

# “The Choice Before Us”

a sermon by

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

In a recent article in the *New York Times* entitled “High Five Nation,” David Brooks makes an interesting contrast between our nation in 1945 and today. At the end of World War II the United States had just completed one of the noblest military victories in human history. Yet, as Brooks points out, the mood in this country was not one of jubilation but humility and gratitude.

As the *Times* of London put it, fascism had stood for grandiosity, pomposity, boasting, and zeal. It is true that the allied propaganda mill had also produced its fair share of excesses. But by 1945 there was a mass hunger for a public style that was understated, self-abnegating, modest and spare.

Today, we live in a very different culture. Self-effacement and humility are now identified with conformity and self-repression. Today we live with what some sociologists call “expressive individualism.”

We have seen evidences of this kind of “expressive individualism” over the past several weeks: a congressman interrupting a speech by the President of the United States, a performer by the name of Kanye West grabbing the microphone from Taylor Swift at the MTV Video Music Awards, Michael Jordan’s bizarre behavior at the Hall of Fame awards, as well as Serena Williams’ reproachable behavior at the U.S. Tennis Tournament.

## I.

This morning we have read a passage from the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew, chapter 7, we encounter a number of sayings that conclude this monumental section of Matthew’s gospel: sayings about judgment, sayings about what is holy, sayings about prayer, and the “golden rule.” The text for this morning contains the sayings of Jesus about the narrow and wide gate and the narrow and wide road.

One of the distinguishing aspects of the teachings of Jesus was the remarkable clarity he demonstrated on so many occasions. Often, we bemoan the complexities of life. Jesus seemed to enjoy doing just the opposite. He was able to reduce the complex to the simple: a narrow way versus a broad one, God or Mammon, losing life or saving life.

So often, most of us want things in our life that are liberating. We want to be free to do what we want to do, believe what we want to believe, choose what we want to do.

That is not the life that Jesus describes in Matthew's gospel. He speaks of the choice that is before us and that choice is between a broad path that leads to destruction and a narrow path that leads to life. In a time in which we seek greatness, one has to ask what are the things that make for greatness?

## II.

Look for a minute at the things that make for greatness. All of them are in Jesus' sense of the word "narrow." Attention is narrow. When William Gladstone was asked the secret of his success, he answered with one word: "Concentration." The worthwhile mind can focus, but the inattentive mind cannot. Decisiveness is narrow. We cannot decide vaguely and in general. We must decide in terms of the particular. The decisive mind defines, excludes, wills this and not that, but the indecisive mind is a vagabond on a broad road. Loyalty is narrow. It binds a person to a definite devotion.

This past weekend I was in New York City with my daughter Lucy. On Friday night we attended the Broadway play "Hamlet" that starred Jude Law in the role of Hamlet. Having watched a performance of "King Lear" and "Hamlet" within the past several months I have been amazed at the sheer power of Shakespeare's genius. My daughter Lucy, who teaches English to high school students, said that one of the jokes among English teachers concerns a high school student who viewed the play Hamlet. The student's response to the play was that she didn't see what the big deal about Hamlet was all about. After all, the student observed, it is nothing but a bunch of clichés. There is, of course, a sense in which that student was speaking the truth. There are so many lines in the play Hamlet that are a part of the English language that there were a number of times the audience laughed quietly. Of course, the great imprint that Shakespeare has put on our language is not an accident. In all of Shakespeare's works there are a total of 20,000 different words that he uses, ten percent of which he created himself.

To give you some comparison, John Milton's works contain 10,000 different words and the King James Version of the Bible contains 9,000 different words.

That is the mark of genius. It is the capacity to focus. Nothing left loose ever does anything creative. No horse can be ridden until he is harnessed. No source of energy can ever power anything until channeled. No life ever grows great until it is focused, dedicated, and disciplined.

Jesus said that there is a broad way and a narrow way. One leads to life, the other leads to destruction.

That is true in our national life. I spoke earlier of this excessive individualism, but it is more than that. It is hard to imagine that we can preserve the greatness of this nation with loose morals, a disintegrated family life, and self-interest taking precedent over the common good. That is a broad door and it leads to destruction.

### III.

That is true in the life of the church as well. This morning we begin our stewardship season. As all of us know, these are difficult times for all churches. The city of Charlotte has been severely impacted by the deep economic recession that has affected our whole community. People have lost jobs. Families have had to move to other cities to find work. The financial industry, which has been a leading driver of our local economy, has in the past year faced the most severe crisis since the Great Depression.

