

“Lenten Moments in Matthew’s Gospel: 3) The Narrow Gate”

a sermon by

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Text: “Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few” (Matthew 7:13-14).

Several weeks ago I came across an article that appeared in a publication of the United Methodist Church entitled “When a Downtown Heritage Ends: United Methodists Suffer Through Urban Church Closings,” by Cynthia B. Astle, in which she points out the significant number of downtown Methodist churches that have closed over the past few years in places like Elmira, New York, or Tacoma, Washington, but also in Detroit, Chicago, Houston, Minneapolis, Philadelphia, Miami, Dallas, and Los Angeles. These churches, many of which were cathedral type churches, have now been sold to become drug stores, restaurants, and Health Care Systems. Most will eventually be torn down to make way for new developments.

That article crossed my mind this past week when I met with the members of our church on the Poplar-Pine Street Committee that has been charged by the Session of our church to look at ways that our parking lot can be used to strengthen the mission of our

church. On Thursday our group met with Michael Smith, the President of the Center City Corporate Partners, who presented to our group a power point presentation on the growth of the Uptown area. There are now 10,000 people living within the inner loop. That number will grow to 15,000 within the next three years. Michael shared with us the enormous number of projects on line in the center city, including housing projects, a baseball stadium, a light rail train station on Trade Street, street car tracks from the square to Johnson C. Smith University, Third Ward Park, a law school, and a host of other educational and cultural entities.

That presentation reminded me once again of the unique opportunities for mission that are before our church today. First Presbyterian Church today is a growing, vital church of 2100 members located in the heart of dynamic business district.

There are many factors that have contributed to the growth and strength of this church: its worship and television ministry, the numerous opportunities for outreach and service, a dynamic children's ministry that includes a Child Development Center and a Weekday School, a strong music program, a strong ministry with youth, the strengthening of our pastoral care program, including a parish nurse, and a host of other things as well. But as important and vital as are all these things, they do not constitute an authentic church. The church of Jesus Christ is God's creation. Its origin is in God's love and in God's call. God chooses a people and covenants that he will be their God and they will be his people.

The church has its origin in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and in his calling the disciples to be with him in a life of faith and hope. Nowhere in the New Testament is there the slightest indication that the church is a human organization that came into being by its own accord. It is always seen as a gift of God.

I.

During the Sundays of Lent we have looked again at Matthew's gospel as a guide for the Lenten Season. At the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount we find this saying of Jesus about a "narrow" gate and a "wide" gate. Jesus does not spell out exactly what this narrow gate or road is. He does say that it leads to "life" as opposed to the "wide" gate that leads to destruction. But while this text does not in itself point out how one walks in this narrow way, there are certain aspects of Matthew's gospel that do make this very clear.

The first is the centrality of Jesus Christ for the Church. John Calvin, the great Reformer of the Sixteenth Century, observed of the church in his own day: "Although the melancholy desolation which confronts us on every side may cry that no remnant of the church is left, let us know that Christ's death is fruitful, and that God miraculously keeps his church as in hiding places."

Gary Wills, a prominent Roman Catholic theologian, has recently written a book entitled *What Jesus Meant*. Wills sees a radical connection between the "Jesus of History"

and the “Jesus of Faith.” For him one cannot explain the Jesus of Jesus apart from the Jesus of faith. The popular question, “What would Jesus do?” is not a very useful one, Wills argues. Jesus did many things that we would not and should not do. “Should Christians,” Wills asks, “like Jesus forbid a man from attending his own father’s funeral... or tell people to hate their parents? Are we justified in telling others, “I come not imposing peace, but a sword.” Such moments in the gospel remind us that Jesus is not like us, he has higher rights and powers. He has an authority that is from God.

Drawing on the wonderful scholarship of N. T. Wright and the late Raymond Brown, Wills makes a trenchant case for why Jesus’ earliest followers believed in their Lord’s physical resurrection. If the tomb had not been empty, the authorities could have shut down the early Christians rather easily by dragging out Jesus’ bones and showing them to people. The only way to understand the New Testament, Wills argues, is to understand that the only plausible explanation for the disciples’ transformation from scattered and scared to fierce preachers and martyrs is that they came to believe that Jesus in fact had been risen from the dead.

II.

Then, too, the “narrow way” that Jesus describes is one that is rooted in a strong sense of ethics. Whereas the Gospel of Mark emphasizes the crucified Christ and the imperative of following Christ in self-denial, Matthew has a different emphasis. For him the Christian life is rooted in a strong sense of ethical response to the message of Jesus. That is the point of Matthew’s use of the metaphor of the trees. Good trees bear good fruit. Bad trees do not. The Gospel of Matthew puts a great deal of emphasis on the fact that if our lives do not bear fruit, our faith is in vain.

