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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
The Sermon on the Mount, August 13, 2023  
Matthew 7:13-20  
The Narrow Gate

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My Bible text for this morning speaks of the narrow gate. Jesus says this:

<sup>13</sup>Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. <sup>14</sup>For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few.  
(Matthew 7:13-20, RSV)

How narrow is that gate? Well, I reckon that it is about wide enough to admit one person at a time, but lots of folks can go through that gate if they will stay in line. I mean, Jesus leads the way through the gate, and we follow on behind him. And then the way becomes hard, perhaps like a mountain path, with danger on either side if we should stray away, but we will be okay if we walk in the way of Jesus. We let him choose the steps, even if those steps should seem strange compared to what others might say. We let him choose the steps and we follow on behind, all the way into life!

I believe I mentioned in a newsletter article that this passage about the narrow gate and the hard way is not in our three-year lectionary. It is not one of our assigned Bible readings, and so I have never preached on this text, as far as I can remember. But it is an important text for me and I suspect for many Christians. Indeed, I feel steeped in this text since the time I first read it as a child. This text teaches us not to be undone by the difficulties of Christian life. Do not be discouraged if following Jesus should leave you out of step with popular ways. We are speaking of life. We are not playing a game. Jesus lives, and I think it best for us to think of him standing right here in our midst, looking us in the eye, and saying to us, "The gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life. But seek life. Walk in that narrow way. I want you to walk in that narrow way all the way into heaven, to live with me forever!"

Heaven, then, is the positive side of this saying of our Lord. The gate is narrow and the way is hard but it leads to *life*. We are speaking of life here and now but also of eternal life, of life that is good every sunrise and every hour of the day and is endless. We are speaking of life with Jesus and with the saints of old, including many of our loved ones. We are speaking of life in a Kingdom wherein there is no more sorrow or pain or dying and where God himself wipes away the tears from every eye. We are speaking of a City in

which sin is stricken from every heart and where we and our neighbors will leap forward gladly to do unto others as we would have them do unto us. As they get older, many of our members yearn more and more for this good City. As I get older, I yearn for it too.

So, *life* is the positive side of our Lord's saying about the narrow gate.

But let us not hasten on by the warning in these words. Our text speaks not only of life, but of destruction. Indeed, it speaks of *many* on the road to destruction:

...for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.

These solemn words set a task for the church: Our job is save folks from destruction and to point them to the way to life. Our Christian hearts are not callous. They are not indifferent to the fate of our neighbors. We care about others and do not want them to be destroyed. There are many good reasons to come to church, including the treasure of fellowship with one another and the beauty of the liturgy and the hymns. But this too is important: that we should be trying to save souls. And the path toward saving souls is not always an easy or a popular one. It is a matter of the *true* proclamation of the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. Unless we think Jesus is just whistling Dixie when he speaks of life and destruction, we should strive for truth in the church, even if that truth is out-of-synch with popular opinion. We dare not conform our preaching or our personal convictions to anything but the Word of God.

So, these have been some introductory words on the narrow way that leads to life and the broad way that leads to destruction. Now, let us turn to a fun quote from Martin Luther. He speaks of a headache. I bet he speaks from personal experience. I mean, think of all the opposition Luther faced as he struggled for the renewal of the Church. The man took on the world — or at least, it probably felt that way to him. His spiritual superiors told him he was wrong. He was trying to save souls, but important people in life said he was wrong. In the beginning of his work, he must have felt overwhelmingly outnumbered, but he pressed on anyway. So, here is the Luther quote I like. He is explaining why Jesus speaks of the narrow gate:

Now Christ intends to say: "I have taught you this to make you see how very few people are on your side and how many will teach and live in opposition to you. This will give you a headache, but hold tight, and do not let it get you angry. You should know that this is how it should and must be, and you should remember that I told you beforehand: 'The gate to life is narrow, and the way is hard, but the other way is wide and easy.' Therefore do

not let that divert you. Listen to what I am saying to you, and follow Me. I have traveled over the narrow way, and so have all the saints. You must travel that way, too, if you want to come to Me.” (LW 21 on Matthew 7:13-20)

It seems to me that you and I stand midway between two great sayings of Jesus — sayings that at first seem contrary to one another. Here we are near our Lord’s say about the narrow gate and the way that is hard, but leads to life. But farther on down the road in Matthew’s Gospel, we are going read about the yoke that is easy:

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:28-30, RSV)

How can both be true? How can it be that the way to life is narrow and hard, and yet Christ’s yoke is easy and his burden is light? Perhaps the best I can do is to bid us to listen to the voice of our seasoned brothers and sisters in Christ. With hair that is graying and backs that are bending, still there are Christians who have walked a long time with Jesus, and they have not regretted a thing, even when the going was tough. Even when the narrow gate gave them a headache, they would not exchange their narrow way for an easier and broader way. If they regret anything, it is that they did not follow the narrow way with even more integrity.