It is in such a time as this that we appeal for the financial support of our members as we face a new year. One of the choices that is before us today is the question of what kind of church we want to be. First Presbyterian Church has a long history of steadfastness in the time of severe trouble. In the 1950's when downtown Charlotte was in great disrepair, this church voted to remain a city center church. During the racial struggles of the 1960's and the school busing crises of the 1970's and 1980's, this church stood strong in support of strong public schools.

There is a great heritage here and there is much of which to be proud. Our church has the largest per capita giving of any church in our Presbytery. We sponsor 35 different outreach ministries. We have a very strong Weekday School and Child Development Center and a Television ministry that continues to broadcast our worship service to 25,000 people each week.

But, like every church, we are faced with the question of what we want to be. It is not a question of getting by. It is a question of whether we want First Presbyterian Church to be strong in its ministry or whether we want to just get by. If we are going to be strong, we are going to have to have the support of all our members to be the witness for Christ that God intends us to be.

But, like every church, we too stand under the judgment of Jesus' words about the narrow and wide way. To follow the narrow way is to focus our attention on the "great ends of the church" – the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness.; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven for the world."

This past year has marked the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of John Calvin, the founder of the Presbyterian Church. During this year I have read again Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* which remain, even after a half a millennium, one the finest statements of the Christian religion still in print. A distinct impression that one has of Calvin is his confidence in Scripture and in the power of God. For Calvin, the essence of the Christian life was described in the words of Jesus to "deny oneself, take up the cross, and follow Jesus." For Calvin, the basic sin is unbelief, lack of trust and confidence in God the father, but the primary expression of that sin is pride or self-centeredness. This self-centeredness is overcome by the practice of self-denial, which is both a dying unto self but also a becoming alive to God and to one's neighbor.

#### IV.

Then, too, these words of Jesus about a broad and narrow way touch every one of us in our own personal lives. Some years ago, Robert L. Calhoun, who taught for a number of years at the Yale Divinity School, spoke of “two great moral principles that appear again and again in Jesus’ teaching and practice,” namely intelligence and integrity on the one hand and a life of faith, hope, and love of God on the other.

The first is a demand for intelligence and integrity; not simply shrewdness nor technical competence nor rule of thumb honesty (though these all have their place) but a fundamental readiness in all situations to see and acknowledge what is so. The temptation stories, the Sermon on the Mount, the sayings that deal with cup and platter, unwhitened graves, ceremonial cleanliness, the Sabbath day, all reflect, in one way or another Jesus’ insistence on truthfulness and realism in the presence of an objective order that we disregard at our own peril.

The other essential factor in this moral summons is the demand that all of us live by faith, hope and love toward God and our neighbor. More concretely, this is a call for generosity in thought and in action, for a readiness to give more than one expects to receive. It is a reminder to all of us to treat others as we would want to be treated and to realize that the judgment we exercise on others will be exercised on us as well.

I spent this past week on the campus of Princeton Theological Seminary in Princeton, New Jersey. Throughout the Seminary library there are a number of portraits of some of the illustrious graduates of that seminary: John Mackay, Robert Speer, Charles Hodge, and Bruce Metzger.

One of the portraits that has always has always fascinated me is the one of Toyohiko Kagawa, a citizen of Japan, who attended Princeton Seminary in the 1920’s before returning to his native land. Kagawa was a person born to great wealth, but he forswore that wealth and lived his life in the slums of Tokyo. In the terrible period after World War II, Kagawa was a great force in helping Japan rebuild itself after the War. He was probably the most famous man in all of Japan.

In the latter years of his life he was invited back to the Seminary to speak. By then he was quite old and the years of wear and tear had taken their toll on him. He was stooped over, his eyesight poor, and his voice weak. After the convocation a group of students were walking out of the doors of Miller Chapel. One of the students turned to a friend and said, “Well, he didn’t have much to say, did he?” A woman, who overheard this conversation, said to the student, “A man on a cross doesn’t have to say a lot.”

Jesus tells us that there are only two choices in life. One is broad and leads to destruction. The other is narrow and leads to life.

May God give us the grace to find that narrow path and the life that Christ alone can give.

Amen.