

Don Quixote and Me (Sermon on the Mount #16)  
Matthew 7:13-14, I Peter 4:7-11  
May 8, 2016  
Pastor Dave Carver

I'd like to ask you to do something that I've never done before. Will someone please call my cell phone? I need you to hear something...



Do you hear that? It's the beginning of the Overture from the sound track of *Man of La Mancha*. The central figure in that show is an old man named Alonso Quijana, who has become so steeped in stories of chivalry and injustice that he renames himself Don Quixote de La Mancha and goes forth as a knight-errant to save the world.

If you don't already know this, you should: Don Quixote de La Mancha is my hero.

Seriously. I mean, my daughter is under orders that she's got to find someone willing to sing "To Dream the Impossible Dream" at my funeral. I'm a little over the top on this one.

Why?



<sup>1</sup>Don Quixote is an idealist who charges at windmills and who dreams of slaying dragons. He treats those on the margins with respect and honor, even while all the time he is thought by the world to be a madman.

Yet at the end of his story, he has taught a community to believe the best about themselves and each other. He has led his squire, Sancho Panza, and the lowly kitchen wench, Aldonza, to not only embrace his so-called folly, but to share and appreciate the value of what he calls

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<sup>1</sup> *Don Quixote*, Fabricio Moraes

“the quest”: the task of making the world a better place by the way that you treat it and those who are in it.

I thought of Don Quixote this week as I encountered the next few verses in the Sermon on the Mount. Since September, this congregation has been considering this body of teaching by Jesus that has been called the greatest set of ethical instructions ever offered. We have heard the beatitudes, the reimagination of the Law, and the proper direction for prayer, fasting, and almsgiving – we’ve overheard Jesus’ instructions to his followers as to how to live lives like his. And now he is coming to the conclusion, and he says this:

*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.*



You know, when I was younger, this passage scared the heck out of me. I remember wondering, “How will I know if I’m on the right road? What if I’m wrong?”

This road sure looks crowded...am I heading for destruction? What if someone I love believes the wrong things about Jesus? How can I possibly know everything? What if I get to the gate and I’m wrong?

You see, I had almost always pictured this verse as some sort of theological final exam. You choose a path

and you walk down it and you get to a gate (hopefully, a really teeny-tiny one) and someone asks you if you believe that Jesus is the Son of God and the Reconciler of the world and you say “Yes” and start to come in but then there are a lot more questions about the virgin birth and the theory of atonement and the doctrine of the Trinity and prevenient grace and transubstantiation and so on and so on. I’d thought of the “narrow gate” as having the ability to give my intellectual assent to some core doctrines of the church. If I get enough right answers, then I’m allowed through the narrow gate; if I don’t, well, I guess I’ll have plenty of company on that other road...



<sup>2</sup>I As I said, that’s what I used to think. However, I’ve come to see that this interpretation does not fit the text. The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus’ means of equipping his followers to live as he does. Verse after verse for three chapters contain a whole array of *practices* in which the disciples are called to engage. There is very little in this message about doctrinal correctness or theological certainty. Rather, Jesus is describing the life of faith – the best life possible – as a journey, or better yet: a quest.

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<sup>2</sup> *Sermon on the Mount*, Bryan Ahn, 2012

German Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about this in his monumental work *The Cost of Discipleship*. Listen:

The path of discipleship is narrow, and it is fatally easy to miss one's way and stray from the path, even after years of discipleship. And it is hard to find. On either side of the narrow path deep chasms yawn. To be called to a life of extraordinary quality, to live up to it, and yet to be unconscious of it is indeed a narrow way. To confess and testify to the truth as it is in Jesus, and at the same time to love the enemies of that truth, his enemies and ours, and to love them with the infinite love of Jesus Christ, is indeed a narrow way. To believe the promise of Jesus that his followers shall possess the earth, and at the same time to face our enemies unarmed and defenseless, preferring to incur injustice rather than to do wrong ourselves, is indeed a narrow way. To see the weakness and wrong in others, and at the same time refrain from judging them; to deliver the gospel message without casting pearls before swine, is indeed a narrow way. The way is unutterably hard, and at every moment we are in danger of straying from it. If we regard this way as one we follow in obedience to an external command, if we are afraid of ourselves all the time, it is indeed an impossible way. But if we behold Jesus Christ going on before step by step, we shall not go astray. But if we worry about the dangers that beset us, if we gaze at the road instead of at him who goes before, we are already straying from the path. For he is himself the way, the narrow way and the strait gate. He, and he alone, is our journey's end.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *The Cost of Discipleship* (Macmillan Paperback, 1961, pp. 211-212)

The Sermon on the Mount is the way that Jesus chose to communicate the core truths – not about what to believe theologically, but how to live in the world day in and day out as we follow in his steps.

And the message sunk in, eventually.

