

Scripture: Matthew 7:13-14, 21-23

Sermon: The Narrow Way

Given @ VHUMC – Video

June 21, 2020

### **SLIDE 1 - SCRIPTURE – MATTHEW 7:13-14 21-23 (NRSV)**

Matthew 7:21-23 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

<sup>21</sup>“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. <sup>22</sup>On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’ <sup>23</sup>Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you who practice lawlessness.’”

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Some of you are old enough to remember the See Rock City signs painted on barns all over the South.

### **SLIDE 2 – SEE ROCK CITY SIGN**

Since I grew up in Chattanooga, the home of Rock City, I have a sentimental attachment to it, but in a world full of Disneyland, Universal Studios, and theme parks with roller coasters taller than a 6-story building, Rock City might seem a bit cheesy, but not to me. I grew up going to Rock City and I loved it all **except for the squeeze.**

### **SLIDE 3 – FAT MAN’S SQUEEZE**

They don’t call it **Rock** City for nothing and there is a section where the rocks squeeze together so closely that most adults and even some children must turn sideways to pass through. The situation becomes worse when you realize this narrow way goes on for about 15 feet. Now I was an average sized child, but I could not bring myself to pass through the squeeze; I did not know what the word meant at the time, but **I was and am** slightly claustrophobic so I had to take the other, wider path with my wonderful Papaw who never complained about the

detour. Of course, if you took the wider path you did miss a good portion of the enchanted trail, but I did not care.

Today we continue our sermon series, **“Down to Earth”** where we explore together what it really means when we pray: “thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” We’ve heard that God’s kingdom is closer than we think and that it is a viral moment that needs each one of us to spread the kingdom to everyone. **But today we hear Jesus tell us how to enter and participate in that kingdom.**

Our gospel passage is the final wrap up to Jesus’ most famous and comprehensive teaching: the Sermon on the Mount. **Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount contain the central elements of Christian discipleship. That means our passage is critical to our understanding of discipleship.** In three chapters of Matthew’s Gospel, we learn of the Beatitudes and how Jesus calls us to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. The familiar version of the Lord’s Prayer is found there as well and we also hear Jesus condemning good works done only for recognition and not from the heart.

**Basically this is the life of the Beatitudes:** it is the city set on a hill, turning the other cheek, going the second mile, love, purity, truthfulness, and meekness. It is a way of life known by its fruits. Let’s be honest here: this is tough stuff. Everything we read from the Sermon on the Mount leads us to expect that Jesus is going to be very demanding. In fact, and I quote, **“we cannot say that much is demanded from us; rather we must say everything is demanded from us”** (Feasting on the Gospel – Matthew Volume 1, page 170).

**SLIDE 4 – We cannot say that much is demanded from us.**

**We must say everything is demanded from us.**









And now we arrive at the first section of our scripture passage. Fortunately or unfortunately depending on your mind set, Jesus is very specific here. We are told to enter the **narrow gate which is hard but leads to life**. Sadly Jesus tells us only a few will take it. Many others, though, will take the wide gate, because it is the easy way, but it is also the way that leads to destruction. I have to tell you when I read this passage I am immediately transported back in time to that little girl at Rock City who would not take the narrow way, but instead took the easy one, **the one that would not challenge or frighten her or demand too much of her**.

Here is the real problem with the wide and easy road; there is always a crowd on that road and it is always easier to go along with the crowd, even if you prefer not to. My husband, Mike and I lived in Japan while he was in the Navy and one summer weekend we went to Kyoto to see the oldest and most famous festival in Japan. I have never seen a crowd that large; it was an ocean of people and once you were in the crowd you could only move where the crowd moved.

#### **SLIDE 4 – CROWDS AT GION FESTIVAL IN JAPAN**

I literally could have picked up my feet and the crowd would have carried me along with them. Jesus may have used this metaphor of the wide and easy way that leads to destruction 2,000 years ago, but it is still relevant today. We live in the most connected world in human history; thanks to social media platforms we know it all and we know it immediately. That means it is very easy to follow the icons and images of a path that lead us to destruction. There are reality shows that prey on the worst of human behavior. There are people called social influencers who make a living by successfully influencing their followers who can number in the millions to buy whatever the social influencer is promoting. The

false gods of our world are so seductive and it is always easier to be swept along with the crowd.

**Which brings us back to the narrow gate and the road that is hard.** This idea that only a few will find the narrow gate gives me a mental image of a very small group of people wearing identical t-shirts that read, **“I’ve got my golden ticket to heaven, but you don’t.”** Let’s be honest, this particular scripture sounds so exclusive that is difficult for us to comprehend against our understanding of an inclusive Jesus who welcomed and loved everyone into his inbreaking kingdom. **But what if we look at the narrow way from a different perspective?**

**What if Jesus’ call to enter the narrow gate is not a simple, one-time decision?** What if instead of a one and done salvation experience, we must choose daily to enter the narrow gate. I have a good friend who has been sober for over 10 years now. We are close enough friends that I can be honest with him so I asked him once, **“I’m so proud of you for staying sober, but how you do it?”** His reply was deceptively simple, **“Every day I choose to be sober; sometimes I choose it multiple times in a single day. But never forget, I am not alone I have a community of men and women who struggle like me and we all walk this path together.”** There we go.

