with love. This is what Paul gets at in our Epistle. Because of Jesus, we are

not the same people we once were. Look at Romans 6:3-4.

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

Baptism changes everything. Again, just as we need to imagine ourselves as First Century Galileans when we hear Jesus preaching we need to remember that Paul, too, was writing to mostly Jewish Christians only a few decades later. When we do that what we realise is that in Romans Paul is retelling Israel's story and in Romans 6, as he writes about Baptism and what it means and does, he's simultaneously telling the story of Israel's exodus from Egypt.

Israel cried out to the Lord from the misery of her slavery and oppression. The Lord heard and he sent Moses. Moses led the people out of their bondage and into the Promised Land and that journey began at the Red Sea. They entered the sea as slaves and the came out the other side a free people, their captors crushed and drowned under the waves. And yet they had to pass through the wilderness. It took longer than the people expected. They grumbled a lot and even got angry with the Lord and with Moses and talked about going back to Egypt. But the Lord led his people—a cloud by day and fire by night—and eventually they entered the Promised Land.

Again, the Israelites entered the Sea slaves and they came out the other side a free people. And Paul uses this to illustrate what happens in baptism. We go into the water dead and we come out alive. We go into the water slaves to sin and death and we come

out free people. And that's what makes Jesus' impossible calling possible. It's what makes possible a righteousness greater even than the righteousness of the Pharisees. Paul says that in our baptism we are united with Jesus in his death and resurrection. God called Israel to be salt and light, he gave her his law, but it wasn't written on her heart. Israel had the same wicked, self-centred heart that all humanity shares. But Jesus came as the true Israelite. His life and ministry embodied Israel's calling. He even followed Israel's pattern symbolically in his own baptism and his own forty days in the wilderness. And then he took on himself the crucifixion that Israel deserved. His enemies killed him, but instead of returning judgement and violence on them, instead of cursing them, he responded by praying to his Father: "Forgive them, for they know not what they do." Sin and death, anger and hate did their worst to Jesus at the cross and Jesus overcame them with love and with sacrifice. Impossible? For human beings who have only their own sinful wills to rely on, yes. But not for Jesus *and* not for those who have been baptised into the death and resurrection of Jesus. We are not who we once were. Earlier in Romans Paul describes what we used to be as being "in Adam". By birth we are part of the old humanity, fallen and enslaved to sin. By virtue of our baptism we are born again. We are now "in Christ"—in Jesus the Messiah.

This is what Paul means when he writes in verses 6 and 7:

We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin.

Sometimes sin comes knocking at the door and it seems impossible to say no. Sometimes that certain person who irritates us comes around and we

know we should forgive and love them but it seems impossible. It feels like we're still slaves to sin. All sin has to do is show up and we cave in to it. But Paul says, No! That old self is dead. It was crucified with Jesus. We are no longer slaves. We have been set free from bondage to sin. Like Israel wanting to go back to Egypt, it's easy to be tempted to go back to that bondage. The wilderness isn't an easy place to be, but the Lord is with us anyway. And Paul stresses that we need to remember that sin no longer has any hold on us. We're new and free people in the Messiah.

Paul goes on:

Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Romans 6:8-11)

Jesus burst alive from the tomb that first Easter. Other people, like Lazarus, had come back from the dead too, but Jesus' resurrection is different. Lazarus had to die again, but Jesus has gone through death and come out the other side into a kind of life that death can never touch and, Paul says, if we are in Jesus the Messiah then we have a share in this new life.

We're not there yet. We too still have to face death, but we live in hope knowing that like Jesus we will come out the other side of death alive in a way we never have been before—alive in the way that God truly intended us to be when he created us. But what about today? Sin and death can't touch our future, but what about our present? Jesus' calling still seems impossible so much of the time. And this is why Paul makes this point. *Our baptism pulls our future hope into the*

present. It takes the life of Jesus and his victory over sin and death and applies it to us today. There's a change whether we feel it or not. The Israelites didn't necessarily feel any different on one side of the Red Sea than they had on the other, but everything was still different for them. They had been slaves; now they were free. And just so for us. We are no longer in Adam; we are in Jesus. And Jesus has poured the God's Spirit into us and the Spirit is at work to renew our minds and regenerate our hearts as we live in this in-between time.

In verse 11 Paul says that we must *consider* ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Jesus the Messiah. That word "consider" is the same one we saw in the Epistle from Romans 8 two weeks ago. It's an accounting term that Paul uses. And here's his point. When you send your books to your accountant he adds everything up and gives you the bottom line. His reckoning doesn't change your financial situation. Nothing about your situation has actually changed by the fact that your accountant has added up your profit and loss columns. But that bottom line he reckons for you shows you *in fact* where you stand. It might mean you've got money you need to invest or creditors you need to pay or it might mean you need to economise and tighten your belt. Adding up your profits and losses doesn't itself have an impact on the health of your business, but it does make you aware of it and it tells you what you need to do.

And so Paul looks at the cross and he looks at the empty tomb and he looks at the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost and everything else and he says: I've done the math. You are in the Messiah. You are dead to sin and alive to God. *Now start living that way!*

Is it a challenge? Of course. Jesus was baptised, the heavens opened up, the Spirit descended on him and the Father spoke, "This is my Son. With him I am pleased". And then Jesus

went straight into the wilderness to battle the devil. The Lord led Israel out of Egypt through the miraculous parting of the sea, he was present with her, giving the law and leading as cloud and as fire and yet he led her straight into the wilderness. And we too. We're baptised and the Lord sends us straight from the Font into the world. If there's anything Jesus (and John and Paul and Peter) are clear about in the scriptures, it's that his people will face opposition and trials and tribulation at the hands of a wicked and doubting world. And there's a reason why, in our baptism, we're called on to renounce the world, the flesh, and the devil. All three will come after us. They'll tell us that nothing has changed. They'll tell us that following after Jesus is impossible. They'll tempt us to give up or at least to compromise. When others sin against us, when they hurt us, when they wrong us the temptation comes saying: "It's okay, be angry or be bitter. Get that person out of your life—you don't need them. Hey, look how well you're doing! You didn't kill them!" Brothers and Sisters, that's sin calling. Jesus calls us to seek to reconcile. Jesus calls us to embrace the wrongs that others do to us and to return those wrong with grace. Jesus calls us to break the cycle of anger and hate and violence. And when it seems impossible, remember your baptism. We are a new creation. You have died and risen again with Jesus and he has poured his Spirit into you—into us. Brothers and Sisters, in that the Lord had made us witnesses of the transformation from the old creation, full of death and decay and sin and sadness, into the new world in which he is reconciling everything and everyone to himself, in which his law of love reigns, and in which he will wipe away every tear. Live as the men and women that God has made you through Jesus and the Spirit and not only will you see the kingdom of God, but all the people around you will have a glimpse of it too. Make them constructively curious by your life and you'll have the opportunity to

explain the good news of Jesus, crucified and risen, that they too might know God's new creation.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, you have poured your love into us poor sinners by giving your own Son as a sacrifice. Teach us to pour that love back out to the world. When it seems impossible to break the cycle of sin and anger and hate, remind us of our baptism and that, through Jesus, you have brought us into your new creation. Remind us that we have died with him and risen with him and that sin and death no longer hold us captive. Teach us to live for righteousness that the world might see Jesus and his kingdom through us. Amen.