

“Off the Beaten Path”
Matthew 7:1-14, 24-29
Fifth Sunday After Epiphany
February 10, 2019
First Christian Church
Mahtomedi, MN

I have always loved anything that deals with transportation. Trains, planes, automobiles, they all interest me. It is not shocking for those with autism, like myself to be interested in objects like trains and planes and I fit that description. When I was a kid, I would look at road atlases for hours and would then start drawing maps of my own with freeways going hither and yon.

I've always had an interest in the Interstate Highway System. Sign into to law by President Dwight Eisenhower, the government started building divided highways throughout the nation. Somewhere in the 1990s, the System was deemed complete, at least complete to its original plan.

People who don't like freeways talk about how it went through neighborhoods, uprooting communities, many of them communities of color. All of them are valid criticisms, but I still have a love for freeways for many reasons. One reason is that they tend to be safer than the two lane highways of old. I can remember when I was in college driving out to Colorado. Interstate 70 outside of Denver enters into the Rocky Mountains. The curves are not sharp which makes it easier to drive. They have some smoother grades that make it not as dangerous to go up or down the highway. Compare this with taking US 40, the old two lane highway that parallels I-70. To get to the resort were staying at meant going up steep roads with sharp curves. The road was literally between a rock and a hard place. On the one side you would see a steep cliff face, which made you think that a big rock could fall on your car at any moment. On the other side was a steep drop off that could send you plummeting to the road below. There. Was. no. guardrail.

Interstate highways are safer and get people there quicker. Now there is a drawback; they are not the most interesting roads. They are clean and efficient, but they the scenery is rather boring. Two lane highways are dangerous, but they do have a certain beauty to them. I go

back to driving on two lane roads in Colorado: they are dangerous, potentially deadly, but they are some spectacular views.

Sometimes the easiest road is not the best road. Sometimes the hard road is better.

Today we are finishing up the Sermon on the Mount. Chapter 7 is focused on how those who follow Jesus are supposed to live and what Jesus is saying is that to live in the way of Jesus is not easy.

He starts by talking about refusing to judge people. Now, this is a confusing text because it makes it sound like we should never say when someone is doing something wrong. When Pope Francis was asked about his views on gay people, he made a statement that said, "Who Am I to judge?" People thought this meant that he approved of LGBT people in the life of the church. Putting that aside, the word judge is really the wrong word to use here. The Greek word used here is actually condemn. What Jesus is saying here that people should not condemn others. They are not to exclude them, not say they are beyond redemption, or consigned to hell. Jesus is calling for people to show some grace to others. There is nothing Christian about saying that someone you might not agree with is doomed forever and ever. The Message version of the Bible has one of the better ways of translating Matthew 7:1:

"Don't pick on people, jump on their failures, criticize their faults— unless, of course, you want the same treatment. That critical spirit has a way of boomeranging."

Jesus then moves on to prayer. Jesus tells the crowd, "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." What Jesus is getting at here is that people should not be timid in praying to God. Many people were afraid to pray to God because they were afraid of God. To these people, God was a punitive deity, so people would approach God like a timid Oliver asking for another bowl of gruel. Jesus presents a different view of God, one that wasn't ready to punish, but was loving and wanting the best for people. Jesus tells the people that God wants to give good gifts, just as a parent loves their child.

Next, Jesus moves to the rule, the Golden Rule as most of us know. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." When we think of the Golden Rule, we think of it as worldly wisdom, words to live by. But that way of looking at the Golden Rule is not the way it was intended. The Golden Rule is how we want to be treated if the ways of Christ ruled in our lives.

All of this leads to where Jesus talks about wide and narrow roads. When I was younger, I can remember seeing these images this phrase from Jesus where you would see this wide road filled with people on the road to hell and this narrow path leading to heaven. But that is not really the way to interpret this passage. What this passage is talking about is what it costs to live as a follower of Jesus. Take Jesus call to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. The wide road is one where it is quite easy to hate those who who hurt us. It is quite harder for us to love those who are opposed to us.

Following Jesus has costs. There is beauty in following Jesus, but it will be something that costs you something. The difference between a freeway and a two lane highway is that if you take the two lane road you give up getting to a place in time. But you might gain seeing the wonder that is all around you: the mountains or the rushing rivers just a few feet from you.

To be a Christian is to follow a narrow path. It means to follow in a way that is countercultural and that always has it costs. I am interested by how priests and nuns in the Catholic Church give up their lives for Jesus. They give up living a "normal" life all to follow a sense of call. I am not calling that we are Christians have to become nuns, but we do need to realize that when we seek to merciful people, when we seek to not condemn folks, we are doing things that are not in participating in the ways of the world and that will mean people might see us as crazy, softhead or even dangerous.

As this church is seeking to learn what is its vision, it is important that we understand that part of that vision should be to seek to follow Jesus, to be like Jesus even at the cost of the world. The church has to point towards the kingdom of God and it should live in a way that shows a different way to live in our world.

I still love taking freeways. But every so often, taking the side road is a good idea. It takes longer, but you might be all the better for it. Thanks be to God. Amen.