

we know the way? And Jesus answered, “I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the father except through me.”

You can’t get there on your own! It doesn’t matter how nice you are, how good your record is, or how religious you’ve been, there is no way for you to find your way without a guide. And there is only one guide who can lead you in your frailty and brokenness into the new dimension of being which we call heaven.

I said at the beginning that this offends us. It sounds too narrow. It sounds too exclusive.

But think about what it takes to become a citizen of Canada. There are certain requirements you must meet. Sure, we expedite a certain number of refugees each year – but they need to prove that their lives are in imminent danger. But if you’re just a person living somewhere else, and you want to come here, there are some very high standards you must meet.

You need to prove that you are a good sort of person with skills that we’re looking for, and you have the resources to set yourself up here and on and on the list of requirements goes.

It’s actually very difficult to become a citizen of Canada. The demands are great. It takes a long time. You need to hire lawyers and professionals to navigate the process and there are no guarantees. And we’re one of the most welcoming countries in the world!

But what Jesus is telling us is not some impossible requirement. Do you want to be a citizen in the kingdom of God? Good, but you can’t earn your way in. This is not a place for the well to do, the privileged and the well qualified. It’s a place for those who are poor in spirit, for those who mourn, for those who are meek and

lowly in heart, for those who hunger and thirst for righteousness and who are merciful and pure in heart. It’s a place for those who are peacemakers, for those who are persecuted, for those who are insulted.

In other words, it’s a place for those who know they need Jesus, because you need a guide. And he’s the only way to get there – its remarkably fair and inclusive like that.

You see, this way into the kingdom of heaven is actually the most generous, most inclusive, most fair way to run a kingdom. Here in Canada, we keep things pretty tight – only a certain number of qualified people can get in.

But that’s not how it is in God’s kingdom. God isn’t worried about your qualifications he’s worried about your heart. The kingdom of God is not for the proud – the people who say “I did it my way.”

The kingdom of God is for those who say, “I have no right to be here...I’m profoundly underqualified...but I know the king – and he’s generous and loving and kind – and in his loving kindness he brought me here...carrying me the whole way.”

“Small is the gate and narrow is the road that leads to life...”

And that road leads us right to Jesus himself. Our only hope, our only guide and our only pass into the kingdom of God.

Thanks be to God, Amen.

## ***“Sermon on the Mount: Narrow vs. Board Way”***

*October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023 — Selby United Church — Scripture: 7:12-23*

*By Rev. Mike Putnam*

One of the tricky things a minister has to do is find just the right words for a funeral. It’s tricky because it’s actually fairly rare that a minister knows, with any kind of certainty, where the deceased stood on matters of faith.

So, we tend to make some pretty big assumptions. I mean, I may know that they were church goers. I may know that they were baptized as an infant, confirmed as a teen and even went on to teach Sunday school when their own kids were young. But rarely do I know the true nature of their faith.

Faith is a matter of the heart, so we leave that judgement to God.

And I bring this up because so often, when I have the honour of being part of those sacred end of life conversations, it’s shocking to me how fuzzy most Christians are on the details of the gospel. It’s amazing to me how often, when I ask someone if they are ready in their hearts to meet their maker, they respond with a statement about their qualifications for heaven.

They’ve sat in a church all their life, they’ve done their time on committees, they’re by all outward appearances the best kind of Christian. But when it comes right down to it, they don’t appear to be resting in the good news of the gospel.

But without the good news of the gospel all they have is their own moral record – and for most of us that’s no place to rest.

And so, this morning Jesus wants us to get our thinking a little clearer. This morning we’re in the final section of the

Sermon on the Mount – Jesus’ most sweeping statement about what it means to take up residence in the kingdom of God – it’s the constitution for God’s realm. But today we need to talk about citizenship.

And this morning Jesus wants us to know that universalism isn’t how it works. The kingdom of heaven isn’t for everyone. But that offends us, doesn’t it? That’s not how it seems it should be. I mean sure, maybe the worst kind of criminals shouldn’t get in - Hitler and Stalin shouldn’t be allowed. But Aunt Roberta and Uncle Bob, I mean they weren’t that bad...

Shouldn’t everyone with a reasonably good record get in? Isn’t there many ways up the mountain? Aren’t all religions and philosophies offering basically the same thing? Isn’t God a forgiving God and shouldn’t we take a more generous stance on all of this?

But see, then we come to texts like ours for today where Jesus says just the opposite. He says his is a narrow road and the others lead to destruction, he says some trees bear no good fruit, he says some teachers are missing the mark. And so, these exclusive texts challenge us!

