

Sermon on Matthew 7:13-14 and Romans 12:9-21
Susan Verbrugge
Blacksburg Presbyterian Church
August 31, 2008

I don't know if any of you have had this experience or not, but this summer I attended a church in which I heard a sermon that I totally disagreed with. Now, I know that this has never happened to any of you while in this church, but maybe it has happened to you elsewhere. I, in fact, had so much trouble with this sermon that at one point, Ross, my husband, had to put his hand on my knee to keep me from coming out of my seat.

But, there was a good outcome from the sermon. It really made me think a lot about the passage the preacher used. And, yes, it is this passage from Matthew about a wide and a narrow gate that has stuck with me.

I want you to imagine with me that you are approaching a city in ancient Israel. You are tired because you have been traveling for a week. You are thirsty and hungry. You have been on your guard day and night because you have been out in the open with no secure walls around you. The dust has been swirling about you, covering the bag on your back and coating your throat. The sun has been beating down on you since dawn.

Finally, you are close enough to see the walls of the city. Their security and the promise of food, drink, and shelter looms before you. You notice to the right a long line of people, standing single file. As you squint in that direction, you notice that they are slowly working their way over a rocky, uneven path toward a very narrow gate in the city wall. Only one person at a time can make it through that gate. Then, you look to the left. Lots of people are streaming in that direction. They are rushing forward on an

even, well traveled path through a wide gate in which many can enter at one time.

Which one will you choose?

I'm guessing that we would all choose the open, wide gate. It will get us there quicker. Everyone else is going that way, and it looks easy. We are tired and ready for a bite to eat and some rest. It makes total sense.

But, Jesus has a different way. Isn't this just like Jesus? He takes a story out of ordinary, everyday life and challenges his hearers in ancient times and his hearers today to think and live in a different way.

Many interpreters of this passage make it into a passage about heaven and hell, who will make it and who won't, who is in and who is out. Maybe it is that.

But maybe it is so much more. This passage comes near the end of what we now call the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has been talking with his disciples about what it means to live in this life in a new way. Blessed are the poor in spirit, the meek, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, and so on. He talks about handling anger. He talks about not trying to get back at others. He talks about loving one's enemies. He teaches them how to pray. He warns them against worrying about how they will feed and clothe themselves. He exhorts them not to judge others for each one has enough sin rattling around inside to deal with without pointing a finger at others. And, just before he talks about the gates, he reminds the listeners that "in everything, do to others as you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7:12, NRSV). He is telling them how to live in the here and now in a new way, in community with all other people.

Within this context, our passage takes on a whole new meaning for me. The narrow and the wide gate are not some gate in heaven, waiting for me to enter. Instead, they are gates put before me every day which will lead me toward life or destruction for my soul in the here and now. They are gates before us as a community which will lead us to life or death right now. For the kingdom of God is about the now and the not yet. It is among us now, and it is our job to recognize it and live into it.

It seems to me that Jesus spends his whole ministry and eventually give's his life trying to teach us what God's kingdom is all about. What does it mean to spend one's life continually choosing to go through the narrow gate which leads to life? In one place in Matthew he says that we must "deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow [him]. For those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for [his] sake will find it" (Matthew 16:24-25, NRSV). He also says in various places at various times that we must remove ourselves as stumbling blocks for others. We must love our enemies and bless those who curse us. We must humble ourselves. And, over and over, in his example, we see that we must reach out to and love those who are on the margins of society, those who have no power and no voice, those whom others shun. This is no easy way to live. It's hard work. It's a rough road, for the world doesn't value this way of life.

In our passage from Romans today, Paul expands the vision of what it means to choose the narrow gate. He says we must turn from evil, whatever form it takes. We must extend hospitality to strangers. We must live in harmony with one another. We must be with our sisters and brothers where they are. If they are weeping, we weep. If they are rejoicing, we rejoice. We pray; we love; we serve the Lord.

It's easy for me to stand up here and say these things. It's much harder for me, and I would guess for you, to live them out. Maybe that's why Jesus said it's a narrow gate. It's much easier to follow the crowd and go on the easy, well traveled road through the wide gate. The narrow gate is reached by a rough, untraveled road. Why? Tom Long, theologian and preacher, says there are two reasons. First, he says, the narrow road "often takes us to those places where we must make some painful and difficult choices". And second, the gate is narrow "because in any given situation, full of many possibilities, disciples are beckoned to choose God's will and God's will alone" (*Matthew, Westminster Bible Companion*, 83).

So, let's say you are a student working together with others on a group project. One of your group members takes information from another source and says it is her own. You know the truth and so does the group, and the group is willing to turn the project in as is. What is the loving thing to do here? What might God's will be?

You are driving along Main Street and see a homeless person in front of Town Hall. Do you keep on driving? Do you pull over and ask him if he has had a meal today?

You are in the hall at school and you notice one student picking on another. Do you keep walking or do you open yourself to the ridicule of all your friends and reach out to the person being picked on?

Someone at work is trying to do you in by spreading rumors, withholding important information, and generally making your work situation unbearable. Do you start rumors of your own? Do you complain to fellow workmates and do nothing? Do you confront the person? Do you treat him with love and respect?

If the church is aware of desperately poor people within our community and our world, do we turn a deaf ear to them or do we reach out to them and make sure their voices are heard?

If our community needs lower priced housing options, do we act as if there is nothing we can do or does our church speak up and demand changes?

If the working poor in the New River Valley need transportation and quality childcare, do we say it's not our problem or do we work with all of our resources to make new options available?

Wide gate...narrow gate. Which will we choose? For each day, we are placed in situations, small and large, in which we must choose. The wide door leads to destruction of pieces of our souls. The narrow gate leads to life. Which will we choose? Jesus says, "I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly." May we have the courage to claim life and live it. Amen.