

SERMON ON THE PLANE

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Luke 6:17-26

If you have flown much at all with a commercial airline, then you should have no problem recalling what takes place at the beginning of every commercial airline flight.

Before taking to the air, while the plane is still on the ground, the flight crew delivers their speech on safety procedures: what to do in case of sudden depressurization of the cabin, or a fire, or, worst of all, a crash. They point out the emergency exits and describe the emergency slide; they explain how to use the seat belts, and even what to do in case of an “unplanned landing.”

If the plane is a small one then usually just one person will speak. If the plane is larger, then one person will talk over the PA while others down the aisle pantomime the identical gestures. It's a weird feeling to lean out into the aisle and look forward at a line of flight attendants simultaneously performing their safety dance.

I like to call this safety talk the Sermon on the Plane. This speech we receive every time we fly is not unlike the words of Jesus which I read a moment ago. Both place before us the fundamental rules of our identity, whether that identity is as a passenger on a plane or as a follower of Christ. Moreover, these words are ones that we, for one reason or another, would prefer to ignore. But more on that in a moment.

It doesn't matter how dull this the airplane safety speech may be, or how many times in one day I may have heard it, or even how much of it I've got memorized, I think that if my plane got so far as the runway and I hadn't received my safety talk I would be distressed. I might even flag down one of the flight attendants and point out the omission in their take-off procedure.

Imagine this. Imagine that I do flag down a flight attendant and express my concern over the missing safety talk. I'm sure the other passengers would look at me like I'm the kid who reminds the teacher that he forgot to assign homework. So imagine that the attendant turns to me and says, "I'm sorry, but we don't do that anymore."

"You don't give the safety speech anymore?" I ask. "No oxygen masks, no inflating life vests, no 'put your phone into airplane mode'? Why not? It's part of the experience/ritual of flying on a commercial airplane."

"It's simple," she says. "No one ever paid us any attention. You, Mr. Edington, always read the newspaper during our safety procedure. No one seemed to care."

"I care. It's important that you tell us those things. The passengers need to know. It's for our safety."

"Mr. Edington," she says with an edge of impatience in her voice, "our public relations department conducted a survey of 1000 passengers, and they discovered that the average passenger does not like the safety speech. They said it was dull and it made them feel uncomfortable. They said they would rather not think about crashing while flying on an airplane."

"Who would?" I'd say. "No one wants to consider crashing. But if that should happen, then we would be better off if we were prepared."

"Mr. Edington, What is the safest means of travel in this country?"

"I'm pretty sure it's flying," I'd be forced to answer.

"Correct. And given the number of airplane flights multiplied by the miles they fly multiplied by the number of people riding on those planes and what do you have? You have a very high number. Statistically, it is very unlikely that any one particular person will die from flying. It is so unlikely as to be inconsequential."

"Statistically, I suppose that is true, but..."

"Of course it's true," she continues. "And since it is true, we figured why bother with that safety talk. Statistically, no one will ever need it. And, honestly, it is just embarrassing. Just try talking to people who are going out of their way not to listen to you, to ignore you. I'm sure that as a preacher you know how that feels."

"But it's important," I throw in desperately. "It's part of flying. It's always done."

"Mr. Edington, you've flown before; you know the speech. The exits are well marked. You certainly don't need to hear that lecture any more."

"But what about people who haven't heard the speech, who have never flown before? Certainly there must be a first time passenger on this plane. How will they know what to do?

"There are always people on a plane who have never flown before. But if something were to go wrong, then you and the other experienced passengers could help them. And now Mr. Edington, I really need to get to work."

Okay. I know this is a bit far-fetched, but it is still a disturbing and distressing thought. It is disturbing to think that something so crucial and basic as an airline safety speech could be lost. Within no time at all there would be a generation of passengers with no idea of what to do in an emergency. When something finally did go wrong, lives would be lost which might have been saved if people had listened.

