

THE NARROW GATE
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Who here wants to go through that narrow gate?

For all of my young life, I most assuredly did NOT want to go through it.

If the gates at Disneyland – yes, LAND; for 3 years as a young girl

I lived very close to the park in southern California, aka La-La-Land –
if the gates at Disneyland lead to the happiest place on earth,
the opposite had to be through that narrow gate.

The long shadow of puritanism still looms over American religion.

(You know what H.L. Mencken said, that *Puritanism: [is the] haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.*¹)

This ethic insists that to get through those gates
you must wear the right clothes, believe the right things,
have the right name, be around only the right people,
and follow the rules your betters make for you,
which generally resulted in having no fun.

One of my ancestors is the formidable puritan minister, Cotton Mather,
who thundered that every step taken while dancing was a step nearer to hell.²

Anyone who broke the rules was shamed and shunned for life – Scarlet letters and all that.

In short, getting into heaven meant being an opinionated, judgmental killjoy.

I've got good news, and bad news.

The good news: My ancestor, Cotton Mather, had it wrong.

Grim propriety is not what the narrow gate is about at all.

The bad news: the road to and through that narrow gate

is even more difficult than what the Puritans taught,
and truly, in today's world, it means breaking many of our culture's rules.

The narrow gate that Jesus Christ calls us to travel toward
is the gate that leads to life. What life? Life with God.

Life with God is the life of the Eternal One.

In this life, God's will is done, on earth, in heaven, in all Creation.

And what is God's will?

Let's take look at the descriptions from our lessons today:

In Chronicles, we learn that our glorious God
is the one who establishes justice with faithful love.

In the psalm, the voice of God speaks peace, mercy, truth, and
righteousness (the same Hebrew word, *קִדְּוָה*, is translated as "justice")

A reminder of what "justice" and "righteousness" mean in Hebrew:

things are right, things are just, when all Creation

is as God created it to be, without human sinfulness devastating it.

James and Jesus both insist that God delights in giving good gifts to humanity,
nourishing and delicious gifts, including Creation itself.

¹ S. Bryn Roberts, *Puritanism and the Pursuit of Happiness*, citing H.L. Mencken, *A Mencken Chrestomathy*. Boydell Press: 2015, p. 1

² *Ibid.*, pp. 1.

What does human sinfulness look like?

I remind you of what our presiding bishop, Michael Curry, teaches,
that the best synonym for sin is selfishness,
when we put our own self-interest, self-preservation, self-indulgence,
ahead of the justice, peace, mercy, truth, and faithful love
that serve all people equally.

Sin, James tells us, begins with refusing to listen to others,
talking at them, and getting angry – and aren't we ANGRY right now? –
all of which lead to moral filth and wickedness.

The opposite of sin is the way life and the will of God taught by scripture,
all the law and all the prophets, which Jesus sums up with words we all know:

Therefore, you should treat people in the same way that you want people to treat you.

Thus, the narrow gate and the difficult road, the way of love, is, with humility,
to do God's will on earth as it is done in heaven by being like God from whom all good things come:
speaking peace, giving generously, being merciful, telling the truth,
listening to what others have to say, being very patient,
and treating others the way you want to be treated.

The wide road to the broad gate that leads to destruction – to moral filth and wickedness –
is the way of the world: materialism, self-righteousness, revenge, greed,
bigotry, anger, and violence.

Once again, today's headlines come straight from a 2,000 year-old book.

The destruction we are seeing in the news today reflects perfectly
how our culture teaches that walking down the wide road of selfishness is our right,
and for those of us who are white, at times it has even been our civic duty.

I say this as a child of the 50s who spent formative years not only in La-La-Land,
but in the deep, deep south, in Alexandria-Pineville, Louisiana, in the mid-60s.

I lived there from 1963 to 1966 – quite a momentous time in the South.

My family, like most military families, avoided discussing politics,
and we did not watch the news because the news on TV in the 60s was hard.

In my naïve, uninformed bubble, I rode the bus to North Bayou Rapides Elementary School.

In the summer and fall of 1964, during the Johnson-Goldwater election,
we drove by a billboard that had Mr. Johnson's face painted black,
with giant red lips, and the words, "You want THIS man as president?"

In my naïve, uninformed bubble, I simply did not understand this billboard.

But we didn't talk about such things at home, so I didn't ask what it meant,
and I remained blithely ignorant for a long time. For decades.

Now, I did grow up, and I of course I knew about racial tension in America.

But I was still deeply ignorant, and I had no incentive to be otherwise.

Until the day came when I began – just BEGAN – to understand
how far I had traveled down the road to destruction.

Not because I was overtly bigoted – of course I was not.

But because, following the way of the world, I did not listen, and I never even asked myself,
how people of other races were treated, not by me,
but by the government and institutions acting on my behalf.

On my behalf, they were not treating other people, people of color
the way I'd want to be treated. But I didn't think much about it.

Then, one day in 2009, almost exactly 11 years ago,

I just so happened to be in Birmingham, AL visiting a pastor friend at his church.

I just so happened to mention I wanted to visit the Civil Rights Institute there.

Someone at the church just so happened to mention
that entry to the museum at the institute was free that day.

