

‘Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

‘In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

‘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 7:7-14

**The Sermon: The Narrow Gate, The Hard Road**

I was given a great gift. It took me a long time to understand, though.

I know I've talked with you about my brother, Bart, whom I often describe as my hero. Bart was born with cerebral palsy and then, just as he was trying to learn to walk with braces and crutches at age eleven, was stricken with polio. Now he's 75 and doing well, though he has been confined to a wheelchair for the last 64 years. Bart's my big brother, thirteen years older than I am, and so my childhood was interesting. I remember spending many mornings at Riley Hospital, playing with my

favorite of their many toys, a Greyhound bus that I could wind up and let go, in the waiting room while Bart was being examined and helped. In one of the many, many surgeries Bart endured there, the doctor attached a steel plate over his hip joint because Bart's muscle spasms were so severe that his leg muscles would pull his hip out of socket.

Our parents encouraged Bart to be active and, as a little kid, I was always dragged along when they took him places where there were activities he could participate in. There was Crossroads and there were the Handicap Horizons that he travelled with, and there was a group that always met at IPALCO Hall,

and there was Camp Koch for Crippled Children—  
that's what it was called then—down in the town of  
Troy, right above the Ohio River. And for a child—  
for me—it was scary to be there, in those places.

Scary. You see, I was used to the faces that Bart  
would sometimes make, either because of the  
spasms or the pain, and I was used to seeing his legs  
draw up or his arm jerk—slightly. Bart had a few  
advantages; I don't say this to minimize his  
difficulties or his accomplishments. But Bart could  
always speak clearly and he was able, with a lot of  
effort and therapy, to have pretty good use of his  
hands. He could move his own wheelchair, and he

was very, very strong in his upper body. But so many weren't like Bart. So many were unable to speak at all, or made involuntary sounds, or jerked violently without any warning, or simply sat—still and silent and seeming so lonely. For a two or three or four year old boy, these situations were hard to understand and frightening in ways I can hardly explain now.

Over time, though, I was given this great gift. First, I began to understand well enough that I could empathize with Bart's friends—even those who could not speak but could, with enough effort on their part and enough patience on mine, smile just a

little or nod when I looked at them. Over time, I began to see, initially, that they were like my brother and, then, that they were like me. I watched their parents and their brothers and sisters and I began to see what love looked like, love for a child with special needs, deep and true and devoted love for someone who would always need all that a parent would have to give—always. A life-long commitment. The boys and girls and men and women I was seeing through the lens of their differences became, instead, inspirational to me. I suppose it took me longer to see my own brother as an inspiration than it did with the others. The

amount of overcoming that I saw done by Bart's friends—and by Bart—is simply amazing; I started to understand that I was lucky to see this when most of my friends had no idea. They had no Bart in their lives.

What I witnessed, and what I still see when I am with my brother, is human dignity. Human dignity. Life, with all its difficulties and deformities and dysfunctions—life with all its privileges and possibilities—not merely accepted, but lived as fully as possible, by not only the people with these terrible afflictions but by those who loved them, as well. Human dignity displayed by parents who love

**their children** even as others look away, shocked by the twisted limbs and shocking faces and disfigurement of spasticity. Human dignity—the choice to live on in the face of overwhelming odds. Human dignity.

And, so, I confess that over time I have developed an intolerance. We're supposed to be tolerant, I know, but I can't shake this one. I have developed an intolerance for anyone who mocks a person with a disability, who makes fun of someone's tics or spasms or manner of speaking, who attempts to imitate someone else's involuntary actions in an attempt to get a laugh or to denigrate

someone in a misguided effort to make themselves somehow look better or funnier or stronger. Only a fool would fail to appreciate the strength and perseverance of one who struggles so and still finds a purpose for his life; only a fool mocks a person who has accomplished despite—maybe even in spite of—his disability. Only a fool makes fun of the struggles that are so intimately a part of another person's life. I try to be a tolerant person but this foolishness, I confess, I do not forgive.

Let's pray together.

Guide us this morning, God, as we consider a passage of Scripture so familiar and, at the same

time, so mysterious. Sit with us; let us rest upon Your shoulder and let us learn of Your will through the sounds of Your rebating heart. Set our feet firmly upon the path that leads to the life You have promised us—abundant life here on earth and eternal life with You when our days here are complete—and give us grace to reach out to the others—even those we find intolerable—so that we might lift them to this same path. And remind us, in all that we do and say, in all that we see and hear, in all that becomes plain in our sight and all that is blurred by our tears, that the glory of this time and of these words is Yours, alone. Amen.

‘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.’

If we take Matthew at his word, then this passage sticks out from the rest of our Scripture today like a sore thumb. Jesus is speaking to the Disciples, and to the crowd that has gathered around them. That is, Jesus is teaching Peter and Andrew and James and John—the first four He has called. But a crowd has gathered around them and, as we learned last week, the crowd is pretty amazed at what is happening, for Jesus talks to them unlike

anyone they had ever heard. So Jesus talks about asking—ask and it will be given, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be flung open for you. And God, who is just waiting for you to ask, knows how to give the very best gifts. And then Jesus tells them this: all you have to do—the only thing you have to do—is to do to others what you would like to have done to you. Jesus says that's what the law and the prophecies are all about. Just do to others what you'd like them to do with you. How much easier does it get? How much simpler could it be? Who can't do that—just do to and for others what you'd like to have done to and for yourself? So,

why, then, does Jesus immediately start talking about how hard it's gonna be? After Jesus has just talked about how God is just waiting to give you what you want and all you have to do is treat others people like you want to be treated, why does Jesus then talk about a narrow gate and a hard road being the only path that leads to life? Why does Jesus say that only a few find the way?

