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“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 7:12-14

“Lord, teach us to master our selves in order that we may become the servants of others.”

When I was in middle school and the early years of high school, my friends and I played a lot of street hockey during the winter. We didn't use any hockey pads, even when we were playing goalie and it was not unusual to get hit by a stick or by the frozen tennis ball in a way that left a lump or stung a bit. Most of the time it wasn't a problem, but every now and then things would get a little testy. One day my good friend Jim, who had a short temper, got whacked by someone across the shins. Jim then retaliated by taking his hockey stick like a Japanese samurai and hit the guy who hit him and said, *“Jesus said, ‘Do unto others as you want them to do to you’ so since you did it to me you must have wanted me to do it to you.”* A couple of us intervened before any punches could be thrown and I said, *“I don't think that's quite what Jesus intended.”* Jim later went to Notre Dame; they aren't called the Fighting Irish for nothing.

How well do we do with Jesus' words, ***“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.”*** If we are honest with ourselves, many of us would have to confess we find this difficult to do even with other Christians on Sunday who profess to follow the same Teacher and share the same beliefs. We may find it tough to do even with members of our own family – with our parents or children or brother or sister. If we find it challenging with family members and brothers and sisters in Christ; how do we do with the rest of the world, the rest of the week? How do we respond when the rest of the world seems to be threatening and menacing, muttering with a stick in their hands: *“Do it to others before they do it to you.”*

Jesus says, ***In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.***

We heard earlier in worship from Deuteronomy 30:15-20 the end of the law where Moses in his final message to God's people, implored them to choose life and not

death. Life came through obeying *“the commandments of the Lord your God...by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances.”* Two ways lay before the people and they had to take responsibility and choose whether they would be committed to following God or not.

Psalm 1 lays out a choice between the way of the wicked and the way of the righteous. We're told *“the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.”* Psalm 37:5 says, *“Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act.”* God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah saying in 6:16, *“Thus says the LORD: **Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.** But they said, “We will not walk in it.”*

The ancient story is God giving people the freedom to choose between life and death, between God's good and life giving way and our own way and so often people have said, “We will not walk in it.”

Jesus is offering us a choice about which way we will go much as Moses, the Psalms, and the prophets do. I drove up to Boston on Thursday morning for Vision New England's Congress event, left my car at my parent's house in Brookline and hopped on the T into downtown Boston. Getting off at Massachusetts Avenue I had just a two block walk to the Hynes Convention Center. At the corner of Mass. Ave. and Boylston St., a young woman, probably in her 20's, with a couple of small bags by her feet, was standing still looking at a map. Whether I am in Boston or on Cape Cod, I want people to enjoy those places that are special to me so I like being helpful so I asked her, *“Do you know where you are going?”* She smiled and said in a lovely British accent that she was looking a particular hotel, but she couldn't quite figure out which direction she was supposed to go on Boylston St. I turned her map 180 degrees, showed her where the hotel was and then pointed out a couple key landmarks along the way down the street. I didn't want to make her nervous by offering to walk with her part of the way so I told her I was walking in that direction so to just follow me.

Like that young woman from the United Kingdom, sometimes we may find ourselves trying to figure out where to go, what road to take, and we may be unsure, things look unfamiliar, we may even have the map up side down so we don't recognize north from south or east from east. As we stand there on the corner in our confusion and anxiety, Jesus asks us, *“Do you know where you are going?”* He knows where the

roads lead, he knows the territory, the landmarks, and he invites us to follow him on the road that leads to life.

Jesus compares the wide and easy way that leads to destruction with the narrow, hard way that leads to life. Jesus knows the easy way is tempting and taken by many people. On the wide path there are a host of folks streaming along – the road is well lit and well maintained – unlike many in Massachusetts. The road on the wide and easy way is maintained by the *“Good Intentions Paving Company.”*

“Everybody’s doing it,” is still a lame excuse whether one is a teenager in High School or an elected official lining his pockets with lobbyist money in Washington DC.

By narrow way Jesus doesn’t mean so much a self-righteous narrowness that would exclude all others who differ from us. What the narrow way of Jesus does require is a narrowing that sharpens, focuses, and concentrates on what is most worth living for. People narrow in, focus down, and sacrifice to do many things – such as learning an instrument, or a trade, or a craft. Jesus encourages us to do this in order to be more like him. To be a Christian demands dedication. Nothing worth having in life is attained without significant effort and that includes our character.

Entering the narrow gate is the beginning of a lifelong journey toward the prize which has been set aside for us. It is not enough to enter the narrow gate, thank the Lord, and find a comfortable place on the side of the road to relax and lie down for the rest of our lives. Like the folks who first heard Jesus speak these words, we too have to leave times of teaching, worship, inspiration and fellowship to return to hungry stomachs, bills to pay, and family concerns. Yet we want to do so on the way that leads to life.