St. Paul is one of those seasoned Christians who gives a good testimony like this in Romans Chapter 8:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. (Romans 8:18, RSV)

So, there are sufferings for Paul. But he considers it worthwhile to follow on behind Jesus.

The Apostle says a similar thing in Second Corinthians:

<sup>17</sup>For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison... (2 Corinthians 4:17, RSV)

Paul finds the difficulties of the Christian path to be very minor compared to his hope of heaven through his Savior Jesus.

But I think we can go even a little deeper into this mystery of the hard road being nonetheless an easy yoke. We must not forget about heaven, and yet let us also speak of these threescore and ten years lying before us. Let us speak of here and now and of how good it is to walk in the narrow way.

It is a good thing, for example, to be able to look at your spouse, even after half-a-century of marriage, and to know that you have been faithful. It is good to not have to flinch at the memory of adultery. It is good to know that at least in this one matter, you have walked in the narrow way. And if one has strayed from faithfulness, it is good to repent and to return to the path behind Jesus. At least in this one matter, we can get things more right. We can mend our ways and walk more closely to Jesus. And in the walking, we will love our spouse even better than before.

A clean conscience, I am saying, is a good thing in life. None of us has an entirely clean conscience. Our sins might ever be before us. And yet the narrow way is a good way. If we have not been walking in the narrow way, it is good to turn more toward it. It is good for us to walk even more closely behind Jesus as we find him in the Bible.

In our business and professional practices and all our dealings with one another, the narrow gate and the hard way mean being loyal to Jesus above all else. Judas judged that way to be too hard, and so he hastened off for his thirty pieces of silver. But he lived to regret that judgment. He sure did! Likewise with us. Let us not trade heaven for thirty pieces of silver. Let us not trade a good name on earth for thirty pieces of silver. It is good to be able to lay our heads down on the pillow at night and to be able to think that we have been fair and square with others. We have the respect of our colleagues and our employees and our customers and our neighbors, because we are trying to be one of the good ones on earth. We are trying to walk in the narrow way behind Jesus. We are trying to be Christian workers in this world.

Jesus is not asking us to do something that he himself has not done and does still. Jesus himself walked in the narrow way. That is the great thing about the temptation stories. Jesus turned down glory and wealth. He even turned down something so basic as bread. Jesus turned down easier ways and broader paths because the cause was great: you! You are His cause, for which he walked the narrow way all the way to the cross.

Martin Luther once pointed out that though the Christian path be narrow and hard, nonetheless it is a path that has been trod by many good people in the past and by many good people even now. Indeed, the Bible speaks of a great "cloud of witnesses" who have walked in the narrow way (Hebrews 12:1). And so, the Christian path is not really a lonely path, if only we would permit our eyes to see Christ and the saints cheering us on. Luther makes this point. He says that the Christian should think this way to himself or herself:

I see my neighbor and the whole city, yes, the whole world, living differently. All those who are great or noble or rich, the princes and the lords, are allied with it. Nevertheless I have an ally who is greater than all of them, namely, Christ and His Word. When I am all alone, therefore, I am still not alone. Because I have the Word of God, I have Christ with me, together with all the dear angels and all the saints since the beginning of the world. Actually there is a bigger crowd and a more glorious procession surrounding me than there could be in the whole world now. Only I cannot see it with my eyes, and I have to watch and bear the offense of having so many people forsake me or live and act in opposition to me...It is certainly true, if we accurately total up both sides, that the believers have the advantage. Therefore they should not want to trade places with the wicked. (Martin Luther on Matthew 7:13-20)

Let me end by saying that this is how we will make ourselves most useful to others: by walking in the narrow way. For all of its bluster, the world will come to value a true Christian. Many crimes and sins have been committed in the name of Jesus, and that is a terrible burden for the Church and for individual Christians to bear. But I am not speaking about you and me doing crimes and sins in the name of Jesus. I am speaking of the real thing. I am speaking of true discipleship. I am speaking of following Jesus as we find him in the Bible and in the great tradition of the church. If we be those kind of folk, we will be good people in our land. We will be salt of the earth and light of the world (Matthew 5). We will be a blessing to others. There is no need for others to fear us on a late-night subway or sidewalk. There is no need for others to sigh and say, "There goes another thief. There goes another cheat. There goes another shabby worker. There goes another breaker of human hearts." Rather, our neighbors will say of us, "There goes someone I can count on. There goes someone with sympathy and compassion in his heart, in her heart. There goes someone who puts me in mind of the Jesus I heard about back in Sunday School days."

In this way, in our lives in the narrow way, we will bring some credit to Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.