

## It's Not Easy Following Jesus

Matthew 7:1-5, 12-14, 21

It's not easy following Jesus. If it were, we wouldn't have needed Jesus, and preachers would be out of a job. Of course, we preachers sometimes botch the job of helping us to follow Jesus!

Today we wrap up our reflections on the Sermon on the Mount, and this chapter is a flurry of moral teachings. They are, how shall we say it, a bit challenging.

Jesus uses a popular form of Jewish moral teaching that talks about the "two paths" or "two ways", the easy way and the difficult way, the popular way and the way most avoid. The language Jesus uses is:

Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who find it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

Evidence abounds. The crowd is rarely right, and truth cannot be determined by popular vote. Most choose the easy way, but as Robert Frost wrote: "I chose the one less traveled by/ And that has made all the difference."

We are going to talk about the more difficult way today, the one that leads to life. A prayer in Wendell Berry's poem, "To the Holy Spirit" ends, "By Thy wide grace show me the narrow gate."<sup>1</sup>

## I

Jesus begins the day's discussion talking about judging others. Jesus, couldn't we start with something easier?! He says, "Judge not that you be not judged."

We are not talking about the moral discernment necessary for us to help us choose the right path for ourselves. It is about the negative judgments we heap onto others. It's about our trying to be lord over someone else's conscience.

Father Richard Rohr, Franciscan priest and spiritual teacher, says we need to get rid of our "dual thinking", our dividing the world into good and bad and right and wrong and making it "me vs. others." We are in the right; they are in the wrong. He talks about how even making comparisons and preferences can fall into this pattern, filling our minds and ruining our days. "This is better than that." "She is smarter than he is." "My meal at 220 Main was better last time than tonight!" "Her dress! Oh my!"

One of my favorite animated movies is *Ratatouille*, about a rat who becomes the chef of a 4-star French restaurant. The key scene for me was the day

the newspaper's food critic showed up to taste the food and review the restaurant. His name was Anton Ego, a most appropriate name. As he tasted, he wrote notes, mostly negative. But when he tasted the *ratatouille*, he was transported by the taste to the memory of being a child in his mother's kitchen, and tasting hers. He drops his critic's pen, and in slow motion it falls end over end, bouncing on the floor. Jesus is saying "Put down the pen."

Perhaps a really good fast for Lent would be to fast from comparisons, preferences, evaluations and opinions! They don't help the state of your soul.

Opinions, opinions, opinions. They fill our days. We live in a blizzard of opinions. They are the constant chatter on social media and talk shows. Do you ever get tired of your own opinions? I do. You can squeak by in life without them. Plato wrote:

The lowest form of knowledge is opinion. It requires no accountability and understanding. The highest form of knowledge is empathy, it requires us to suspend our ego and live in another's world.

Studies show that the empathy level of Americans has dropped precipitously in the last few decades. In Wallace Stegner's novel *Angle of Repose*, the main character, an aging professor of history remarks that most people (this

novel was set in the 1970's) have undergone an "empathectomy", their empathy surgically removed. If that was true then, it is many more times true today.

Imagine this cartoon. There are two booths selling tickets. The booth on the left has a sign that says "Opinions". The booth on the right says, "Empathy". There is a line a mile long waiting in front of the "Opinions" booth, and just a few standing in front of the "Empathy" booth.

Of course, this judging business can be turned most hurtfully inward, on ourselves. We beat ourselves up because we don't measure up.

We've been reading of an alarming rise in suicides among teenaged girls. Michelle Goldberg, New York Times columnist, has been following the story and last week reported research that points to the damaging effects of social media in making teen girls feel "less than". Cyberbullying has had a killing effect. The rise of selfies and TicTok have added to the problem as beautiful young girls put pictures of themselves all over the internet and make other girls feel ugly by comparison. Judging oneself can be fatal, and judging others can injure another's spirit.

## II

Jesus uses the humor of exaggeration to make his point:

Why do you see the speck that is in your neighbor's eye but do not see the log that is in your own? How can you say, "Here, let me take that speck out of your eye" when there is a 2x4 stuck in your eye?

