

Bearing Good Fruit

Matthew 7:13-20

Back in college, I took an elective class in philosophy. On the final exam, we were given a bonus question. See if you can get the bonus points. You are at a crossroads. One of the roads goes to a blissful heaven, and the other road goes to a terrible hell. Unfortunately, you have no idea which road goes where. Fortunately, there are two robots at the crossroad who know the answer. One of the robots always tells the truth. The other robot always lies. Unfortunately, you have no idea with robot lies and which one tells the truth. What question can you ask that will tell you the correct way to go?

So here is the answer. You ask one question to either of the robots. It does not matter which one. You ask, "What would the other robot say is the road to heaven?" And then you take the opposite path of what you are told. Think about it. If you happen to ask the robot that always lies, it will tell you the opposite answer that the truthful robot will tell you. But you take the opposite way. If you happen to ask the robot that always tells you the truth, it will tell you the lie that the other robot will tell you, and so you go the opposite direction. Either way, you get to travel to your heavenly bliss.

I suppose some of you might think this is a rather suspicious way to start this sermon. Maybe you wonder if this is a political analogy that I am making two days before the presidential election. I can see that: We are at a crossroads, and there are two paths we can take - one path leads to the Promised Land, and the other way leads you to hell. One computer tells the truth, and the other one lies. How do you figure out which one to trust? But I want to assure you, that is not my focus.

I thought about that test question when I read the scripture, not when I was thinking about the election. Jesus uses an old rabbinic teaching method, in that He offers us a choice between two roads, either the wide, easy path or narrow, hard path. He warns us that the wide and easy path leads to destruction, while the narrow and hard path leads to abundant life. He wants us to make a choice for life.

We may object that life is not so simple to reduce it to an either/or choice. Life is more like a multiple-choice question with lots of options, or maybe life is more like a long essay question. But the rabbis had it right. There are times we need to see that we do have stark choices that will make all the difference in the world.

We may also not like this analogy of Jesus' because we associate it with a more fundamentalist approach to religion. When I hear pastors preach this analogy about the narrow or the wide gate as a young boy, the choice in my evangelic upbringing was between accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior and going to heaven OR taking the easy and wide path of a worldly life and going straight to hell.

But that is clearly not what Jesus is up to. Jesus is just finishing up preaching the Sermon on the Mount, where He has given numerous teachings about how we are to go and live our lives. His concern is not with choosing Him or having the correct doctrines. He is only concerned about one thing: will you follow His teaching or not. Will you do what He has been teaching you to do? You can say you're Christian and have all the right beliefs until the cows come home, but in the end, one thing matters: what you do! So it is not about whether we decide to accept Jesus. It is about what we decide to do in the living of our lives.

But Jesus has more to say to us. He says, *"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit...Thus you will know them by their fruits."*

Now we find ourselves back to the analogy of the two robots at the crossroad wondering which robot can we should trust. If we have two paths to choose between, we want to make sure we are not being guided down the wrong path. Jesus understood that there will be many false prophets, like the lying robot who will seem genuine, but will send you down the wrong path to your destruction. Why? Because there are people in this world dressed as lambs when they are in reality a ravenous wolf ready to consume an unsuspecting flocks of gullible sheep. So many followers of some televangelists have discovered this after they had emptied their bank accounts. How can you tell which robot you can trust so you can go down the right path?

Jesus has an answer for that dilemma. You do not listen to what they have to say. You look at what they actually do. As Jesus put it, if you want to know what sort of tree they are, you look at the fruits they produce. A bad tree produces bad fruit. A good tree produces good fruit. Huh!

What are the good fruits? The Apostle Paul, teaching years later, gives a wonderful list of fruit in which we ought to judge those who would lead us. The fruits of the spirit are: love, joy, peace, forbearance (or patience), kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

If your read the Sermon on the Mount you will see that Jesus would add: valuing those who are weak, justice and generosity to the poor, inclusiveness for those left out, forgiveness for those who harm you rather than revenge, loving the enemy, selflessness, and sacrifice rather than self-enrichment.

Today, I want to center the focus about taking the narrow path and bearing good fruit on stewardship. It is that time of year. Of course, this has something to do with raising the church budget. But my focus is about something far more important and that is our spiritual well-being. Spiritually healthy people practice what they confess to believe. There is not much daylight between what they confess and the fruit they bear in their own lives. Much of the time, they do what they say. You know you can trust them because of this.

Billy Graham said, "Give me five minutes with a person's checkbook and I will tell you where his heart is." That is a quote that has disturbed my sleep more than once. We feel uncomfortable when our religion starts messing too much with where we actually live.

And the truth is, it is our impulse to hold on to things rather than to let go and share. We are more easily motivated by the ways of fear than the ways of love. It is a narrow path to be willing to let go of what we have and be generous.

The longer I live, the more I have come to understand. Father Richard Rohr says that the first half of life is about the development of the self and getting ahead as best we are able. We struggle to establish a career; maybe seek and find a spouse and have children we can hold onto; we work to accumulate wealth. This is not an evil pursuit, but it is rather self-focused, and we can become so accustomed to getting ahead that we lose track of what life is really about. Some never feel they can never accumulate enough to be satisfied. And they are correct: you can never have enough of anything of the world's goods to be satisfied.

But just on the other side of middle life, if we are blessed, we start to realize something else. More important than gaining and learning to hold on, life is about holding things lightly, appreciating them, and learning to let go. If you do not learn this lesson in your life, lady wisdom will teach you that, as you age, you have to let go regardless of whether you want to or not. It has been my experience that those who have been practicing holding things more lightly and letting go have a much easier time when faced standing at death's door and entering into that final mystery. How much greater joy there is when we learn this when we are very young. So, I do not have trouble asking people to be more generous with their church and in all aspects of their lives. It is a path to a more abundant life. It is the narrow path, not the wide one, which most people choose instead.

Fred Craddock had a niece in Arizona who could not stand the thought of a dog being destroyed, especially greyhound dogs who are used for racing and then disposed of. So she goes out and adopts greyhounds. She has several of these big old greyhound dogs in her house. She loves them.

Craddock was in another home where they had adopted a racing dog. He was a big, spotted greyhound, and he was lying in the den. One of the kids in the family, just a toddler, was pulling on its tail, and a little older kid had his head over on that old dog's stomach, using it for a pillow. The dog just seemed so happy.

Craddock said to the dog, "Are you still racing?"
"No, no," the dog said, "I don't race anymore."
Craddock said, "Do you miss the glitter and excitement of the track?"
"No," he replied.
"Well, what was the matter? Did you get too old to race?"
"No, I still had some race in me."
"Well, what then? Did you not win?" I asked.
"I won over a million dollars for my owner."
"Well, what was it? Bad treatment?"
"Oh no," the dog said, "they treated us royally when we were racing."
"Did you get crippled?"
"No."
"Then why?" He pressed.
He said, "I quit."

"You quit?"

"Yes," he said, "I quit."

"Why did you quit?"

"I discovered that what I was chasing was not really a rabbit, and I quit."

He looked at me and said, "All that running and running and running and running, and what was I chasing? It wasn't even real."

Sometimes, you have to make a clear decision about how it is you are going to live your life. "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. Learn to trust and to let go." Amen.