Because, as it turns out, there are fools in this world who mock the speech and the tremors and the tics and the spasms of the disabled. It turns out that there are frauds who take advantage of elderly men and women by conniving to get them to turn over

their life savings to non-existent charities. As it happens, there are charlatans falsely wearing the cloth of Christianity and, yet, preaching the gospel of prosperity or spewing hatred and proclaiming the virtues of discrimination against other types of people. Despite the clear teachings of Jesus, there are warmongers who insist that force is preferable to conversation. Although we are loved by a God whose whole being is abundant, too many have been fed the false bread of scarcity and, so, engorge themselves in a desperate, greedy attempt to have more than all the others. Even though Jesus spoke the words, “seek,” “knock,” and “ask,” it turns out

that there are people who will simply kick in the back door and steal what might have been freely given to them. There are those who will claim to be wise because they refuse to pay fairly for the work done by others. The gate is too narrow, and the road is too rough for some because they deny essential human dignity. The way is not apparent to those who will not even see and acknowledge the worth—the equal worth—of others. Too many suffer from the delusion that we are not—all of us—equal in value, worth and dignity. Jesus said that the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it; they take the easy

road—they enter through the widest gate, those who do--because they are so focused on self-interest that they are unable to take account of even the humanness of the others. **One who** can look upon the image of a shattered little boy in an ambulance, caught in the middle of a brutal civil war and who is, just for the moment, rescued from the shelling, or upon the images of the body of a child washed ashore as testimony that his family has lost its risky attempt to be free again, or at video of a child whose home and family have been destroyed—one who can look at these images of their fellow humans and not be moved to do unto them, to do for them, to give to

them but, instead, recoil out of fear or, more realistically, out of greed—well, are they not rejecting Jesus? Really—are we not rejecting Jesus when we refuse to help the most helpless; what would we hope for them to do if the roles were reversed? In everything do to others as you would have them do to you. **Imagine the roles** reversed; how would we, in our darkest moments—darker than we can even imagine—how would we feel if our humanness were denied by those best able to help us and if we were to be trivialized as we have seen these children trivialized?

In everything do to others as you would have them do to you. This is the law and the meaning of the prophecies; to deny this truth is to deny the authority of Jesus to interpret the Scripture. But what does it mean if we not only do less for the other than we would have done for us but, also, deny the basic human dignity of the other? Are we not denying Jesus?

The gate that opens upon the road that leads to life is the narrower of the two. The road is hard; there is no doubt. The temptation is there, and it is very real. Drive right through the wide gate; take that smooth multi-lane road with fewer bumps,

almost no twists and turns, no speed limit. Get to where we want to go, and go it alone--there's no law that says our vehicle must carry more than just one person. I bet there's even a **Crew Car Wash** on every corner along that route. No need to arrive at our destination with a messy vehicle.

Or.... Or, we can follow Jesus. Do to and for the other as we would want the other to do to and for us. This is Jesus' most basic teaching. **Christianity 101**, page one of the syllabus. The very first day of the class, no previous readings necessary. You can even go to this class before you buy the books. Jesus is going to have a lot to say and it's going to

take three years, but this is like day one and the lesson is this: you're all the same, and God loves you. You have dignity—each one of you—and you are to see the dignity in each and every one and treat each other the way you'd like to be treated. If one suffers, the others should pick him up and carry him; the sun shines and the rain falls on each, regardless of righteousness. Be careful about scorning or mocking or just walking right past the other; his fate might be your own fate one day. And—you know what—even if someone decides to drop the class after this first session, he ought to be able to remember this lesson. Do unto others as you would

have them do unto you. And sometimes that's messy.

Sometimes, that's just messy. Sometimes that means you end up with someone else's snot on your shirt because you held them close while they cried.

Sometimes doing unto others means having to wash out your car after you've given someone a ride because their kids made a mess in the back seat.

Sometimes going through the narrow gate means waiting, waiting, waiting as others push their way through, first. Sometimes taking the hard road means that your vehicle ends up with dirt and tar and a few dings that won't disappear no matter how

many times you take it through the wash.

Sometimes, being a decent human being requires that we look into the eyes of someone who just wants to say the word, “yes,” but whose body twists and spasms and whose face contorts and whose tongue stammers and stutters and whose eyes well up with tears as they finally concede that the word will not come and, so, simply nod their head—and in all of that, we see human dignity and nothing—nothing—less. Always—always, doing unto others as we would have them do to us—always, we take risks. Risk is the most basic feature of a life of following Jesus. Let me repeat that: taking risks is

the most basic feature of a life of following Jesus.

Jesus' teachings always came with a warning; three will be some who will despise you if you follow me.

Risk of our own death to this world is the hallmark of a life of service to Jesus.

So, maybe, the Scripture fits together better than I thought. Maybe it's true that there is a narrow gate and a hard road and a tough choice to be made.

There is a price to be paid for seeing others as our equal; there is risk to seeing human dignity in those who do not look, live or love as we do. There is the very real possibility that following Jesus along this hard road will cost us our lives—as least, our lives

as we know them. And when we arrive at the end of that hard road—whenever that day comes—perhaps these bodies and these souls will bear scars we could have avoided if only we'd passed through the wider gate and lived our lives on the easy tree-lined parkway that goes to nowhere.

But that's not where you want to go, is it? And that's not who you are. I know you. I know who you are:

Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

Let's pray. Teach us to take the better road, Lord—the road that Jesus has taken, the road at whose end He awaits us. Let us take our turns passing through that narrow gate and let us follow Jesus. You have given each of us dignity—human worth, sacred worth. Let us see the same sacred worth in all of Your children, and let us, then, do for each one what we would ask of them if we found ourselves in their situations. Guide us along this difficult road and remind us, always, that You are the giver of all good gifts. Amen.