In his words about the wide way that leads to destruction and the narrow way that leads to life, Jesus is pushing for us to make a decision. One thing we discover as we go through life is **our character comes from our decision making**. Life is a process of choices, forks in the road, where decisions must be made and there are no timeouts. Even not to decide is to decide. If we don’t consciously choose the narrow way we will be swept up with the crowd going the other way. Life is a road with many intersections, each one of which presents us with the choice to live our faith or to deny it, to trust in God or to trust myself. Pastor and author J. Barrie Shepherd wrote, *“There is a valid, vital sense in which the decisions that I face each day, in my personal relationships, in the struggle for integrity and responsibility on the job, in my attitudes and actions on the major public issues: war and peace, hunger, abortion, human*

*rights...in these choices I am becoming, or failing to become, a Christian. And in them I define myself far more clearly than by any words I speak, any button I pin on my lapel.*¹

Jesus' intention in verses 13-14 is practical – that we take with great seriousness our responsibility to do what is right. In one sense we want to go through the narrow gate by which we enter life with Jesus - traveling the sometimes difficult or hard road of loving other people, even and especially people we may find difficult or hard to love and treating them and everyone else as we would like to be treated. However, it is also true that part of traveling that road is **we want to help others find the narrow gate**. We don't want to just *go in* the narrow gate, giving thanks that we have made it, while thousands of others continue on the wide and easy road that leads to destruction, depression, disillusionment, dis-ease, decay, and death.

We want to let other people know – *“Hey,” don't go that that way, there's a better way. There's a way that leads to life, joy, purpose, wholeness, renewal, and resurrection.”* **As followers of Jesus it is important not just to enter the narrow gate but to help others find it.** We are invited, commanded, and compelled to tell others about the gate that leads to life and we are to do so as if we truly believed that lives are at stake.

That gate is Jesus who said, in John 10:7-10,
*“Very truly, I tell you, **I am the gate** for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. **I am the gate.** **Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.** The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. **I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.**”*

God love us so much, God has given us the freedom to choose which way we will go. The Lord wants us make the correct choice so badly that when the Law and instruction God gave to Moses wasn't enough, God sent other prophets, and ultimately Jesus, and then even the Holy Spirit to help us walk every step of the way. On the wide and easy way that leads to destruction people are always cutting each other off, there is lots of anger, road rage, and woe to you if you break down because you'll be waiting a long time for someone to help you.

On the narrow way that leads to life, progress is much slower because God's rag tag army has so many people who need assistance. The truth is the way is narrower and more difficult for some folks than for others. Some of us have had an easier road

¹ J. Barrie Shepherd, *Prayers From The Mount*, (Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1986), 1986, page 124.

than others. Some of us have cruised along pretty smoothly whether due to good fortune, wise decisions, or God's favor. Some of us have had a pretty tough time with serious bumps in the road due to circumstances beyond our control, poor decisions, or the sins of others or even our selves. Some of us know where we're going, Jesus is navigating and we're enjoying the ride. Others of us think we know, but we're kind of wandering and wondering if we're really on the best road. Some of us may be just plain lost, confused, and unsure where we are or where we want to go. Some of us may have been lost and are here because we've recognized we aren't where we want to be, we aren't where we were supposed to be, we aren't where we need to be, and we need the help of Jesus to get us on the right road. And we need some people who belong to Jesus, who've been traveling the narrow way, folks who are willing to be ambassadors for Christ, who can say, *"Do you know where you're going? Because this way is like home for me, and I'll show you the landmarks, the key points of interest, the turns you don't want to take."* Those of us who are having an easier time are meant to help our fellow pilgrims. Nobody is competing with each other, the goal on the narrow way is for everybody to be able to finish.

Last night I came back from Congress with Chris Morris. Chris was driving and he doesn't have a lot of experience driving in Boston, plus it was dark and raining. Chris' parents bought him one of those global positioning satellite systems folks have in their cars so you can't get lost, there is even a voice that speaks up at times, like when you lose the signal. I said to Chris, *"You don't need that, you've got me. I learned to drive here, there aren't many streets in this part of Boston I haven't driven, walked on, or ridden the T to. All we're going to do is go straight, and we'll run into the expressway."* As we drove I pointed out Old South Church, Boston Public Gardens, the theatre district, St. Francis House, the day shelter for the homeless where Jill worked the year before we were married, Chinatown, and then we were at Route 93. Now I don't want to put Chris on the spot, but I suspect if you were to ask him, that, even with a GPS, he probably felt a little more relaxed about finding his way out of Boston at night with me in the car than he did on Friday night when he did it alone.

In life we have to choose which road we are going to take. The biggest decision we will ever make in our lives is whether or not we are going to follow Jesus or not. That is a once in a lifetime decision and if you haven't made it, I hope you will do so today or as soon as you feel ready to trust Jesus. We each choose which road to take: the wide and easy way that ends in destruction, or the narrow and hard way leading to life. Jesus

tells us he is the gate. Jesus is also willing to get in our car and to drive with us the best way for us to go. If we will trust him, rather than relying on our selves or any other way of navigating through life, he will lead us exactly where we should go and he will make the trip more interesting and worthwhile because he has traveled this way before. He knows the history and stories and has personal experience to share and it is far more comforting having him in the car than trying to find our way alone because he is the way, the truth, and the life we are seeking.

Prayer: Lead us through the narrow gate that leads to life and help us to show the way to others who are going down unproductive or destructive paths. Help us to take up our cross and follow Christ. I ask this in the name of Jesus who was willing to die on a cross to point us in the right direction. May our obedience be the reward of his suffering.

Blessing:

God guide our feet along the narrow way that leads to life.

May we walk out into the world, not with a yawn, a groan, or a grudge;
but with praise and true thanksgiving on our lips and in our hearts.