**What if being a disciple means every day we choose the narrow gate knowing that the path will be hard and knowing that some days we will fall short?** But like my friend, we also know we do not walk the path alone. That is the reason there are no “Lone Ranger” Christians; you cannot do it alone. We all need a community, a family, a church, a bible study class, whatever you want to call it that will walk with us, encourage us, pick us up when we fall and be our traveling companions.

I really miss seeing all of you in person on Sundays, but I also miss the rhythm of Sunday life as a pastor. For over 20 years, my Sundays have been highly structured and I knew exactly where would I be and what I would be doing at any given moment. But now I am just like all of you, I watch our worship online with my husband usually drinking coffee. However, there have been some joys as well in this new Sunday routine.

For the first time in forever, I attend Sunday School with Mike via Zoom. Mike is in a great Sunday school class. They are what I call real deal Christians. I love listening to their lessons and the comments and questions that come up concerning that day's scripture. Now no one in that class is a "spring chicken"; everyone has seen what life has to offer: the joys and the good stuff and the simple delight of being alive. But they have also experienced loss, grief, disappointments, pain, and suffering. But those life experiences bring such a richness to their discussions and study. But here's the reason I am telling you about this group of people. **They do not think they are "there yet." You will never see any of them wearing, I have my golden ticket to heaven t-shirts.**

In fact, they openly acknowledge that they are still learning about God, learning about themselves, and allowing study, scripture, and service to continue to shape and transform them. Best of all, they know that it is only through the power of the Spirit they can choose the narrow gate and stay on the difficult path. Are they perfect people? Of course not, they mess up just like you and me. But here's the thing, they don't give up. Every single day they choose the narrow gate and the difficult road because **it is the only one that leads to life.**

But there is more for us to see and understand today. When Jesus is speaking there is always more to understand. The second half of our scripture

passage is just as disconcerting as the first part. In fact, this section should come with a warning label. Hear the words from our sweet, sweet Savior: **“Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.”** Basically Jesus is ending the Sermon on the Mount with a terrifying question: **are we known by Jesus?**

#### **SLIDE 5 – ARE WE KNOWN BY JESUS?**

Jesus is telling his disciples then and now very clearly that salvation is not based on what we do, but rather on our relationship with Christ: does Christ know us? Jesus also reminds us that talk is cheap and so are actions that on the surface look like they are done for the kingdom, but really are used primarily to advance our position or social status. Given the language of our scripture, it is very likely that many were using Jesus’ name and charging fees for prophecy and healing, a common practice in that day and time. The historical circumstances are radically different, but human nature is still much the same. There is still the temptation to do the right things for all the wrong reasons.

I don’t know if you have ever heard the phrase, **“that’s another star in my crown”** but either way my advice is not to use it. The implication is any “good” work we do for the kingdom will go up on some divine scoreboard and guarantee our entrance into the kingdom. The only problem with that thinking is I do not believe Jesus was ever in favor of wearing crowns let along adding stars to them. The purpose of the kingdom of God is to serve before being served; Jesus taught and lived that out in powerful ways. St. Francis said it best in this prayer:

#### **SLIDE 6 K- ST. FRANCIS PRAYER (SEE BELOW)**

**O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek  
to be consoled as to console,**

**to be understood as to understand,  
to be loved as to love.  
For it is in giving that we receive,  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,  
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.  
Amen.**

Now does our passage mean we are not to engage in ministry to build the kingdom of God? **No, of course not.** But that ministry has to flow out of a relationship with Jesus Christ. However it is not just being known by Jesus; it is **being transformed by Jesus.** Entering the Kingdom of heaven is a both/and proposition, you see. It is doing the will of God which means building God's kingdom right here and right now. But you build the kingdom not because you know the name of Jesus but rather because your relationship with Christ is so deep and transformational that the only possible response is to serve.

John Wesley, the founder of our Methodism, believed that we are saved by grace and grace alone. That is at the heart of the Christian faith. But for Wesley, faith and works were not in opposition. For him, faith and service are united in God's love. God expresses his love for us in the life and ministry of Jesus and we, in turn, express our response to God's love through our service to others. That is called being a disciple which is what the Sermon on the Mount is all about.

When Jesus was about to leave this world he left his followers with marching orders. They were to go out into the world and do what: make sure people come to church twice a month and have plenty of stars in their crowns. No Jesus told them to go out into the world and make disciples. But as we all know that is easier said than done. That is why the leadership of our church has spent almost a year working on a discipleship path that show people the necessary steps to become active disciples building the kingdom right here and now.

In the months to follow, you will be hearing all the details about the discipleship path. I believe it has the potential to not only transform our church, but also to transform our community as well. It is very exciting and I am anxious to walk that path with you. But in the meantime, remember this. Jesus is more than just a name; he is a way of life. Jesus tells us to enter through the narrow gate and step onto a difficult road. It is not easy, but it is the only way that leads to life and we must choose each day to walk that path. We thank God that we do not walk that path alone. For that and so much more, we are grateful. Amen.