

November 7, 2010
All Saints Sunday

Numbers 9:4-11
Luke 6:17-31

“Plain and Simple”

The *Grand Sweep* readings for this past week, as we make our way through the Bible in a year, clearly indicate how important rules and laws were to the early Hebrews. Our text from Numbers shows that God was instructing his people all along as they wandered in the wilderness, hoping to reach the Promised Land. The people were instructed to observe Passover, even as travelers without a home; especially as travelers without a home.

There were some members of the community who were ritually unclean at the time appointed for the Passover observance. They were deeply distressed and dismayed; they wanted to please God with the same observance, but were barred from doing so. It's vital to note that MOSES DID NOT TURN THEM DOWN, or turn them away. He consulted with God. (How often do we forget to do this?!) And they were given the means to observe Passover as well, at a later date. A desire to honor and please God was deeply rooted in their hearts.

In the Sermon on the Plain, presented in our text from Luke's gospel, Christ teaches the people about how to honor and please God. Note that he was speaking to a people who had received laws, rules, teachings from God throughout centuries and centuries.

Christ's words here contain material similar to that recorded by Matthew in the Beatitudes. Matthew tells us Jesus went up on a mountain and taught, naming those who are blessed by God. Matthew's words are known as the Sermon on the Mount. Luke's gospel tells how Jesus went up on a mountain to choose his disciples, then together they CAME DOWN from the mountain. Jesus taught the crowds about God's blessed ones as he stood on a level plain. Luke's words are known as the Sermon on the Plain.

What did he teach?

“Blessed are you who are poor”, Jesus said, “for yours is the kingdom of God.” Do we believe the poor are fortunate? Of course not. But Jesus tells us to think again. We think of ourselves as privileged, and that we should do all we can to help the less privileged. I don't want to say that's not true. It is. But Jesus teaches something more here. It seems he is saying the poor are

privileged in some way; the rich are less privileged. He seems to be saying that we've got it backwards.

In this Sermon on the Plain, Jesus lifts up and names those who are of special concern to God. He tells us the poor, the hungry, the despairing, the rejected have a special place in God's heart. We are called to be as concerned and actively involved as we can be with these very same folks. A rabbinic saying teaches that theology is "worrying about what God is worrying about when God gets up in the morning." Christ calls us to worry with God about the poor, the outcasts of society.

But what do we do about this business of having things backwards in some ways? If we, definitely rich folks from a global perspective, are in some ways NOT privileged, NOT lucky, NOT blessed--- what does that mean?

I think the Sermon on the Plain calls us to live more plainly. We are called to see that living a simple life, a plain life, a life unencumbered by TOO MUCH is a blessing. The TOO MUCH in our lives clouds our vision and brings us trouble. God calls us to live more simply BECAUSE HE LOVES US, and IT IS BETTER FOR US TO DO SO.

When Jesus says, "Woe to the rich," he's not saying, "Uh-oh, if you're rich God won't like you—God will punish you." Jesus is saying if you're rich, the riches will punish you. They aren't good for you. When he says, "Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry," he's not talking about some future punishment. He's talking about how affluence can lead us to have deep spiritual hungers. When he says, "Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep," he's not saying some day the rich will get what they deserve and they will suffer. He's telling us the delight we take in THINGS will prove hollow. There will be a sadness and sorrow deep inside us if we turn to the material world seeking joy.

Some time back I read an interesting book, *The Poverty of Affluence* by Paul Wachtel. He contends that we are working harder, working longer, to buy more, but feeling more and more discontent, with less and less time to enjoy what we buy. He contends our culture teaches that we aren't satisfied because we haven't acquired ENOUGH, so we work harder and even more hours to try to snare that elusive butterfly of happiness.

Jesus is teaching us that we're eating crackers when we're thirsty. He stood on a level plain to preach and teach that plain truth.

Christ's teachings have a different flavor than the messages from God to Moses in our readings of the Grand Sweep. But the commitment to listen, hear and live out Gods' will is paramount in both passages.

God expects us to keep life plain and simple: focused on our Lord, seeking his will in all circumstances.

The Jewish hearers of Christ's Sermon on the Plain had a long tradition of listening to God's messages. Are we able to truly listen? Do we long to honor and please God, in the way that Moses' people did, in their appeal to be given some means to observe Passover? Do we even try to learn what honors and pleases God? If and when we learn what pleases God, do we try to live according to what we've learned? Do we care about any of this, even a little bit?

God expects us to keep life plain and simple; focused on our Lord, seeking his will in all circumstances.

On this All Saints Sunday, consider the saints in your life. Was there someone who taught you about a plain and simple life, focused on God and his will for us? How might you help someone else learn and live out God's will?