

Living Into the Kingdom
Matthew 7:12-20
November 15, 2020
First Presbyterian, Luling

I'm not really pleased to tell you this, but here's what I've got for the theme for today's sermon: being faithful is hard. I'm not pleased to tell you this because so many things are hard right now, that it seems like following Jesus faithfully could be easy for a while, but it's not. We know this. It should not come as a surprise to us. Living faithfully sent Jesus himself to the cross. Jesus himself told us over and over that the last would be first and the first would be last and we would have to take up our own cross and follow him. Jesus never ever promised it would be easy, and yet sometimes we can let ourselves think that it might be.

We're just reading a small chunk of the Sermon on the Mount today, but this is our sixth week of reading and thinking about chunks of the Sermon on the Mount. And I think that, taken all together, it can be inspiring, it casts a vision for what the Kingdom of Heaven is and will be. And it shows us what we need to do to live in that kingdom and to make it a reality. But the Sermon on the Mount never indicates that it will be easy. Those things that make us blessed in the Beatitudes, are not really things we would otherwise aspire to: poor in spirit, mourning, meek, being reviled and persecuted. Being faithful isn't easy.

Our chunk this morning starts off with something that doesn't sound so hard: the Golden Rule. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. That's not unique to Jesus—lots of cultures all around the world have similar sayings. It's a good touchstone for rules about how we treat one another. Holding the door open for the next person, listening carefully when someone speaks, even a new one that we've learned this year: wearing a mask to protect your neighbor, as you would want to be protected.

But the Golden Rule by itself can get a little off track, and here's how. By its very nature, it allows us to impose our idea of what is good and beneficial onto the other party. For a trivial example, consider this: there are two sisters. One sister likes chocolate ice cream, and the other likes vanilla ice cream. Both kinds are available in the freezer. Vanilla-loving sister says to chocolate-loving sister: please bring me some ice cream. Now if chocolate-loving sister follows the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," then she thinks to herself, "I would want chocolate ice cream, so I'll bring my sister chocolate ice cream." The Golden Rule allows her to impose her preferences for

chocolate ice cream onto her sister. In fact, the Golden Rule encourages her to do this.

A more mercenary chocolate sister might bring vanilla sister vanilla ice cream, just so there would be more chocolate for herself later, but that's not the point of what I'm trying to say here.

If she brings the ice cream she would want, then she's imposing her chocolate onto her vanilla sister, in effect saying that her preferences don't matter and backing it up with the Golden Rule. You can see how the Golden Rule could be used to impose all kinds of other things on people who don't want those things. In the book we're using for Bible Study, the author uses the example of Christians deciding that the Native American children needed not only the Christian religion but also the cultural customs and practices of European Americans, because that's what they would have others do unto them. So they removed them from their families and put them in boarding schools which often were places of abuse and horror.

So "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," is incomplete and can be leveraged for abuse and coercion way too easily. What Jesus adds to it is important, then. Jesus adds this: "for this is the law and the prophets." He's saying that the law and the prophets show us HOW to do unto others as we would have them do unto us. And that again turns us back to the earlier parts of the Sermon on the Mount. The Beatitudes show us what the law and the prophets value—meek, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, even though it leads us to persecution and the not easy path. And remember Jesus extending the law, building fences around it so that we should not even get angry with our neighbor, much less murder them?

So return to the ice cream example. Strictly doing unto others as we would have them do unto us leaves a vanilla loving sister with chocolate ice cream, because that's what the chocolate loving sister brought her. If we add the Golden Rule and the Law and Prophets together in the way Jesus has showed us, then that interaction goes a little differently. Instead of thinking, "well, I would want chocolate, so I'm sure that's what she wants, too," the sister fetching the ice cream could either simply ask what the other sister prefers. Or, since they're sisters and know each other, she could think to herself, "Well, *I* would want chocolate, but I know she likes vanilla better, so I'll get that for her."

And extend that out to more serious matters, and we can see that the justice and righteousness of the law and which the prophets called for, require us to treat each person as fully capable of making their own decisions and actions,

no matter how misguided or unqualified we think they might be. And wow—that can be a lot more difficult than just deciding we know what's best and never questioning it and never trying to learn what other people think or believe or prefer. It's a lot harder. Hm. Faithfulness isn't always easy.

And then Jesus turns to two more examples or images, which I won't discuss in such detail. He's reiterating the same point, that faithfulness is harder than it sounds, that it isn't easy, that it doesn't always look like what we think it's going to, and that discerning the right path is complicated.

The first image is the narrow gate and hard road that lead to eternal life, as compared to the wide gate and easy road that lead to destruction. That's pretty plain speaking, isn't it? There's no sugar coating or misleading expectations. Narrow gate. Hard road.

And as we're trying to find the narrow gate and hard road, we might turn to prophets for their guidance, but then Jesus reminds us of what Deuteronomy has already taught, that false prophets are so often the ones that tell us what we want to hear and thus steer us to the wide gate and easy road. False prophets tell us that we're doing just fine as we are, no need to change. The true prophets are the ones that tell us things we don't want to hear, that tell us we aren't doing as good as we thought we were, and we need to change. That tell us the same thing that Jesus has been telling us, which is that following him faithfully isn't easy.

But when we squeeze through the narrow gate, when we listen to the true prophets tell us hard things, when we work to hold together the law and the prophets and the Golden Rule and love God with all that we are and love our neighbor as ourselves, when we get that all happening, then we know what living in the Kingdom of Heaven is and will be. May God give us the courage to follow faithfully.