Years ago on a trip to Iona, I learned that in the rural areas of Scotland and Britain there was an outbreak of a disease called "Hoof and Mouth" disease. Having never heard of it before, what I heard people talking about was "Hoof *In* Mouth" disease. With which I was familiar, having put my foot in my mouth more than a few times.

What Jesus is talking about here is "Plank in Eye" disease. We can barely see out of our eyes for the log in our own, but we still try to do eye surgery on others. Blind to our own faults, we have X-ray vision into the faults of others.

Next time you are tempted to judge someone, turn it into a call for *plank-examination* in your own eye. Why am I so judgy about that person?

Richard Rohr talks about the church today being a "Cult of Innocence". We see ourselves as guiltless and innocent while pouncing on the sins of others.

The church in America and the white race in America have a "cult of innocence" in regard to the evil of racism in our nation, past and present. Black Lives Matter conversations and curricula like the "1619 Project" are demonized and are now being specifically excluded from public schools and higher

education. In the new revised College Board A.P. curriculum for high schools on Black Studies, the word “systemic” has been systematically taken out. We in our cult of innocence do not want people to think about the racism imbedded in our laws and institutions.

The narrow way, the way of the Jesus minority, includes no judging. But if you take pride in your narrow way, your membership in the Moral Minority, go back to last week’s sermon on pride and piety. Being different is not necessarily the same as following Jesus.

Think about the words we sing at Communion every month. *Pursue justice, be kind, and be humble.* If we focus on that, there’s little time or energy for judging!

### III

Next Jesus gives us what we have called the “Golden Rule”. This is harder than it sounds because it requires that thing called empathy. He teaches:

In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.

It is a universal moral teaching present in many other world’s religions. The great 1<sup>st</sup> century rabbi, Rabbi Hillel, was approached by a young man who came with a challenge: “If you can say the whole Torah while standing on one leg, I’ll convert

to Judaism.” The rabbi stood on one foot and said, “What is hateful to you, do not do to another. This is the whole Torah. Everything else is commentary.”

Here is the version in the Islamic scripture, the Koran: “A person does not have faith until they love for their neighbor what they love for themselves.” What a beautiful and challenging way to put it!

And, as I’ve recited before, here is Wendell Berry’s agrarian paraphrase: “Do unto those downstream as you would have those upstream do to you.”

This requires the moral imagination to walk in someone else’s moccasins, to imagine their needs, and then to want their needs met as much as your own. Empathy.

David Comer told me last week that if he were to start preaching again he would have a three sentence sermon:

Love yourself

Love others

This will take a lifetime.

This is the narrow way that leads to life. Don’t follow the crowd, follow Jesus.

#### IV

Finally Jesus says,

Not everyone who says to me “Lord, Lord”, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my *Abba* who is in heaven.

It’s a lot easier to call Jesus “Lord” than to follow his way.

We may say as we wrap up the Sermon on the Mount, “How can we pull this off?”

And again we hear Jesus say, “With us it is impossible, but with God it is possible.” Well what does this *mean*? Some experience that it is the presence of the living Christ with us as help. We might think of it this way: Jesus walks beside us urging us, helping us along. Paul puts it like this: God’s love is poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

I knew a choir member in the bass section in another church who told me that when he was having trouble with his part in an anthem he would stand next to the best singer in his section and lean his body into the other’s body, and the vibrations and sounds helped him sing his part. Maybe that’s part of what it means: *we lean ourselves into Jesus*. So we ask God’s help, Jesus’ help. Perhaps that’s what Jesus was talking about when he said a few verses up in the chapter:

Ask, and it will be given to you,  
seek and you will find,  
knock and the door will be opened to you.



Ask. Seek. Knock. God is ready to answer. It's not easy following Jesus, but it's possible.

“By Thy wide grace show me the narrow gate.

Amen

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1. Wendell Berry, “To the Holy Spirit”, *Collected Poems* (San Francisco, NorthPoint Press, 1984), 209