

“Two Roads”
Matthew 7:13-14
4th Sunday in Lent

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Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

Are any of you familiar with the name John Bunyon?
Not Paul Bunyon, the lumberjack folk hero.
But the Puritan from 17th century England, John Bunyon.

John Bunyon is the author of one of the most famous pieces of Christian literature, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. But before he wrote *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Bunyon wrote his spiritual autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, published in 1666.

In that memoir, Bunyon “charts his early life as one long and unbroken descent.”

His “social standing” is like “his spiritual state.”
He is “a tinker and the son of a tinker...”

Do you know what a tinker is?
It’s “an unskilled repairer of pots and kettles
who carries sixty pounds of tools and materials
on his back” to make a living.

At that time and place, it was against the law to curse, but Bunyan spends his days swearing with abandon... “in one brief episode a townswoman overhears his blasphemies and pronounces him the worst swearer in the entire village and a scourge to the youth.”

Bunyon spends much of his early life in despair.

“So great is [Bunyon’s] sense of doom,” writes one scholar, “that when he ventures into the Abbey he is overcome by fear that one of the giant bells will fall on him.”

But he doesn't just fear death.

He "recklessly invites" it "into his life. One day he takes hold of a viper and plunges his hand into [the snake's] mouth to pluck out its stinger."

Bunyon is in a dark place, living a disrespected life...
And then.

Then Bunyan experiences what the Puritans called "coming through." He has a dream, a vision in which the saints are "sitting on the sunny side of a great mountain...basking in the warmth" while Bunyon sits shivering in the cold, "afflicted with frost, snow..."

A drystone English wall separates Bunyon from the saints.
He can't figure out how to get through to the sun, the warmth...

Then he writes:

"I saw as it were a narrow gap, like a little door-way in the wall, [through] which I attempted to pass."

Is it too tight for him?
For this brawny tinker, it might be.
Nevertheless, he tries.

"First the head, then the shoulders...and finally, with great effort and anguish and relief, he is through..."

As Bunyon puts it, the opening is just wide enough for body and soul, but not for sin!

It's a "New Birth" for John Bunyon.¹

He begins a new life as a preacher...and ends up writing works on the Christian life that remain in print to this day. But in order to enter that life, he had to do what?

He had to pass through that narrow opening in the wall.

It's an image that's born directly from Jesus' words to us today:

"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. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it."

On the one hand, it's a common image, right?
It always seems like there are two paths, two gates, two roads.

I'll bet someone in this sanctuary right now is thinking of Robert Frost and "The Road Not Taken":

**Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.**

Be careful with that poem, however.
According to Frost, it's a "tricky" poem.

Frost wrote that poem as a joke about a friend of his, who—whenever they would go for walks together—this friend was always lamenting that they should have taken another path.²

¹ Much of the material in this section on John Bunyan is quoted or taken from Richard Lischer, *Our Hearts Are Restless: The Art of Spiritual Memoir*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2023.

² [Robert Frost: "The Road Not Taken" | The Poetry Foundation](#)

That's not what Jesus is doing today.

The choice that Jesus is asking us to make is not the one
that Frost describes between two roads
that look "worn...about the same."

Today we've got an easy road...and a hard road.
A wide gate...and a narrow gate.
And Jesus tells us to enter through the narrow gate.

I got to thinking about that word this week...narrow.
Narrow.

That's not a word that I typically trot out when talking about God
and Jesus and our faith.

I don't like that word.
Do you like that word?

Just consider for a moment our church's vision.
What's our church's vision?
Open minds open hearts.

Wide...expansive...

What if I made a motion to the Session at our retreat later this
month that said, "I move that we change our vision to NARROW minds
and NARROW hearts."

Let's make that the heading on our website!
How do you think that would go over?
Right.

Not a lot of freedom in that word, narrow.
Not a lot of flexibility when something is narrow.

In fact, I think the problem I have with the word narrow is what it implies we're going to have to do. In order to follow Jesus along the hard road, the sacrificial road, the Lenten road, the road that takes us to Golgotha in just a few weeks...in order to travel this road, **we have to give something up.**

In order to fit through the narrow gate, **we have to let something go.**

It's what the season of Lent is all about, right?
Giving something up.
Letting something go.
How good are you at letting go?

I recall how, when our boys were very small, their grandmother (my mother) would bring them all sorts of toys that she had saved from my childhood when I was their age.

One of those toys was a McDonald's playset.
We're talking early 1970s here.
It was old, but it was indestructible.

And our sons played with it, and then they outgrew it.
And it got stored in some closet in our house.

A couple of years later, my wife is cleaning out that closet, and she runs across this ancient McDonald's playset.

She put it in the "give away" pile.
I came home from work and saw it sitting in the "give away" pile.

She asked me, “You don’t care if I give this away, do you?”
 And I said...well, I must admit I PAUSED.
 Got a little lump in my throat.