Our reading for today is from the sixth chapter of the Gospel According to Luke. This passage is the beginning of a section that is commonly referred to as the Sermon on the Plain: P-L-A-I-N. I apologize for the horrible pun. We call this passage the Sermon on the Plain because of how it begins: *[Jesus] came down with them and stood on a level place*—a plain—and delivers what we know as the Sermon on the Plain.

Jesus had been up on a mountain praying and speaking with God. While on the mountain, he calls twelve of his followers and names them apostles. The mountain is a place that is set apart. But then Jesus comes down the mountain to be with a great crowd of people from different lands. And it is from this level place that he addresses the crowd.

This “sermon” runs most of the sixth chapter of Luke. It is similar in many ways to the Sermon on the Mount which we find in Matthew’s gospel. The Sermon on the Mount is longer and more detailed, but the ideas and structure are basically the same. Both the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain are regarded by scholars to be collections of the sayings by Jesus, and not a single Sunday morning type sermon.

The Sermon on the Plain begins with the Beatitudes. Here, Jesus describes four types of people who are blessed:

1. “Blessed are you who are **poor**, for yours is the kingdom of God.
2. “Blessed are you who are **hungry** now, for you will be filled.
3. “Blessed are you who **weep** now, for you will laugh.
4. “Blessed are you when people **hate** you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man... for surely your reward is great in heaven.

Jesus then describes four types of people who are cursed, and they correspond up with the four previous 'blesseds'.

1. Woe to you who are **rich**, for you have received your consolation.
2. Woe to you who are **full** now, for you will be hungry.

3. Woe to you who are **laughing** now, for you will mourn and weep.

4. Woe to you when all **speak well** of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

These blessings and woes are not blessings and curses given out by Jesus. No, they are insights into the lives of these people—of their relationship with God.

The Sermon on the Plain continues on with commandments, exhortations, parables. For example, we read,

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also... Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

One scholar has suggested that we approach the Sermon as a Christian catechism¹, as a teaching about what it means to be Christian. If someone with little or no understanding of Christianity wants a quick idea of the expectations levied on Christians, this would be an excellent place to start. It's basic; it's fundamental—love even your enemies, help your neighbors.

When one boards an airplane, the purpose it is to take a journey, to go from one place to another. To fly on an airplane, one must have an understanding of their relationship to the airplane. The safety sermon is a reminder that the airplane is inherently a dangerous device. Things can go horribly wrong and we need to be prepared. We need to understand that we are fragile and subject to being hurt or killed.

To be a person of faith, one must have an understanding of their relationship with God. They have to understand that God is much greater than any human. Next to God, they will always be poor and hungry; they will always weep and be despised. When we understand who we are in relation to God, we can't help but be overwhelmed by the enormity of God's presence and grace and love and power. God is great and we are small. God's power illuminates our weakness; God's goodness reveals our sin; God's glory puts our lives into perspective. When we look at God, we realize just who we are. It is like what is said about an education. The more educated you are, the more you realize how little you know.

Those are blessed are the ones who recognize that they are poor and hungry. But because of their poverty they are able to see the Kingdom of God; they can taste

¹ J. Jeremias, *The sermon on the Mount*, pp. 30-35.

fullness, they can know the sound of laughter, and anticipate their reward in heaven. These are people who are on a journey of faith.

On the other hand, it is those who feel that they are rich and full, who are laughing and confident that all adore them--they are the ones who are not going anywhere. In their assuredness and pride, they can't see God; they see only themselves. When their plane crashes, they will suffer.

The Sermon on the Airplane teaches us how to be a good and responsible air passenger. We should know where the exits are located and how to use the seat cushion as a floatation device. We should know the emergency escape procedure even if there is little chance that we will ever need it. A responsible air traveler should always be aware of the airplane.

In the same way, the Sermon of Jesus puts before us the basic expectations of the Christian life. A Christian is asked to love her enemies; she is asked not to judge but to forgive. He is asked not to wield power but to share it with those who have less. The basics. Without these basics we are just sitting on the tarmac.