

Lessons Along the Way: Finding the Good Path

A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Matthew 7:13-20
on March 19, 2023, with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC
I.

Back in the summer of 2019, I traveled with our youth to Passport Camp. That year, Passport was held at my alma mater after all (go Paladins!), and any chance to be with our teenagers who I so loved, among the camp I so loved, on the campus of Furman which I so loved – well, that was just the actual best.

After everyone wakes up, and rubs sleep out of blurry eyes, and stumbles to breakfast, Passport youth camp begins all together with Morning Celebration, sort of a ‘pep rally meets dance party meets wake up call meets Jesus.’ These 30 minutes set the tone for the day of Bible study, mission projects, fun and fellowship, and worship. So on the first morning of Morning Celebration, as we made our way into Furman’s McAlister Auditorium, you could feel the pent-up energy among us all. I was ready – had my camp shirt on, my backpack ready, my Starbucks in hand – until I saw the signs plastered on every single door leading into the Auditorium: “no drinks allowed.”

Now I’m someone who mostly follows the rules, but guys: it was my first cup of coffee, and I’d only had a sip or two! And I’m at youth camp, for crying out loud! Coffee is non-negotiable. So I started bargaining with the signs in my head: “I know McAlister Auditorium like the back of my hand; I practically lived in here as a music major at Furman (ahem, 20 years ago, but still!) And I’m a mom of three! I’m almost always carrying multiple items, most which don’t belong to me, most regularly something liquid. I mean, dear God, I’m a grown woman of 40 years old. I think I can handle a cup of coffee. Surely those signs are really meant for the *campers*, not the *40-somethings*.”

So the doors opened, and in we strode into McAlister, I – surreptitiously – with coffee in hand, only partially trying to conceal it. Our group settled into our row, probably 20 rows back from the front, behind a host of campers and leaders. The room was electric, a year’s worth of pent-up Passport energy finally released. Hundreds of campers are up and moving, hitting beachballs around the room and dancing the “Church Clap” and the “Waka-Waka,” both camp favorites. And as we crashed, flushed and hyped, back into our chairs to prepare for the devotion – of course you see where this is going – I accidentally tipped over my “almost-full-except-for-a-couple-of-sips” cup of coffee and watched in absolute horror as it gushed down the slanted floor to the stage. I looked aghast as kids and leaders realized that hot coffee was coursing under their shoes, a hot brown river soaking their backpacks, lapping over anything they had dared set on the ground. My face inflamed immediately into a hot crimson, and of course I’m sweating, in this, one of the most mortifying moments of my life, sure I’m about to be dragged on stage and made an example AS I SHOULD BE. Wishing a giant hole would just open up and suck me down, I instead stepped out on the walk of shame down front to find a Passport staffer and confess my Starbucks sin, feeling every eye on me in disgust. (Pretty sure one of my ministerial colleagues whose backpack was drenched in my coffee is still mad at me.) And as I fumbled through my words and profuse apologies, in my flustered state, I actually said out loud to this poor staffer now saddled with my mistake the thing I had thought only in my very own head: *I didn’t think those directions applied to me!*

Following directions, huh? Not for the faint of heart, let me tell you! Especially when the faint of heart think themselves above the need.

II.

We're back with Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, nearing the conclusion of these lessons along the way. They're lessons, as we've learned over these months, about how we live into the coming kingdom of God, how we treat each other and posture ourselves, how we pray and lead and love and give.

Today's passage is brief, two warnings sounded by Jesus about the challenges and risks of kingdom living: the first about the direction we should follow, and the second about how to discern our leader along the way. There are two options, Jesus tells us. Which path might you take?

"The gateway into God's dream for this world is a narrow one," Jesus tells his listeners. "There's a wide and easy road that many will take, and narrow and rough road that few will follow. The hard road is the road that leads to life." Jesus' hearers would think of Jeremiah, of course, and his warning to the people of Israel: "see I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death." Two paths, and only one you will choose. And the way of the kingdom, Jesus makes clear, is a narrower path. It's not for everyone. This way of the kingdom asks you to do God's work of Love in this world, and sometimes that's just hard work to do. It isn't always congruent with the ways of this world: ways of status and efficiency, of disposability and discord, of self-protection and self-sufficiency. The way of the kingdom is a way of reconciliation and grace, of sabbath and compassion, where last are first, and least are essential, and the good of the whole is always prioritized over the good of the one. Yes, this way applies to you. Will you take it?

"There are two kinds of leaders," Jesus continues, "ones that seem as gentle and wise as sheep, but instead are ravenous like wolves; and others

that are good and fruitful like trees. You'll know them by their fruits." Jesus reminds the hearer that appearance and reality are not always congruous, to be alert to what lies beneath one's shiny exterior and always evaluate based on the real effects of one's life. Look for the fruit, Jesus says, mixing his metaphors to evoke the image of a tree, flush with grapes and figs and all that nourishes and sustains. The path of God's kingdom asks you to live in such a way that your very life becomes full of the Spirit's fruits: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. It doesn't always prioritize the ways that get certain ones ahead of others, ways of charisma and charm, of power and preference. Yes, this discernment applies to you. Will you follow?¹

III.

Two types of paths and two types of guides, Jesus says. Next week, we'll hear about the two types of foundations upon which we build.