With moist eyes, I replied, “No, of course I don’t mind, we don’t need it anymore.”

Now, we gave it away. But for 10 seconds there, I was constructing an argument that we should do everything possible to keep it. A 40-year-old toy, this bulky thing that was just taking up space and no one was using it!

Why would I want to keep it?

Because it’s hard, sometimes—
 it is human nature, to NOT let something go.

Heck, I instruct you to **not** let go every time I say the charge.
 Go out into God’s world in peace.
 Have courage.
 Let go of what is good?

No...
 Hold on to what is good.

Maybe I need to change the charge during Lent.
 Shake things up a bit around here.
 Remind myself and everyone that sometimes, we can’t hold on,
 even to that which is good...

Did anyone else see the movie *The Lost Bus*?
 It came out on Netflix last fall.
 Not an Oscar worthy movie, but a movie worth watching.

Based on a true story, it's about the Camp Fire that engulfed Paradise, California in 2018. In the film, Matthew McConaughey plays a school bus driver named Kevin McKay. And Kevin is down on his luck:

- He lives with his elderly mother, who suffers from dementia...
- He's trying to piece together a relationship with his teenage son, who would rather live with his mother than with his dad...

On the day that the fire starts spreading, Kevin is driving his school bus, returning from his route, intending to go home and make sure his family gets to safety. But then a request comes over the speaker on the bus, from his supervisor:

There's a group of children at a school nearby who need a bus.
The need is URGENT.
The fire is coming too fast.
Can anyone pick them up?

And Kevin has a decision to make.

He wants to get home.
He has time to go home.
All he has to do is say, sorry, I can't get those kids.

But one after the other, all the other drivers are announcing, "I can't get those kids."

And very quickly it all becomes clear to Kevin.
He doesn't really have a choice.
He has to get those kids.

Which means he can't go back and make sure his family is safe.

Making sure his family is safe...that's not just a good thing.
99% of the time, that would be the most important thing.

But on that particular day, he has to let that good thing go...

Enter through the narrow gate, says Jesus.

And the problem with that narrow gate is that many times, going through it is something that none of us want to do.

Not when there's another broad gate right over here.

Not when there's another smooth, more convenient road just a few steps over there.

Why can't we walk with Jesus along any old road?

Why can't we take all our other loves with us when we're walking on the road with Jesus...

You see, when it comes to walking with Jesus, I want to bring my loves and conveniences with me:

my love of comfort,
and my love of feeling safe,
and my love of merit,
and my love of MONEY....

Do you think I can do all that?

Do you think Jesus will help me carry all that?

I think the answer is found in our first text for today.

A rich young man comes to Jesus.

He says, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?"

Jesus says, “keep the commandments.”
 “Which ones?” replies the rich man.

This, this, this, this, this...says Jesus.
 “I have kept all these; what do I still lack?”

To which Jesus says:

“...go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

It made me curious.

Was there ever a person to whom Jesus said, “Follow me”—
 and that person never had to give something up?

Never had to let anything go on their journey with Jesus?

Going back to John Bunyon for a moment...do you know where he was when he wrote his memoir?

When he wrote *Pilgrim's Progress*?
 He was sitting in a jail cell.

After he began preaching and became a notable figure, it didn't fit—a tinker who's now a successful preacher? To those with the authority and power in Bunyon's day—it made no sense.

So he was charged with “gathering Christians for unlawful worship and failing to uphold the established practices of the church.”

And they put John Bunyon in prison for 12 years.

It was a difficult road...not just for Bunyon, but for his family.
 His wife, Elizabeth, was pregnant.
 He had four children by his first wife, who had died prematurely.
 And now his family had to fend for themselves.

Of course, the irony was that it was in that very same jail cell that Bunyon discovered the peace that had eluded him for years. Even when he first started preaching, he had what we might call today “Imposter’s Syndrome”—he says that when he was in the pulpit, he was tempted on numerous occasions “by the near uncontrollable urge to shout blasphemies from the pulpit.”

Not so when he was in prison.
 In prison, Bunyon wrote these words:

“I never knew what it was for God to stand by me at all turns...as I have found him since I came hither.”³

Sleeping in a cold, damp cell with a bunch of other men for 12 years?

To me, it sounds like misery.
 For John Bunyon, it was a miracle.

God came to him...in that narrow space.

Do you think the same could be true for you?

Do you think God’s grace might come to you...
 not just in your broad, comfortable places,
 but in your narrow places too?

³ Lischer, *Our Hearts Are Restless*.

I don't know what it is, in your life, that you're struggling to let go of right now.

I do know this.

Jesus says:

NOTHING—

not your fear,

not your sin,

not your guilt,

not your loves,

not even death itself,

none of that will get in the way of his love...

and the grace of God that will see you through.

Amen.