But here’s what I want us to consider this morning. What if these “exclusive” sounding texts are the basis of the world’s greatest hope. What if what Jesus is saying here isn’t some unfair arbitrary set of rules designed to keep people out, but in fact, are evidence of just how loving, generous and gracious our Lord really is?

Well, let’s entertain that thought as we work our way through this thorny little passage bit by bit.

Jesus begins his discourse on citizenship by talking about narrow gates and wide gates. He says, “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”

Why is the way that leads to destruction so broad? Because most people are on a quest to save themselves. Most people live as if heaven is real, but the only one who can get you there is you.

Lots of people like Jesus because he shows us the best of humanity – they treat him like our great model. We all just need to be a little more like Jesus. But here’s the problem: we can’t be. None of us has met that lofty standard - not even close.

Now sure, we should aim for Jesus, but the reality is we will never get there on our own. The curse of sin and death is too great – and we’re all infected. Just when we think we’re doing a pretty good job up pops our weaknesses or our frailties and our good intentions unrealized.

My daughter loves The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe movie. She watches it over and over again. There’s something about this possibility of going into a closet and entering into this whole other world that has captured her imagination.

But of course, this image, created by C.S. Lewis, is based on this text. Narrow is the gate that leads us into the kingdom of God. You can’t make your own way. The kingdom requires us to enter through this small place that is opened for us by God – Because it’s not a Frank Sinatra’s “I did it my way” kind of thing. Jesus says, “follow me” I’ll show you the way. Jesus says, “I am the way...”

And so, now Jesus has something

to say about true and false prophets. He says, “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them...Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.”

And this is where we need to be discerning about who we learn our faith from. Prophets are modern day preachers. I have a prophetic task amongst you – which is to say I stand up here Sunday by Sunday and proclaim the Word of God. But how do you know that I’m teaching faithfully? How do you know that you should listen to a word I’m saying? Well, that can be tricky, but Jesus’ answer is to look at the fruit of my ministry and of my life.

Am I doing this for the money? Am I doing it for the fame? Am I doing it for the power and the control? Or am I motivated to do this only because God called me to do it?

See, the quality of the teachings you listen to are very important. Because it is very possible that you could sit in church Sunday by Sunday and never really hear the gospel. You might hear about good advice for healthy living, you might hear social or political commentary, you might hear my opinions on this issue or that matter – but that’s not what this pulpit is for. This pulpit is reserved for eternal matters – matters of the soul – matters of the urgency of the Kingdom of God.

But it can be hard to tell! You might say, “I’m not so sure that I heard God speaking to me today. I think I just heard Rev. Mike.” And Jesus is saying the only way to know for sure is to look at the fruit of the ministry. Are people coming to a saving faith in Jesus Christ? Is the church growing or is it dwindling? Is there evidence of the

Holy Spirit at work? Or is it more like a club without much spiritual activity going on? Look at the fruit.

But enough about me, let’s talk about you. Now Jesus moves on to the most bone chilling section of this teaching. Jesus wants to talk to us about true and false disciples.

Jesus says, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”

Who are these people? They are people inside the church – they’re people with orthodox beliefs (they call Jesus Lord). They’re people who do good in their communities (they are teaching and helping people in need). They’re even people with spiritual power (performing miracles). But they’re people who do not know Jesus as their saviour.

People often say, well surely all religions are the same and God will see the good people for who they are. But that shows that you don’t understand what is really happening here. It’s not that God is only cheering for the home team or picking the cream of the crop. It’s that we all need saving.

We can’t get where we’re going by being nice any more than someone lost on the other side of a river can just wander their way home. They need a search and rescue operation. And so do we. But there’s only one person capable of doing that – we need someone who has made that journey ahead of us.

This week my brother-in-law got on

a plane to travel halfway around the world to check one big item off his personal bucket list. He’s going to climb Everest (at least to the base camp). He’s been training for months, he’s changed his diet, he’s been preparing his travel itinerary and working out every last detail.

At the family Thanksgiving gathering last week he was peppered by family who are pretty sure this endeavor is a bad idea. What will you eat? How far will you climb? How long will it take? What will you pack? What if you get sick?

A couple of family members had watched a documentary, and it sounds downright awful. The trails are littered with garbage, human waste, and even dead bodies. There are criminals who take advantage of foreigners. The situation sounds dire along the way.

Finally, he said, “people I’m not doing this alone! You can’t do it alone. I’ve got a guide. He will be with me every step of the way.”

In fact, the only thing he couldn’t properly train for was the change in elevation which makes the oxygen levels in the air thinner as they ascend. He said his guide will be monitoring his oxygen level the whole way. “You can’t go up Everest safely without a guide,” he told us.

I’m reminded of Jesus words in John 14 when he says to his disciples, “My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.”

“But Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can