

The Sermon on the Plain, Part Two: Fairness and Generosity

The Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C, RCL. Luke 6:27-38. February 24, 2019. The Episcopal Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance in the Diocese of Ohio. The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove.

Today's gospel reading comes right after the first part of the Sermon on the Plain in the gospel according to Luke. I talked about the first part of the Sermon on the Plain last Sunday. Like its parallel, the Sermon on the Mount in the gospel according to Matthew, the Sermon on the Plain has more to it than the part where Jesus says "Blessed are the poor" and so on. It's shorter than the Sermon on the Mount, but it covers the same general ground.

The part of the Sermon on the Plain we heard this morning has to do with generosity. The standard set by Jesus' teaching here (and in other parts of all four gospels) is very high. Lend without expectation of return...do not judge...do good to your enemies...give away everything you have to the needy.

Jesus' basis for setting this standard is simple, and it crops up throughout the four gospels: we are to do this because the Most High God is like that: vastly generous. God's creation is essentially good, so any creature who lives in it experiences its blessings—in spite of whatever they may do (and whatever others have done) to mess it up. God's nature and purposes are our standards for attitude and behavior, because we are made in his image and are expected to do our best to live up to it.

And Jesus adds (with equal forcefulness) that doing our best to live up to this breathtaking standard will be rewarded. He uses the image of a street vendor of something like flour or spices filling a measuring pan by pressing down the contents and agitating them until no more can be added without overflow. This kind of commercial measuring can still be witnessed in the part of the world Jesus came from. Assuming the measuring pan is made correctly and the vendor is competent, the buyer will get absolutely as much of the merchandise as possible. As Jesus uses it, this is an image of both fairness and abundance. This is how we want to be treated, so we are to treat others accordingly.

As we experience life, fairness and abundance are not always in evidence. Jesus says that what matters is God's perspective. We use the phrase "God's plan," but it's more like the way everything always has been, is now, and always will be, from God's point of view. God is always making sure that what he wants will be the way things ultimately come around. We are part of that because of his grace—his generous intentions for us—and to the extent we cooperate with his grace to wage fairness and abundance, we will find in our experience (increasingly in this life, and on beyond it forever) that God's loving generosity triumphs. It is a matter, as I said (working with what Jesus said), of both attitude and behavior. Faith, hope and love are attitude in action.

I'm emphatically including attitude—the inner slant of the mind—because so many moral systems emphasize what we outwardly do. Jesus did not talk like that; he emphasized that our inner life was as much on the line ethically as our outward behavior. So when we talk about the basis of morality being fairness and generosity, it has to do with both the inner slant of our mind and its outward manifestation in action.

If this seems like God is asking too much of us, remember: the tail can wag the dog. If we learn to behave as Jesus taught, practicing fairness and generosity in concrete ways will affect how we feel and think and make decisions. So it's better to do the act of kindness to someone we heartily disapprove of and trust that God will assist us in understanding more and more deeply what it really means to love that person and not to judge him or her. This transformation of the heart is a big part of the full measure of reward we get: becoming part of the community of willing and cheerful servants who distribute God's bounty like those loaves and fishes that never could get all the way given away. And doing it better and better all the time. With more satisfaction. With more joy.

