

Today we conclude our series on the Sermon on the Mount. Let us pray:

They had been sitting on the mount for some time. Jesus had already taught them so much. Some of the things he said they expected but so much of it was new or, at a minimum, beyond their understanding and expectations. And he was building toward the peak, toward the climax, of all that had gone before. And that climax, that moment of ultimate truth comes in the form of a series of images, a series of word pictures.

First there are two gates to two roads. You cannot travel them both—you must choose.

This image, **so real in Jesus' time, remains important to us today.** And image we all know. One of the most beloved poems of Robert Frost:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood

And sorry I could not travel both

And be one traveler, long I stood

Then took the other, as just as fair,

And having perhaps the better claim,

Because it was grassy and wanted wear;

Though as for that the passing there

Had worn them really about the same,

And here the poem and Jesus' words, must, like those roads, diverge. Because in Frost's poems the roads were in most ways equally appealing.

And both that morning equally lay

In leaves no step had trodden black.

Oh, I kept the first for another day!

Yet knowing how way leads on to way,

I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh

Somewhere ages and ages hence:
 Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
 I took the one less traveled by,
 And that has made all the difference.

Two diverging roads—you cannot travel both. **Jesus' two road, each beginning with a gate, are quite different from Frost's.** One is distinctly more appealing, well-worn and wide, even paved—and this is a time when most roads were not paved, although the roads of the Empire, the roads to major religious and economic centers, those, yes, those would be paved. But many roads were dirt, not pavement. So is it an image that the people can respond to.

A wide, paved, flat road. A road that makes life easier. A road that is a sign of prosperity. A road that is popular, that makes civilization what it is.

The other road is narrow and the road is hard. I can well imagine a steep, rocky, narrow mountain path.

The road to life, Jesus says, is that narrow, steep, difficult road.

The second image—well, my English teacher would have called it a mixed **metaphor because Jesus starts with a wolf in sheep's clothing and then begins to talk about fruit.** Putting aside the wolf, the trees are the pair here. A tree that yields good fruit and a tree that yields bad fruit.

You know a good tree because it yields good fruit. You know a bad tree because it yields bad fruit.

And then the last pair—two homebuilders. One, a wise builder, builds a house on rock, giving it a strong foundation. The other builds on sand, how foolish. The house built on bedrock can withstand rain and wind (even like the winds from Thursday night). But the one built on sand, well just every-day waves wash the sand out from under it and it will fall.

All of these images have one things in common. Two gates and paths. Two trees yielding fruit. Two houses. In each case, one has advantages and the other disaster.

In each case, there is a decision to make. Which gate will you go through? Which path will you take?

Which tree will you be? Where will you build your house?

Decisions. Will you follow the teachings of Jesus or the teachings of the world—**which sometimes use Jesus' words so the trees look the same, but only the true faith yields good fruit--which will it be? Which will you choose?**

Will you follow Jesus on the narrow, more difficult path, or will you take the paved road, a road that makes life easier, that is a sign of prosperity, that is popular, that makes civilization what it is?

And what is this path that Jesus asks us to choose? Well, that was set out in the teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. All that went before today's reading.

Know that God blesses those the world so often does not—the poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who hunger after righteousness.

And what is righteousness? Far more than merely following the law. Not just those who refrain from murder, but they are even free from anger and who settle disputes directly, personally, with humbleness. They don't even call someone a "fool" in anger. Those who honor their wedding vows, rather than those married time and time again.

Those who avoid lust and coveting in their hearts—not just in actions, but even in feelings. But yet, they don't judge others. They look after their own spiritual health rather than judging others. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

In following the law, they are straightforward, no flowery words or meaningless vows.

And no revenge—instead forgiveness and focus on creative, nonviolent means of protest and resisting violence, evil and injustice. And then the most difficult part—love your enemies.

Even today this is perhaps one of the hardest of Jesus' teachings. Love your enemies.

It can be hard enough to love those you barely know, but to love those who want to hurt you, those who fight you or even plot against you—love them? Well, it's practically un-American. After all, is there anything we are prouder of than our military? Anything Americans love more than our guns?

Let's be honest, at least with ourselves. We don't have a strong military and more guns than any other country so we can love our enemies.

When Jesus talks of our spiritual life, that isn't what we expect either. Pray in secret, because it is there that God hears you and will reward you. Not public displays or religion, but private ones.

