

Arguably the Shortest Sermon Ever Preached
on the Sermon on the Plain

The Sixth Sunday after Epiphany, Year C, RCL. Luke 6:17-26. February 17, 2019. The Episcopal Shared Ministry of Trinity, Alliance and Our Saviour, Salem, in the Diocese of Ohio. The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove.

The sermon on the plain, which the gospel according to Luke reports instead of the sermon on the mount reported by Matthew, contains (instead of the beatitudes found in Matthew) four blessings in parallel with four curses. The four blessings and four curses highlight four things people typically rely on for meaning, comfort and purpose in life: (1) material resources, (2) gratifying appetites, (3) feeling good about yourself and your situation, and (4) positive social standing.

Holiness has to do with how we handle our material resources (or lack of them), how we handle the satisfaction of our biological needs, how we handle our emotional life, and how we handle our relationships with other people (and God). We can make either a blessing or a curse out of any of these things. In fact, focusing on any (or all) of them in place of God is the standard temptation.

Jesus calls the poor blessed because they have a chance to find, in lack of material resources, an opportunity to rely on and exemplify the radical generosity of God's love. He calls the hungry rich for a similar reason, and he calls those who weep blessed because they have an opportunity to find joy directly in God and God's purposes. He calls those of low status blessed because they have a chance to find their value and purpose in the origin of all value and purpose: God himself.

Holiness is not anti-wealth, anti-appetite, anti-happiness, or anti-social (pun intended). But it is anti-selfishness. The touchstone is what we are willing to give away for love of God and our neighbor. (Sounds like a sermon better suited to Lent, but they put the sermon on the plain on the list of readings for today, and Lent isn't that far off.) Our strategies for gratifying our appetites and seeking security are always to be measured against the Love that walked the way of the cross. It is in that sense that we are called to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus.