

**“The Hard Road that Leads to Life”**

**Matthew 7:12-29**

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**5th Sunday in Lent**

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“The gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life” Jesus says and we know this is true after receiving the content of his teaching these last few weeks. For example, Jesus taught us not just to love those who love us but to love our enemies. Imagine putting that into practice with that coworker who’s been undermining you on the job. Instead of paying them back in kind you’re going to actively find ways to repay harm with kindness, to speak to them with respect instead of playing their games. You won’t get the satisfaction of “telling someone off” or “giving them what’s coming to ‘em.” And what’s more, Jesus’ way of responding might not result in change in your situation. Your malicious coworker might never see the light. Their tactics might actually cost you tangible harm. It’s a difficult road, a narrow gate with Jesus.

Jesus’ way of living is indeed narrow because it limits what actions his followers are able to take. Some of you know we’ve had a new friend sleeping on the front steps of the church. Some of us have received cautious emails and phone calls of concern from friends and neighbors. Some of the options for how to respond are options that Christians should not take. We’re not going to call the police unless someone is actively in danger. We’re not going to tell her she can’t sleep on the steps unless we see that she’s a danger to herself or a danger to someone else. We are going to continue to try to build a relationship with her - get to know her - pay her the respect of sharing some of our concerns within that relationship and call on professional help to guide us and her when it makes sense. We’re going to listen to her and learn from her about how hard it is to try to get a job without a home, or a home without a job. And we’re going to keep organizing for all kinds of changes in our city that put the actual needs of people and families at the top of our public priority lists.

But that’s a difficult road. It would be easier to pick up the phone and call 911 or 311 to make a human being with needs someone else’s problem. It would be easier to get her out from in front of our faces where we have to share in her pain and the pain of living in a society where people end up on the street. We’re going to do our best to love our neighbor including setting boundaries, having hard conversations, and paying attention to the logs in our own eyes before we try to fix the specks in someone else’s. A narrow gate. A difficult road, indeed.

Failing to follow that road sounds, at times like a threat from Jesus. “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord,

Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you who behave lawlessly.'" And while I don't like that kind of threatening Jesus, it's not all that remarkable coming from Matthew's community that was struggling in what probably felt like apocalyptic times, with Rome having sacked Jerusalem and squashed the temple, and Jesus' followers increasingly on the margins of their own Jewish community. When you're part of a marginalized community of people who aren't likely to see justice anytime soon, latching onto the assurance of justice in the by and by isn't all that remarkable. Sometimes it's the only thing that sustains you to keep on doing what you know is right.

What's remarkable about this law-abiding, narrow gate living is that Jesus promises that it leads to life. That this way of living - of making decisions to love everyone you meet wherever you are, whatever situation you are in - this day by day, moment by moment decision to do the right thing - is what *leads to life right now* even if justice is delayed to some point in the future. This day by day, moment by moment decision to live the narrow road of loving your neighbor as yourself even when your neighbor doesn't love you back is the narrow path to truly living right now - of becoming alive to your maximum human potential right now.

Jesus has my attention because as we all know, it's not clear that the world is going to wake up to what we're doing to the planet and take the narrow but important road that leads to life. It doesn't seem to be the case that the country is going to repent of our original sin of racism and take the steps that are necessary to repair the harm done to generations of families of color in the nation. It doesn't seem likely that the wave of anti-trans, anti-gay scapegoating that is taking place in some states across the land - really around the world - is going to be pushed back anytime soon. And Jesus - the one who is already facing his own future of persecution and an unjust death - Jesus still argues that your own capacity to come alive doesn't depend on other people doing what they're supposed to do today.

You have to make a choice, Jesus is saying. The wide, flat road that's easy to take leads to hell. Literally? I don't know. But definitely hell right now. If you stake your life on someone else's oppression - big or small - you'll never be liberated from the demons that already hold you. You'll never be able to fully commune with the God who is slow to anger and abounds in steadfast love. If your identity is fueled by who you oppose, who you hate, who you despise, your whole life is based on something other than the purpose for which you were created.

But if you're on that narrow path of loving and forgiving and struggling for justice even when you know it might not come; if you've let go of the idols of money or fame or personal achievement that all have their value in something outside of a loving heart, a gracious soul, a wise mind, then you're free. You're free to serve the only God who is really God. The Creator of the universe whose loving spirit is the genesis of all life.