Give to charity, act with mercy, again in private. Don't seek accolades. Don't expect a thank you. Don't be given credit for doing good. Rather, hide the good you do, so only you and God know.

And fasting—first of all, yes, you are expected to fast. We are all expected to fast. It's not just an optional practice—it is critical to a strong spiritual life. But not if you announce your fast and accept the accolades about how spiritual and

holy you are. Spiritual disciplines don't work that way. They work on the inside and it needs to be a private thing if they are to work at all.

I said "love your enemies" was the hardest teaching—hmmm, I misspoke.

The hardest teaching is you can't serve God and money. After all, this is a nation that most definitely serves money. We like to say we are a Christian nation and that this country was founded for religious practice. And while there were some elements in the country's founding that include that—the reality is, this country runs on money, values money, and, frankly, serves money. Doubt that?

Protect the environment? —not if it will cost jobs or cut profits.

Pay women and men the same amount or require government contractors to comply with labor law? Not if it will cost profits or prevent a company from making money.

Regulations that protect our water, our air, or even our children's brain development? Not at the expense of profits.

Ayn Rand, a devoted atheist by the way, Rand and her philosophy of self-interest and free markets above all else has more influence on many of the leaders in power today than anything Jesus taught. And you cannot follow both the teachings of Rand and the teachings of Jesus.

Still not convinced? Think of our public heroes. CEOs and Fortune 500 companies and CEOs of Fortune 500 companies. Actors, musicians and professional athletes who make millions.

Even to the point that these fabulously wealthy performers are spokespeople on issues are varied as the environment, human rights, and virtually any area of public law—apparently playing a doctor on TV is enough for Americans to listen as if those performers are experts.

But actual scientists are suspect, in no small part because they are not wealthy and powerful.

Yes, the idea that valuing money above other things is contrary to the teachings of Jesus is a hard lesson for us to swallow—but it IS what Jesus taught. Does that mean we should not have money or should not earn any? No, but it does mean that we should share it and we should understand that money is a tool—not the destination.

Because money can quickly become our master—we see it in the anxiety that is rampant, and the resulting fear and even judgment of others.

Instead we should trust God—a conscious decision to trust God, and know that God will care for us.

And the golden rule—do unto others as we would want them to do to us.

These are the guideposts of Jesus' path in about the shortest rundown of the Sermon on the Mount ever.

And if we do decide to follow Jesus—well, it's not like he ever promised that life would be easy. After all, being perfect, being the living example of everything we are supposed to be did not bring him wealth or an easy life. No. Those in power, those who wanted and especially those who had money, they put him to death. So why do we think that following his teachings will give US an easy life?

The easy path, well, according to Jesus, that is not the way that leads to life. The way that leads to life, following the teachings of Jesus, is not easy. But is it right. It is the way to that personal relationship with God that is beyond our imagination—the way that will empower us to do even greater things than Jesus did. That difficult path is the one that brings God's kingdom to earth. It is the path by which we live in and into the kingdom of God. When we pray, "your kingdom come," that is the path we are praying for.

The path to life—it is the road less traveled by. It shares that image too with the paths in Frost's poem. But there is still another difference. In Frost's poem, there was no way to change paths or to really return to the other choice— Oh, I kept the first for another day!

Yet knowing how way leads on to way,

I doubted if I should ever come back.

Analogies always break down at some point, and here is where the two path analogy of Frost's poem breaks down as an analogy for following Jesus. A decision of the path to follow in life often does not allow for going back to the other choice—the paths diverge and you can't get to the other one any more. But following Jesus is different. Because the ability to follow Jesus is always there. That narrow gate is always a choice. One you can make even now, no matter what decisions went before. Following Jesus, being a Christian, means believing and accepting and even living the teachings of Jesus. You can make that decision now.

Some claim that God is a God of judgment and wrath and anger and requires that we must earn God's favor. But those are not Jesus' teachings.

Jesus has a different view of God the Father—a God of compassion. A God of love. A God of justice and generosity and kindness. And we are called to walk humbly, and even secretly, with God.

Imagine you are on that Galilean hillside, what would your answer be? It is one thing to be impressed by the teachings but would you chose that difficult path?

I encourage you to spend time in the next week or two, as we get close to the start of the Easter season, reviewing, meditating on and even praying about the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is asking you, what will you choose? Because the choice is always up to you. The wide smooth path that society loves and travels, or the steep path that leads to life. What will you choose? Amen.