How do I know this? Because one of the men who was there when Jesus was preaching the Sermon on the Mount, a fisherman named Simon Peter, found himself in a jail cell thirty years or so later, writing to a community of people who wanted to know what it meant to call themselves “Christians” – or followers of Christ. And as Peter found himself nearing the end of his own life, he wrote to this group of believers, saying, “Do you want to know how to live right? Then do these things...”

Now maybe you remember a few things about Peter’s life, but just in case you forgot, Peter is the man who fell asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane not once, not twice, but three times after Jesus begged him to stay awake... And this man now writes his friends and says, essentially, “For God’s sake, people, stay awake! Be alert! Look for chances to love each other and to be welcoming and hospitable to the stranger. Share the grace that

you've been given, and look to God to get you through. Love Jesus. Love each other. Share what you have.

And you shake your head and say, "OK, Rev., that's mildly interesting. What's your point today?"



My point is that today is Preschool Sunday here in Crafton Heights. And whether you have access to and responsibility for a particular three year old of your own or not, this is as good a day as any for us to pause and think about which road we are training our children to follow as they come to know the opportunities and dangers that await them on the journey ahead.

We want our children to choose life and avoid destruction, don't we? How do we shape them for that? How do we equip them to become those people whom God is calling them to be?

Albert Schweitzer, the famed physician and theologian, said this: "There are only three ways to teach a child. The first is by example, the second is by example, the third is by example." If that's true – and I am certain that it is – the question is not so much, "How will we

teach our children?”, but rather, “What are we teaching our children?”

I’d like to suggest three ways by which we who are a little further along the road of discipleship and faith might help shape and nurture the hearts, minds, and spirits of those who are following us.

Are you engaging in a model of life-long discipleship and learning? That is to say, are you in a relationship with some community or group that includes adults talking about matters relating to faith and practice of life together? When the children around you consider your behavior, do they see someone who is not only regularly *present* for worship, but who is *active* in worship? If faith and discipleship and “the narrow way” are, in fact, lifestyles rather than dogmas that we accept or reject, we’ve got to demonstrate to our children the fact that we are actively walking in this way.

More specifically, we’ve got to engage in practices of love and generosity with some intentionality. You can help the young people around you learn to adopt and share these values by allowing them to help you shop for the food pantry, for instance. As they get a little older, it’s important to have conversations around your house about

how you get money into the house and how you choose how to spend it.

And while we're on the topic of money, can I please ask that we put on particular sentence on indefinite leave of absence? I think that we do our children a disservice when we hide behind the phrase "but we can't afford that". Whether you're talking about another candy bar in the checkout line or the latest in electronic gadgetry, saying "we can't afford that" is an easy cop-out that diminishes the opportunity for genuine conversation and deeper faith formation. Our children are learning how to prioritize and make choices all the time. If we simply say, "That's not something we value in this family", or "I can see why that's appealing to you, but we are going to use our money for...", then that teaches the child that all of life is about choosing how to spend the selves that we've been given in some of the many, many places of possibility.

Finally, as we walk with and in front of the next generation, can we do so in a way that will allow them to say that we were honest, forgiving, and kind? Can we interact with each other and those around us in ways that recognize that we, ourselves, are those in need of forgiveness too?

One of the ways that we can model this for the children that we love is to have open and honest conversations with them about things like racism, hatred, and bullying. I am ashamed to say that for much of my own early parenting, I was not as intentional as I could have been because, you know, racism didn't affect *our* family. I was wrong then, and you can see it now – our culture is increasingly toxic when it comes to matters of hate and exclusion and villainization. And perhaps the central task facing adults in our culture is whether we are able to help our children recognize that toxicity before it kills them.

We don't agree on everything. Some days we don't agree on much. I don't think that having the same views on any number of issues are prerequisites for the life of faith. Yet, as we heard from Jesus last week, maintaining a posture of love and humility are: treat others as you would have them treat you. Let's teach that to our kids, shall we?

I'd like to thank the Preschool teachers, the Open Door staff and volunteers, and all the people who give of themselves to help create programs here that foster these behaviors in our children.

And in the same breath, I know I speak for many who offer prayer for moms and dads, grand parents, aunts and uncles, neighbors and coaches – advocates who are tireless in investing yourselves in the welfare of the next generation.

No one of us can do all of this alone. That's ok. We're not supposed to. Some days, you may feel like you're charging at a windmill, or stuck on the quest all by yourself. The life of faith is not always fun or easy or natural. But it's good. And it's worth it. And it leads us to life in abundance. Let us go – and let us remember equip those who follow us to walk in this way. Let us teach them to believe that they, and their world, and the people with whom they share this world, are of great worth. Let us model lives of heroism and courage and idealism. I'm not saying you've got to change your ring tone, but it wouldn't hurt to have a song like that stuck in your head when you go out to slay the dragons tomorrow morning. Thanks be to God! Amen.