Now if that sounds exhausting, well then you're still missing the good news. Remember, Jesus promises we'll be *less* anxious when we realize just how deeply God loves and cares for each of us. (Matthew 6:25-31) When Jesus told his disciples to be "perfect" the phrase really means "be whole." (Matthew 5:48) "Be complete." If you hear him criticizing leaders who spout off the right words but don't follow them up with correct action, remember that he's not suggesting that disciples must never make mistakes but that we must always try to bring our actions closer to the ways of living that Jesus demands. He makes these demands because he wants us to come alive.

It helps me to see that in Jesus' life grace and discipline are not opposites. They are two sides of the same coin. The more you can love yourself in the midst of your mistakes, the greater is your capacity to follow Jesus more consistently over time. And the more you practice your ability to love other people especially when it's hard, the deeper your love grows for yourself and for your neighbors.

Alcoholics Anonymous has this little phrase which I love - "it works, if you work it." "If you work the program, it works." I think AA means that if you follow the 12 steps as the Big Book lays out - meeting with your sponsor, working your way deliberately through the steps, you will find the healing that you are looking for. I think Jesus promises something similar to his disciples. If you wake up each day and seek the kingdom of God with your actions - which includes all the internal work to get centered in that kingdom mentality - you will come alive. It works, if you work it.

Angelina Grimké worked the works throughout her life. Women's herstory month is a great time to know her if you don't already. She was born to a well-to-do couple in Charleston who owned a large plantation with lots of slaves. Naturally curious and inquisitive, at age 13 she refused to be confirmed in her parents' Episcopal church citing disagreement with the official creed. She became a part of the Presbyterian Church instead, studying the scriptures, teaching a Sunday School class and eventually providing religious services for the enslaved people on her parents' plantation. While I can't say for sure, I'm guessing those services probably started out pretty paternalistic. But Angelina Grimke was working the works. She had her eyes on the kingdom of God even if she couldn't yet see it clearly. At age 21 Grimke was already opposing slavery, like her Presbyterian pastor. It violated Christian law and human rights. But unlike her pastor, Grimke believed that more than prayer and patience was needed. What was needed was people to speak out and walk the walk of the Christian faith. At age 24, in a public address at her church in Charleston, SC she called on all members of the Presbyterian Church to oppose slavery. They were respectful, because they knew her, but she was expelled from the congregation. At age 24 she was learning that the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life.

But Angelina Grimke was set on working the works. She joined the Quakers and decided that her voice in Charleston had reached the limits of its effects. Charleston was tired of Angelina Grimke. So she moved to Philadelphia, eventually joining the

newly organized Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society in 1835 and writing for the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator* newspaper. Women were not encouraged to organize themselves in those days but Grimke did exactly that with other women up and down the east coast, holding the first Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women. The meetings were intentionally open to men breaking the gender separation of the times establishing "a new order of things." A group of male ministers issued a public letter decrying the actions of these women for breaking social mores. But Angelina Grimke was just getting started. She was working the works.

In 1838 she became the first woman to address any legislative body in the US, using the opportunity to call on the Massachusetts State legislature not only to oppose slavery with all its power but also to defend the rights of women to petition. When rioters later tried to disrupt a racially-integrated gathering of abolitionists, Grimke addressed their threats in the middle of her speech, refusing to cease in her remarks. At the end of the speech, this racially diverse group of women left the building arm in arm to the threats of rioters armed with bricks and stones who burned the building to the ground.

Grimke trusted from an early age that this way of Christ works, if you work it. You can start out the child of a slave owner and end up a new kind of Moses calling on misogynists and racists to let my people go. You can walk through the valleys of discouragements of your time with your head held high knowing that while justice is denied life can still be had while you struggle. The road is narrow and difficult but it can lead you to a full life even before justice is fully known.

The disciples came to the end of the Sermon on the Mount they had heard the whole thrust of Jesus' message. This liberator, this new Moses clarified that the road to our freedom follows the narrow path of walking the walk, not just hearing the talk - living the ethical life as defined by the spirit of the law which is actually way more difficult than following the letter of the law. And while this teaching was offered to Jesus' disciples' the text also notes that the crowds had been listening to this whole thing. People listening, hoping to overhear the key to some happiness in a tumultuous time where the world was upside down.

I hope they found it. Jesus certainly wanted them to. That hard road leads to life even when the external situation is at its worst. That strong foundation that will hold you through any storm. That satisfying soil that produces good fruit that really feeds you. It works, if you work it. It works, if you work it. It works, if you work it.