

**Echoes from the Mountain: The Sermon on the Mount
Narrow Gates and Limitless Possibilities**

Text: Matthew 7:13-20

3-12-17



Reflection questions... [please consider the teaching notes, first, as a basis of your reflections]

“Do Jesus’ words sound, to you, more like an ultimatum or a hopeful invitation? Is there anything about Jesus’ message or his posture toward others that would leave you to conclude that he was being exclusionary?”

“Could it be true that all paths lead to the god we hope to find? What has your own search turned up? What are you not finding in Jesus that would prompt you to continue to look elsewhere?”

“How might we be better served by spending less time trying to reason with people and more time offering them a reason to believe; providing people with the truth of lives well-lived, rather than an irrefutable list of God-facts?”

“Why do you think it has proven so difficult for the church to talk about Jesus in ways that distinguish him, without becoming either arrogant or indifferent? Why do you think we have failed to find some space between exacting exclusion (where we attempt to determine who’s in and who’s out) and indiscriminate welcome? (which makes no distinctions) Do you think that either of these properly represent either Jesus or the atmosphere of the Kingdom of God?”

Perhaps you might spend some time reflecting and dialoguing around these thoughts...

Christianity, as a movement, was developing, and actually flourishing, in the context of a spiritual atmosphere that was pluralistic, indifferent, and even hostile to them, at times. Theologians and historians suggest (3) specific reasons:

First, it was the openness and radical sense of welcome. its accessibility.

Second, the somewhat ‘defining’ nature of their claims. The followers of Jesus claimed that he was “the way”. In a world where all religious expressions were equally valid, they refused to content with simply adding Jesus to the pantheon of gods. They were unhesitant in their commitment to distinguish Jesus.

Third, the sense of community that their claims created. People observed the fashion in which these members of the “way” gave freely to the poor, cared for the hungry and needy and visited those who were sick or imprisoned, and were compelled to join them.

“I can say that I know God because _____”.

Teaching Notes...

This passage always reminds me of the exchange between Alice and the Cheshire Cat:

Alice: *"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"*

Cat: *"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to".*

Alice: *"I don't much care where".*

Cat: *"Then it doesn't matter which way you go".*

These often tension-filled statements of Jesus only matter if the God of the Hebrew Scriptures is the One, true Creator-God and Jesus is the one who has come to make him known to us (Hebrews 1). If this statement is not true, then all we are left with is some *"wiki-version"* of faith that becomes this amalgamation of everyone's interpretations and contributions.

The Kingdom life is, foremost, about standing before this Story--- before this God--- with no delusions of self-importance or self-reliance, but with reverent wonder for this promise-making God who will not be content until you know him as "good", and live a life of "goodness".

Jesus believed that whenever and wherever the rule of God was honored and routinely practiced, that there was a return to "shalom". God's desires, done God's way, with God's hopeful outcome: "good".

Jesus has masterfully (pun intended) painted this image of a world set right--- fully functional and whole--- now available to us in and through his own life. He has portrayed (embodied) for us what it means to be fully human.

He has attempted to remove our hesitations to pursue this life by portraying it as one being lived under the constant care and attention of a good and loving God, one we could feel free to call, *"Father"*. Then, he compels people to "enter the Kingdom"; to choose to follow him, because of his conviction that choosing him is the only reasonable option for you. It is the way to life.

There were any number of (2)-paths teachings in the ancient world (based on Deuteronomy 28). Wide versus narrow; ruin versus life; many versus few. They all set before the listener the gravity of the choices that we make.

This has less to do with theological arithmetic (calculating the numbers of Kingdom participants) and more to do with providing a challenge toward awareness concerning your posture toward Jesus and the Kingdom being now made available to you. It's being able to locate ourselves in the *"knowing God"* spectrum.

Jesus' words were never meant to be dismissing, but defining.

"Narrow" doesn't speak to the scope of the invitation, but to the nature of the response ["narrow" (Gr)- a fixed, or established way].

A few verses earlier, Jesus had told the same audience, *"... everyone seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened."* Clearly, the life of the Kingdom is being made available to "all".

Jesus always spoke of the Kingdom as a *"big table"*, at a *"big party"*, with a big *"invitation list"*.

The narrowing down of the choices (devotion) is not meant to diminish the quality of the life that we experience, but to broaden its possibilities.

This is in direct conflict with a cultural posture that says, *“Keep your options open. Pursue any number of partners and paths and eventually you might arrive at a fuller life”*.

Jesus says, all of those other ‘paths’ (our commitment to forging our own way; making our own assessments) are disastrous. It is the narrowing that actually opens up into the expansiveness of grace. The limitless possibilities of life with Jesus. Gates lead to pasture (John 10:9). Jesus ensures that no one who desires to participate in the Kingdom of God will be denied access. He does so by re-enforcing the fact that entrance is not based on one’s pedigree, or financial portfolio, or which grad-school you attended, but always as a response to God’s unprovoked, self-initiated movement of love. The only pre-requisite: *“tired and teachable”* (Matt 11).

The Kingdom is open to all who embrace and embody the message, but it cannot, by its very nature, include those who oppose it.

The Kingdom cannot welcome people who are self-reliant and refuse to consider trusting another way. It cannot involve people who refuse to be reconciled with God and reconcile with others. It can’t involve people who are bent on retaliation or who are committed to compliance to certain God-codes, but who are unwilling to seriously consider the potential of a disorderly heart. That’s not the Kingdom of God.

There are any number of passages which connects entry into the Kingdom with our response to Jesus. To enter into the narrow gate is to *“know”* Jesus, the one who expressly came to reveal God to us. It is to enter into a relationship with the one who identifies himself as life, light, bread, truth, the way [Matthew 22:1-14; John 3:16-18; John 10:9; Acts 4:12; John 6:35; 8:12; 14:6].

“And this is eternal life: that they might know you, the one, true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent...” (John 17:3).

The most exclusive statements of belief should always result in the most loving and welcoming community.

People often need to find a way to experience blessing by participating in the life of the Christ-community, before they will be inclined to embrace it for themselves.

What might that look like for us?

Let love lead. Our desire to love people must supersede our commitment to winning the cultural war.

“Love each other just as I have loved you. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples...” John 13:34-35

Abandon your commitment to recycling. Know that recycling is wonderful, environmentally, but frustrating spiritually.

When Jesus said, *“If you want to follow me, you must “re-invent yourself?”* [deny yourself]...” (Luke 9:23), he is saying that the resources for the life for which your heart desires are not available to you, independent of God.

Maintain the conviction that the best thing we can do is “glorify” Jesus so that the world will be drawn to him.

“If I be lifted up, I will draw everyone to myself...” John 12:32

Live well. Offer people a 3-D representation of God’s design for relationships and sex and money and work and stop trying to defend God.

Take a day off and show your near ones that you’re not defined by your contribution, but by your creation [not simply what you can produce, but who you were created to be].

Turn off your cell phone and notice the “woman at the well”. Stay long enough to hear their story so that you might eventually become part of it.

Invest in relationships, ask good questions, trust the Holy Spirit, and tell the other what you have witnessed.

“Live properly among your unbelieving neighbors... always be ready to explain your hopeful life, but do it with gentleness and respect...” 2 Peter 2:12; 3:15-16