

**"Virtues We Are Called to Cultivate: Faith!"**  
**Matthew 7:13-14, 21-23**  
**October 31, 2010**

**Luke 9:57-60**  
**St. James UCC**

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“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.”

With these words from Matthew 7, Jesus reminds us, and indeed all of His followers, that following Him is not an easy job. There are many times in life when we might choose to do things because they are easy or rewarding or perhaps because they are the popular thing to do. However Jesus knew that none of those reasons would suffice in the early church. Christians were a minority in a world that was often hostile to their faith. If they were following because they thought that the road would be easy, they would soon be discouraged and quit. Indeed Jesus promises only two things in this verse: The first is that the road is going to be hard. There will be times of discouragement, times when our faith is tested to its very limits, times when this seems like the hardest thing that we have ever done. The second promise is that this is the road that leads to life - real life - life that will last us through eternity.

A few verses later, we find Jesus reminding us that not everyone who comes and calls Him Lord will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. It takes more than a simple word rolling off of our lips. To enter the Kingdom of Heaven takes a faith that is so strong, that we are ready to do God's will - even when that takes us along the toughest of journeys.

Now in our text from Luke we find some examples of people who find the road too hard. One man comes up to Jesus and says that he will follow Him wherever He goes. But as Jesus reminds Him, that's not an easy road. He doesn't have a home with all of the security that that brings. Often He doesn't even know from one day to the next where He will sleep or who will provide the food that He will eat. He is literally traveling a journey of faith on which He trusts that somehow God will provide.

God provides through the people around Him - those who hear the word and are moved to reach out and give something back to Jesus and the disciples. But the reception can be different from town to town, from crowd to crowd. Some days they eat better than others, and there's no guarantee that they will get anything to eat at all. Still, Jesus trusts that God will provide, and those who would follow Him on this journey have to do the same.

To another man Jesus said: “Follow me.” This man seemed willing, but he responded, “Lord, first let me bury my father.” Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury the dead.”

That seems like a harsh conversation. We hear those words, and I know that for me my instinctive response is to feel for the poor man. After all, his father has just died. But then I stop, and think about that scenario. Some of you have made arrangements for the burial of a loved one, and you know how hectic those few days can be. There is one

decision after another to be made. One place after another to go. One person after another to talk with. That's in a culture where burial normally takes place three or four days after the death - and sometimes even longer.

By Jewish Law, when someone died the burial was required to take place within 24 hours of death. When we stop to think about it we realize that if this man's father had just died, he would be so busy with the arrangements, with the wake and with the funeral service, that there is no way that he could have been out meeting Jesus along the road.

Once we realize that, we understand that what the man is really saying is something more like this: "My father is getting on in years and I don't know how many good years he has left. Let me go spend whatever time he might still have with him, and then I will willingly follow you." To him Jesus says, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

In other words, Jesus is telling this man that if he is going to be faithful, then his first priority needs to be proclaiming the Kingdom of God - living out his faith. When it's the second or third or twentieth of our priorities, it always seems to get put off, pushed aside for things that at the moment seem so important, but that in the context of eternity are often a waste of time.

Jesus is very clear and direct that following God's will needs to be our very first priority - at the very top of the list, and everything else - all of those other activities and people that seek a piece of our time and our energy need to be prioritized underneath what we know to be our most important priority!

Now Jesus never says that we shouldn't love our parents and our families. In fact there are many places where He talks about love and how important it is to love all of the people around us. Perhaps the place where He puts that most clearly into perspective is when he talks about the two great commandments, saying that the first is to love the Lord our God with all of our heart and mind and soul. That's our top priority! The second one, the one right underneath it on our list, is to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

Jesus never says that we shouldn't love our family and friends. What He does say is that we do so in the context of our faith. That first we love God, and that secondly we love one another.

In this instance, it's clear that the man could have chosen to follow Jesus and to love and care for his father in the context of living out his faith. What is also clear is that that's not the way he chose to set his priorities.

There's a wonderful story that at least in part lifts up how different we feel and act in a situation depending on what our priorities are.

This story is about a little boy who walked to and from school every day. That morning the weather was questionable, but he walked to school just fine. As the afternoon winds grew stronger and it started thundering and lightning, the mother of the little boy became concerned that her son would be frightened as he walked home from school.

Full of concern, the boy's mother got into her car and drove along the route that she

expected her son would be walking. As she did so, she saw her child walking along, and at each clap of thunder and the flash of lightning that followed, the little boy would look up at the streak of light in the sky and smile.

The mother stopped next to her child. As he climbed into the car she asked him, “What were you doing? Why did you keep stopping?”

The boy answered her, “I am trying to look nice. God keeps taking my picture.”

It’s a funny story, but when you think about it you realize that the boy’s first priority was to do what God wanted - to look nice for the picture that God was taking. In that context, he acted differently. He wasn’t afraid, and while he was walking home in the midst of a storm, he was quite happy because he was trying to do what he thought that God wanted.

There’s a message in there for us as well. Life is filled with storms. When our first concern is taking care of ourselves - then we often end up afraid and discouraged and uncomfortable because we’ve gotten wet in the storm. That’s how the mother in this story expected to find her son.

On the other hand, when our first priority is to love and serve God. When we go through life seeking to live out our faith, and to do what God wants. Our experience is very different. The storms still come, and we still get wet, but we’re smiling like that little boy, because we know that God is about to take our picture.

Amen.