Woo hoo! Free! So I went downtown to find that in a park in front of the Institute there was some kind of festival going on with food vendors, live music, the typical stuff.

I had no idea why there might be a festival that day.

I found the Civil Rights museum, and sure enough, free admission because it was a holiday: Juneteenth.

Three days before turning 55, I had never heard of Juneteenth.

When I came out of the Civil Rights Institute several hours later,

I knew why there was a festival, but I was also older, wiser, and sadder.

The museum had burst the uninformed bubble I'd lived in from childhood.

And, it "just so happened"? Yeah. No.

I knew that the hand of God plopped me squarely on the difficult road.

I'd like to say that I was a profoundly changed person after that day but, if I were to tell the truth, my uninformed bubble was replaced by an intentionally self-protective one.

Who wants to think of themselves as being a willing beneficiary of a system that has official policies and deeply set cultural attitudes that easily and legally let me do the exact opposite of what the Golden Rule demands of me?

This year, just before my 66th birthday, it just so happens that Mr. Floyd was killed in Minneapolis, and it just so happens that because of politics I've learned about the Tulsa Race Massacre in 1921, which I knew nothing about until last week.

Nothing is left of my bubble now, because, I believe, once again,

it just so happens that the hand of God is leading me and, I pray, all of us, on the way of love, plopping me down on the difficult road to the narrow gate that leads to life,

the humble life of discipleship that welcomes the word planted deep inside us,

the good gifts of speaking peace, giving generously, granting mercy, telling the truth, listening to what others have to say, being very patient,

and treating others – all others, no exceptions – the way we want to be treated.

As difficult as it is, my Lord, at long last I truly want to turn my heart to you,

to go through that narrow gate to life. Let me not only hear your word, but do it:

Give me the boldness to ask you for every one of those good gifts found only on the road to life;

give me the strength to search for them in your word already planted in me,

give me the courage to knock on that door so that I really mean it

when I pray each day, heavenly Father, to do your will on earth as it is done in heaven above.

To do all I can do so that there is liberty and justice for all your children, no exceptions.

That, dear Lord, would be a great birthday present. Amen.

COLLECT OF THE DAY:

O God our rock, you offer us a covenant of mercy, and you provide the foundation of our lives. Ground us in your word, and strengthen our resolve to be your disciples, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

1 CHRONICLES 16:4, 23-34

David appointed some of the Levites to serve before the Lord's chest in order to remember, to give thanks, and to praise the Lord, Israel's God. [That day, they sang:]

"Sing to the Lord, all the earth! Share the news of his saving work every single day! Declare God's glory among the nations; declare his wondrous works among all people because the Lord is great and so worthy of praise. He is awesome beyond all other gods because all the gods of the nations are just idols, but it is the Lord who created heaven!

"Greatness and grandeur are in front of him; strength and joy are in his place. Give to the Lord, all families of the nations—give to the Lord glory and power! Give to the Lord the glory due his name! Bring gifts! Enter his presence! Bow down to the Lord in his holy splendor! Tremble before him, all the earth!

"Yes, he set the world firmly in place; it won't be shaken. Let heaven celebrate! Let the earth rejoice! Let the nations say, "The Lord rules!" Let the sea and everything in it roar! Let the countryside and everything in it

celebrate! Then the trees of the forest will shout out joyfully before the Lord, because he is coming to establish justice on earth! Give thanks to the Lord because he is good, because his faithful love endures forever.”

PSALM 85:7-13

- Ⓐ Show us your mercy, O LORD, and grant us your salvation.
- Ⓑ **I will listen to what the LORD God is saying, for he is speaking peace to his faithful people and to those who turn their hearts to him.**
- Ⓐ Truly, his salvation is very near to those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land.
- Ⓑ **Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.**
- Ⓐ Truth shall spring up from the earth, and righteousness shall look down from heaven.
- Ⓑ **The LORD will indeed grant prosperity, and our land will yield its increase.**
- Ⓐ Righteousness shall go before him, and peace shall be a pathway for his feet.

JAMES 1:17-22

Every good gift, every perfect gift, comes from above. These gifts come down from the Father, the creator of the heavenly lights, in whose character there is no change at all. He chose to give us birth by his true word, and here is the result: we are like the first crop from the harvest of everything he created.

Know this, my dear brothers and sisters: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry. This is because an angry person doesn't produce God's righteousness. Therefore, with humility, set aside all moral filth and the growth of wickedness, and welcome the word planted deep inside you—the very word that is able to save you. You must be doers of the word and not only hearers who mislead themselves.

MATTHEW 7:7-14

[Jesus said,] “Ask, and you will receive. Search, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Whoever seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door is opened. Who among you will give your children a stone when they ask for bread? Or give them a snake when they ask for fish?”

“If you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him. Therefore, you should treat people in the same way that you want people to treat you; this is the Law and the Prophets.

“Go in through the narrow gate. The gate that leads to destruction is broad and the road wide, so many people enter through it. But the gate that leads to life is narrow and the road difficult, so few people find it.”

SERMON HYMN: *We Plough the Fields*

BLESSING: Live without fear: your Creator has made you holy, has always protected you, and loves you unconditionally. Go in peace to follow the Way of Jesus, and as you journey, the blessing of our Triune God, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, be with you now and always.