

Palm Sunday Sermon at Leaside United Church

March 16 2008

The Narrow GATE

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Based on Matthew 7: 7-14

Can you imagine a building that is almost a mile long, and about half a mile wide? A building big enough that 12 football stadiums (with stands) would fit into?

That's a pretty big building.

Now imagine that there is only one main entrance, a large opening so that whole groups of people on horseback can enter at once. It is like the entrance to a castle perhaps, across a footbridge, but a wide and broad footbridge, across which almost all of the traffic passes.

At night, when the sun goes down, this entrance is vulnerable. It is easily penetrated, so therefore, heavily guarded.

I am describing the temple in Jerusalem, during Jesus' day. This would become known as the Second Temple, since it was King Solomon who had built the first, which was destroyed in the year 586 BC. Eventually, this huge temple would be destroyed by the Romans, in the year 70 AD.

During the day, people would easily pass in and out through the temple gates. The temple was a place not just of prayer, but also of commerce. People making their pilgrimages to Jerusalem, all would pass through this gate. They would bring money from all sorts of different lands, which would need to be changed into temple shekels. This was done by money-changers inside the first courtyard. Here you would buy your sacrificial animal with the temple shekels, appeasing your sins and those of your family.

During the Passover feast, the crowds were great; up to 400,000 people would enter the temple area in Jerusalem. Up to 22000 animals, from doves to goats, would be sacrificed on the many altars set up for this purpose.

You might think that it was easy for Jesus to slip into the temple unnoticed. But the palms and the crowd makes it obvious that he did not. What he did do was challenge all that the temple of the day stood for. You can see how he was perceived as such a threat.

Now, imagine that below the footbridge, below the huge main entrance to the temple above, there was a small and narrow passageway. A door in the wall led to the servant's area. This door was so small that in order to enter it, you would have to stoop. It was so narrow, that you would have to enter in single file, with

no parcels or bags on your shoulder. In other words, it was reserved for the humble lowly servants of the temple. No king or holy righteous person would ever think of entering the temple area by the narrow gate.

Except a different kind of ruler.

David Korten suggests that in order for the earth, as we know it, to have a future, a new way of being must become the norm. He calls it the way of Earth community, a way of life that is ruled by values and norms that are antithetical to the way of the world, to the way of Empire.

At the end of his book, *The Great Turning*, Korten outlines some of the features of what he calls Earth Community, a task so daunting and so seemingly impossible, since it involves every one of the 6.5 billion people who live on this planet, adopting a new set of values, a new sense of partnership with each other and with the earth, a new model for our relationships with one another outside of hierarchy and power, a reinvention of culture and the re-education of the masses as to the crisis we face.

Global economics must be used to foster local benefits for small communities of people, especially the poor. Owners and managers must be participants, not absentee landlords, in the organization of local communities. Corporations must be called to account for their unbalanced options to make money despite the cost, and the purpose needs to be restated: instead of money as the bottom line, the defining purpose for any enterprise is to secure fulfilling livelihoods for all people, and increase the generative creative power of people everywhere, rather than allowing the rich to get richer and the poor to be used.

Politics must change. Instead of looking out for the interests of the party first, those in democratic countries must strive to increase the level of participation in the democracy, and make public issues, the primary issues of government.

The family, now practically decimated over the generations since the last world war, must be seen as the crucial source of enduring relationships, particularly the healthy development of our children. Family in our day and age can become more extended than ever before, what with Facebook and internet groupings around the world. These need to be nurtured and encouraged.

Education will become a critical component of earth community. Basically, our children will need to re-invent practically everything, since all the things that we enjoy, and consider our rights and privileges, will be gone, used up, extinct.

And religion must cease to be a source of individual morality, but rather see itself as wisdom for all people. Churches, mosques, temples, that oppose serious moral inquiry across the boundaries of religion, will have to cease to exist; we cannot afford that kind of religion anymore.

In short, the whole world must turn a corner. And find the narrow way!

The whole world must be renewed.
The whole world must find a way into the future.
The whole world must find cultural and spiritual enlightenment.
The whole world must stop following the crowd through the broad gate,
and embrace the narrow way, the way of justice and peace for all.

I am hoping that you find this upsetting and threatening.
That your whole world will be turned topsy-turvy, not just because I want you to feel discombobulated, but because to understand this is to know two things:
1) why Jesus was such a threat in his day, and why he still is today you see;
2) if we can understand Jesus journey, we can find our own path of redemption.

Jesus was clear and unequivocal in the Sermon on the Mount:
Either you follow the narrow way of justice, fairness, the golden rule, loving your enemies, etc. and LIVE,
Or you follow the broad way through the wide gate that everyone else considers true and normal, and you die.
If you have always wondered whether or not Jesus speaks to us in our day and age, you can wonder no more.
This is what Christ is saying to us in this text: not that you have to bow down and follow Jesus himself through the narrow door in the bottom of the temple,
but rather:
that the key to life is to lower yourself to the level of servant, such that you become a servant of all for the good of all.
To do this is to live the life God gave us.

