

“The Highway and the Stairs”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Matthew 7:1-14, 21-29
February 10, 2019
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

The wide gate:

*Living easy, living free
Season ticket on a one-way ride
Asking nothing, leave me be
Taking everything in my stride
Don't need reason, don't need rhyme
Ain't nothing I would rather do
Going down, party time
My friends are gonna be there too
I'm on the highway to hell
-AC/DC, 1979*

The narrow gate:

*And as we wind on down the road
Our shadows taller than our soul
There walks a lady we all know
Who shines white light and wants to show
How everything still turns to gold
And if you listen very hard
The tune will come to you at last
When all are one and one is all
To be a rock and not to roll
And she's buying the stairway to heaven
-Led Zeppelin, 1971*

I don't remember when it was first pointed out to me that there is a *stairway* to heaven and a *highway* to hell, and that perhaps this is a commentary on the expected number of travelers to each destination by the civil engineering departments of the eternal realms.

It has also been pointed out to me that the city of Chicago is a den of iniquity, teeming with fornicators.

You can learn about that, and more, from Samuel Chambers, known as the State Street Preacher. If you get off the El at State and Lake and stomp down the metal steps and head toward the Chicago Theatre, you'll hear him before you see him. For nearly fifty years, Chambers has stood on State Street in a double-breasted suit with a suitcase and his trusty microphone and amp informing passersby that they are bound for the highway, not the stairs. They are ignoring God's word. They are feminists. They are smokers. They are gay. They are bald. They are ignoring him and going about their business. You

can't call yourself a true Chicagoan until the State Street Preacher has cast his judgment upon you and deemed you ready for the flames.

When Jesus says, "Do not judge" it sounds like an impossible order a parent might give, like being told not to pick on a younger sibling or, under no circumstances, to taste the Play-Doh. It's gonna happen. We judge. It's vital to our survival — judging bad situations from good situations. We tell kids to "make good decisions!" and they would be completely unable to do that without making some judgments. Jesus has just made a bunch of judgments — about how people pray and fast and what's going on in the synagogue and where people's hearts are. Granted, he's Jesus and we're not, but incarnation and all, it doesn't seem particularly effective to offer judgment of right from wrong in one breath and to forbid such judgment in the next.

It would seem, then, that Jesus means something more specific here. I think it leans more toward what the State Street Preacher does all day. This judgment hangs out in the neighborhood of condemnation.¹ Maybe that's condemnation to the highway, or maybe it's simply condemnation to being outside God's grace, or a community's ability to love, or outside the possibility of redemption or relationship.

Which we, of course, would never do. We would never put ourselves on the judgment seat while God has gotten up to make popcorn.

Truthfully, most of us wouldn't. But we might be tempted to let our preacher or our preferred pundit or our president do the dirty work for us. We could let them pick the group: gun owners or media moguls or Mexicans and rest easy in the knowledge that those folks won't be cluttering our stairway trying to get past the heavenly border patrol. And yet, our Lord describes this as highway behavior. We're in serious trouble when we're looking down to gawk at the highway from the stairway above and it turns out we're actually rubbernecking.

Jesus goes on to talk about the speck in your neighbor's eye and the log in your own, otherwise known as "Christ presaging the internet." The wide gate with the easy path is full of honking and people gesturing to tell one another that they see one speck in their neighbor's eye. The narrow way involves, instead, humility and self-awareness and a constant checking for spots obscured by logs. The way that Christ leads us means applying God's law to oneself before looking for others to throw the book at. There's a lot of blinking on the stairs. And a whole bunch of turning to a trusted friend and holding your eyelids and saying, "Do you see anything?" I'm reminded of Pope Francis saying that some realities "can only be seen with eyes that are cleansed by tears."

We hear about not getting waylaid by those who would ruin our discernment of God's way, and we hear about treating others as we wish to be treated and we hear how we only need to seek this path and it will be opened before us. It seems such an obvious way, and yet before passing a Chick-fil-A billboard yesterday, more than three times I'd betrayed it. I had given holy energy to destructive people and treated people, in thought or deed, in ways that would appall me if such a storm of crankiness had been unleashed in my direction.

But Jesus is always prepared for storms, isn't he? We hear about the man who built his house on rock and the other who built his on sand and if only they were kosher we might expect that there'd be some little pigs involved, because we know where this is going. One of those houses is going to be blown

¹ Warren Carter, Brite Divinity School, at https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3863

down. Build on the rock, of course. Have ears to hear Jesus and have feet and hands to put his words into action. One house stands. One falls. Both experience the storm. Both are tested by the climate and battered by the elements. The house built on rock got wet and windswept and beaten. It's not simple — it's a deluge out there — but there is a path to survival laid out in this collection of proverbs.

Of course it's *not* simple to live as Jesus teaches. That's why he calls it the narrow way. That's why it's a stairway and not a highway. It's not a cruise-control path, it's a workout.

Please don't report this to my wife, but engineers don't know everything.

The way is narrow, the climb is steep, but if we choose to give it a go, we'll find so many saints who have been windswept and beaten. Yet they stand with words of grace that have seeped into their bones and which they speak to all who have heard Jesus and are trying to live. They are the heroes and the prophets of our scriptures. They are the faithful of our families, both blood and chosen, who gave us their own salvation sayings that stick to our hearts like holy lint. They are the mighty saints of our churches — they are Preston and Nell Barron, determined to keep that narrow gate open for the beloved of Edgewood, completely content to be holy doorstops instead of gatekeepers, in heaven as they did on earth.

Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. In the end, as it always is with Jesus, the stairway isn't about rule following, but about relationship. In this Sermon on the Mount he has blessed the crowd and taught them to pray and told them to put all their chickpeas in God's basket. Ask. Seek. Knock. Extend your hand to meet the holy grasp and be led into a different way of living.

Jesus asks so little of us: to love God and to discern God's will.

Jesus asks so much of us: to love one another, which is God's will.

The harder path involves discomfort and tears and vulnerability and messiness and frustration.

It leads us to miraculous meals and healing.

It requires bearing burdens and releasing them to the one calling us forth.

It offers us living water.

It demands foolishness and courage and a cross.

It is the way of truth and life and resurrection.

It is narrow. And it is for you.