That is the thrust of the saying of Jesus in verses 21-23. In this saying Jesus emphasizes the importance of doing the will of God. Faith is not just about having the right beliefs. “Not everyone who says, ‘Lord, Lord,’” shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but those who do the will of my father in heaven.

Recently, I came across an article in *Christianity Today* by Craig Barnes entitled “Sometimes Ministry Stinks.” Barnes relates how as a young minister, he was once very discouraged in his ministry. He decided to visit Bryant Kirkland, who for many years was the minister of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. Kirkland told him that one time, when one of his children was born, Kirkland was very impressed by the quality of the nurses who attended his wife. When he complimented one of the supervisors, she explained that the hospital trained all of its own nurses. “We tell our nurses that there are a lot of smelly jobs in our profession, but every job can be conducted with dignity. Our motto is this: “If you get stuck holding the bedpan, carry it like a queen. Then the focus isn’t on the bedpan, but on the graciousness of the one who is holding it.” Barnes said he got the point.

Craig Barnes, who addressed this article to a group of young ministers, reminded his audience that there are a lot of smelly jobs in the pastoral ministry. For example, churches attract odd people. That's our business. As one seminary professor put it, "If you want to be the light of the world, you are going to attract a few moths." Sometimes the pastor has to fire unproductive staff members, meet with chronic complainers, wade into conflicts between leaders, and represent unpopular changes. These are all smelly jobs, but someone has to do them, and often that someone is the one person who actually gets paid to come to church.

The ministry of Jesus was rooted in his conviction that the "Son of man came not to be served, but to serve." Part of what it means to be the church is to reach out to those on the margin of society--the homeless, street people, and many who are neglected in our upwardly mobile society.

Part of what it means to walk in the "narrow way" is to retain that focus which is at the heart of the ministry of any vibrant church.

III.

Then, too, the narrow way that leads to life is always the way that puts people at the center of the church's life. Most ministers today are aware of demands upon them that go far beyond the traditional roles of preacher, teacher, and pastor. Ministers in larger churches are often involved with stewardship campaigns, capital campaigns, the management of staff, and a host of other functions that are a necessary part of the ministry of any church.

However important as these things may be, they do not eclipse the fact that all effective ministry is pastoral in that it centers on the nurture and care of individuals. Institutional demands should never be allowed to eclipse the importance of the care of souls.

John Calvin often referred to the church as the "mother of the faithful." By that he meant that the church has a responsibility not only for children, but teenagers, and adults to nurture them, to guide them, to rejoice with them in their triumphs and to comfort them in their sorrows.

One of the great controversies of the early church pitted St. Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo, against a British monk by the name of Pelagius. Pelagius was disgusted with the immorality and pagan character of the Roman Empire. Pelagius wanted Christians without "spot or wrinkle." He saw the church as a group of morally perfect people who were willing to stand up against the corruption of the social order and to triumph over a disordered and undisciplined world.

There is something very Christian in Pelagius' concern. He understood that the councils of perfection rest upon all of us. But Augustine understood something that Pelagius could not understand; namely, human nature. Augustine saw the church not as an

aristocratic elite, but as an “inn for convalescence.” It was more like a hospital where people came for healing, health, and wholeness. For Augustine, the church was established not by human goodness, but by God’s grace.

Augustine, perhaps better than any theologian the church has ever produced, understood the human heart. He knew that corruption was not a small habit that could be easily overcome. He knew that sin was not just a matter of perversity or contempt for God. He understood that many sins are committed by pride, but that not all happen proudly.

Augustine knew that the Christian life was never simple. He observed on one occasion that often when we conquer one sin, we frequently fall victim to another. It was this profound understanding of human nature and the nature of the church that earned Augustine the title “Doctor of Grace.” More than anyone else Augustine understood that the church is composed of sinners, and that it lives by the forgiveness of sin. Whenever we forget that fact and are tempted to believe that we are the righteous, the very existence of the church is at great risk.

IV.

Those of us who are a part of this church realize that we have been given a great opportunity. The future of this church is very bright. But, let us not deceive ourselves. There is a broad way that leads to destruction. For us the narrow way is the way that is centered in Christ, reaches out to others, and cares for the faithful who are the body of Christ.

That is the narrow way and it is the only way that leads to life.
Amen!