But oh how we know the easy way and the bitter fruit. Instead of loving our enemies, oh how much *easier* it would be if we could dismiss our enemies, discarding those who differ from our politics, our way of life, our theology, our priorities without guilt or grief. Instead of making things right, oh how much *easier* it would be if we could ignore the problems, evade the truth, soften the blows, coddle the cantankerous. Instead of trying to be salt and light in the world, oh how much *easier* it would be if we could just make our money and build our houses and work our jobs and take our trips and read our books and live our lives, all without worrying about the impact of our choices. Instead of seeking reconciliation and forgiveness, oh how much

¹ Grateful, as I've been throughout this series, for the work of Tom Long in his *Westminster Bible Companion* volume of Matthew, for Anna Case-Winter's *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* volume of Matthew, and Amy-Jill Levine's *Sermon on the Mount: A Beginner's Guide to the Kingdom of Heaven*. Each of these voices informed today's exegesis.

easier it would be if we could just cancel those who make us mad, announcing with glee that we're done with the one who betrayed our trust, the one who failed us yet again, the one whose very presence belies all we think matters in the world, the one whose bad decision became the emotional equivalent of spilled coffee all over our bag – now ours to clean up and make right. Instead of trying to attend to our body, and mind, and heart, and soul in such a way that we know our fruit will be good, oh how much *easier* it would be to just consume fast food for our bodies, our minds, our hearts, and our souls. Life is already hard enough, we say. Discernment is difficult enough, we say. Can't we take the easy street and the mediocre fruit a time or two?

Or even when we've built up a more heightened awareness to live our Christian lives away from that easy street or mediocre fruit, we're not immune to the lessons still. You know, actually I think these two warnings are representative of one of the challenges that plague longtime Christians the worst. I'll call it "I-already-know-that"-ism... or maybe "I-don't-need-the-directions"-itis. "I-already-know-that"-ism suggests that there are parts of the Christian life we pretty well think we've got covered. "I-already-know-that"-ism can look at some of the harder challenges of Jesus (like loving your enemies or taking up your cross) and recognize these as lifelong lessons to learn, but then look to others (like love God, love your neighbor, pray, give, sacrifice, forgive) and think, "you know, I do those things pretty well, I generally live my life as a good and kind person, I don't do anything flagrantly wrong – no murders over here! – so you know, I know what it means to be a Christian, at least worthy enough of a B+ on the final exam!"

"I-don't-need-the-directions"-itis wants to direct the hard stuff to the people that *really* need it. "Don't come to me and tell me to 'be imitators of

God,' or 'clothe myself in compassion,' we Christians say. "I learned those a long time ago! Go tell Uncle Phil over there – *have you heard what conspiracy theories he's been saying recently?* – or give that message to the annoying lady at my doctor's office who will not put my call through to the right people! I've been at this a long time, guys. I got it. I teach Sunday School, I have my Bible on my nightstand, I follow some famous Christians on Facebook, I pick up a few extra items at the grocery for Crisis Control – heck, I've even served on the Policy Committee at church! I don't need you to tell me again; these directions are for the other people, not for me."

"I-already-know-that"-ism and "I-don't-need-the-directions"-itis sound familiar, don't they? They keep us from examining our beliefs and assumptions and can further harm people in our life without even realizing it. They might start innocently enough, and from a generally good-hearted place, but over time, can become like death by 1000 paper cuts, one spilled cup of coffee at a time. That's the best case scenario. But then think of those who learned long ago that the Bible said, "women are to be silent in the church," or that "slaves should obey their masters," or that "homosexuality is an abomination," and then refuse any nuance or context or further awareness of these words because "I already know this" and "I don't need the directions," remember? Their path is set!

And after awhile, we realize we've sidled over to the easy way, where the road is big and broad and cluttered with disease and dis-ease. After awhile, we find that the actual guides of our lives – those whose voices set our agenda and to which we measure our days – come more from the books we read, the podcasts we hear, the news we consume, the movies we watch,

the accounts we follow, than perhaps even Jesus himself. After awhile, we may even realize that the life we're living isn't the life of discipleship at all.

IV.

The late Black theologian Howard Thurman liked to tell a story of his grandmother, a former enslaved person. For in her growing up years, she remembered two services for the enslaved every Sunday. The first was organized by the master, where the appointed preacher proclaimed each week of the instructions, in his words, that God gave on how to be a better slave. The second service came after the formal first, where all who were enslaved would "steal away to Jesus." There, they'd hear another sermon, one that shared a different path, one preached not by wolves but by another shepherd. And how did they know? Because this one ended with the words: "you are not slaves, you are the children of God."²

V.

Friends, I want to encourage all of us today to lay down that which we think we've got figured out and that which we perceive we don't need directions for. Instead, pick up a map. Discover the narrow road. Find the fruitful voices in your life. Look carefully in your life and the lives of others for evidence of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Check your rightness and perfectionism and knowledge and ego and years at the door. Become a novice again in the way of Love. Rediscover the delight of finding this way of Jesus and hearing his voice in your ear for the very first time. Let him slip his hand in yours and lead you home.

² Story as told by Bishop Michael Curry, *Love is the Answer*, p69-70.

It might be that you sound again like Thomas Merton – “my Lord God, I have no idea where I’m going!” – but this, friends, this is the way of life!
Amen!