I love how the Sermon on the Mount challenges us: this is not indirect prose. It's not subtle or ironic. It's as if Jesus, speaking to the disciples, turns his head and addresses the camera, speaking directly to those who would come after.
If you want to lead a true life, he says, then let yourself be last and put everyone else first.
If you want to lead a life of meaning and purpose, then become a servant of humanity, instead of looking out for number one, yourself and your kin.
If you want to lead a life of wisdom, then follow the road less taken, the narrow road of God-infused human wisdom.
And face life head on, as he did.
Be intentional about your faith and your actions.
Let your faith inform your ethics, and live them out with intention and attention.

Recently I have dreaded the phone.
Every time the phone rings, I silently say to myself: what can it possibly be now.
My wife and I have realized that we are entering a phase of life when almost everything starts to break down.

Not only our bodies, though that is happening too, but our assumptions about things,
our belief that we'll somehow be protected from difficulty,
or that suffering, if it does visit us, will visit us later in life when we've lived a full life.

Since the year 2000, the new millennium, all those assumptions and beliefs we held have been turned upside down.

We've had death after death, grief after grief,
We've had close friends commit suicide, or serious contemplate it,

We've had huge health issues to deal with in our family,
We've had accidents and losses, debts and unforeseen bills,

We've had worry after worry about one thing or another.

Like I said, I want to stop the phone from ringing.

I want to stop the world and get off.

I don't want to suffer or be in pain or experience loss or grief anymore.

I don't know how much one family can take.

But as I witness Jesus riding a young colt into the city that would claim him not as king, but as criminal,

as I watch the crowds turn upon him, he who would be a gentle ruler, an earth community type of ruler, he who would rule with peace and justice,

as I see him deliberately choose to face all the powers head on
(and if you look closely at the conversations he has with the religious and political rulers, you'll see that he systemically faces up to each one in turn, and never loses his integrity or his sense of purpose or mission)

I learn this:

Every situation of our life is a situation into which God enters.

I am like the temple, with many barriers and exterior walls.

I am like a fortress, well guarded, overly protected, ever fearful that someone might overtake me and want to rule me, robbing me of my control of things

I too have a most holy centre, the holy of holies, where no one is allowed to even peek behind the curtain, I'm so protective of my inner core

And I know deep down,

It doesn't have to be like this.

Our lives are not set up to be one tragedy after another.

Our hearts are not wired to be broken time and again.

It is in fact, the other way around.

When we face tragedy, pain, suffering, when we face loss or grief or confusion,

and when our hearts are ripped open whether by a loss or a betrayal (as was Jesus) or when everything we thought was true about another person turns out NOT to be true,
well, that's when Jesus faces us head on.
He gets on that little donkey
and rides into the middle of our lives.
He leads us to the little door of the servant's quarters
and getting off his colt, ushers us in, but here's the twist: he goes in too,
accompanying us.

The people cried out Hosanna Hosanna, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, echoing the cries of the ages, for God to save us from our despair. Welcoming the One who would offer us healing, hope, and well-being, which are all the same as the word for salvation.

Jesus comes into OUR lives, and redeems them, right where they are, right where we are.

WE are the narrow gate, it seems to me.
When WE let Christ in, even if just through a crack, our lives are redeemed by the light he throws on our situations.

I had a friend Melanie who was a minister in the United Church. She developed breast cancer, and after all the treatments, was cancer-free. A couple of years later, it came back, and metastasized to her brain. She of course was devastated. No one wants that kind of news. But this time around, she decided to open her life up to her congregation, and invite them to make the journey through this with her. She invited me to walk it with her. It's interesting that the one who died, Melanie, was the one who offered healing and redemption, Because it helps us understand the meaning of redemption in Jesus. Mel CHOSE to enter the suffering and pain of her journey. It was a narrow road, because she had never done this before, it was risky and dangerous and she never knew what might happen next. But it was transformative for all of us who went through it with her. When she died, she left behind a whole congregation of people who had learned to walk the pathway of extraordinary love. HER love for us, called out the extraordinary love FROM us. When she crossed her own threshold and let others in to her inner temple, she freed us all from despair, and taught us all the power of redemptive love.

Now in Mel's situation and in Jesus' situation, we must make one important point. Melanie and Jesus were not the main actors. God was the primary actor.

God takes what happens in the messy life of humanity,
and offers healing, hope and redemptive love in the very midst of it.
To learn this is to follow the narrow way.
Most of the world is still caught up in the myth of redemptive violence.
Vengeance and justice are usually used to justify increasing another person's
pain or suffering.

Jesus forces us to make a choice:
to commit treachery, as did so many in his own story, especially those in
positions of power,
or to commit to life, and stand on the side of what is truly at the core of our inner
experience,
the desire to know and be known,
the desire to love and be loved,
the desire to connect and be connected.

This choice sounds easy, rational, and hopeful.
It sounds right!
Yet it is the path that leads to the narrow gate.
It involves stooping down, becoming a servant,
and leaving all our baggage at the door.

Holy Week offers us the invitation to the narrow way, the little gate that beckons
us to embrace the true life at our core.
It offers the promise of a story with an ending that is absolutely too good to be
true,
yet too good NOT to be true.

I'll see you this week, on the pilgrim way, as we walk together through Holy
Week. I invite you to become a gate yourself, in order to let the Spirit of Christ
walk with YOU.
And then, I'll see you on the other side, next week, at Easter time.