

Based on Matthew 7:13,14 written by Pastor Paul Horn

Great Expectations

- I. Reality: the road to hell is wide and broad**
- II. Reassurance: the road to heaven is still through Jesus**

I don't talk about you, but I'm excited about the doors opening! I'm not talking about the new doors on the new building that will open in October. I'm talking about doors God the Holy Spirit is opening to us, enabling us to carry out our mission to seek the unchurched. I hear more stories from members who are bringing their neighbors and friends to worship. We've added over a dozen names to our monthly newsletter mailing. We've visited over a dozen people whom our summer vicar has discovered in his community surveys. We have a handful of folks already enrolled in "Foundations of our Faith", a class which begins on August 17. These people want to learn more about God's Word.

Last Sunday we looked at some statistics and determined that there are probably over 17,000 people in Radcliff alone who are unchurched. The harvest is waiting in Radcliff! The fields are ripe! Almost everywhere we have an opportunity to share the good news of Jesus. This is the time in our congregation's history where God is pulling us together, allowing us to build, and providing an opportunity for us to serve this community with Christ Jesus.

There is excitement in the air! We have the possibility of full pews every Sunday, adding a second service, tackling another building project, paving a larger parking lot; it's possible that we will see 10-20 new faces every Sunday, inactive members will return... there are endless possibilities with God's blessing! But we can't get too excited because after all... we're stoic Lutherans. All joking aside, it is always prudent for us to return to Scripture when we talk about outreach. In his sermon on the mount Jesus speaks sobering words to believers, to help them understand this world that we live in and are witnessing to.

We do have great expectations, but let's sprinkle in a little reality and reassurance from Jesus. First of all, the reality: the road to hell is wide. Whoa, there, Jesus. You just burst my bubble of excitement. First of all, Jesus wants us to know that hell is real. It is a place of unending suffering, eternal torment and pain; God describes it as a lake of fire which will never be quenched. Jesus wants us to understand that it's really not hard to get there [to hell]. That's why the road to hell is paved like a 20 lane highway, with traffic like downtown Atlanta.

The road to hell is wide and broad and so many travel down that road for a couple reasons. In the first place, God wants us to understand that when he says in the Bible that every single human being is conceived and born into this world in original sin, he's not kidding. And that original sin damns people to hell. When he says that every human being is naturally hostile to God, a sworn enemy of God, and in his unbelief every human being only commits sin, he's not lying to you. This is the reality. That's how all people are. That's why the road is so wide and broad.

This road does not narrow. The number of travelers does not decrease. Sinful human beings are like a herd of sheep being driven by ranch hands across a wide valley. The sheep say to each other, "Where are we going?" "I don't know. But this must be the right way. Everyone else is going this way." Satan keeps them flowing across that wide open valley toward the slaughter house of hell. He not only uses the sinful nature to keep them there. He also uses the influences of sinful society to keep them marching toward perdition. "In regards to morality, make your own rules. With religion, make your own beliefs. With sex and marriage, make your own guidelines. With money and possessions - how you obtain them and what you do with them, draw up your own rubric. How do you spend your time - map out your calendar your way."

Here's proof... last Sunday we mentioned a couple of round numbers. We guessed that less than 50% of people in this community even bother to worship God on Sunday morning. There is a reason for that. It's sin. It's unbelief. It's people serving themselves rather than God. It's that God isn't important enough to individuals to spend an hour with Him. (Yes, we need to be sensitive to the fact that some of those individuals are home bound and cannot physically attend worship.) This is living proof of the truth of this verse: **"For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it."**

God needs us to understand the road to hell is wide and broad for another reason. These are the people he's sending us to preach the Gospel to. Do you know what you can expect? People aren't going to listen. They're going to slam doors in your face. They'll tell you they'll come to church—some may even mean it—but they won't show. Do you know why? Because they have a sinful nature, and that's what the sinful nature does. Because they have been duped by Satan and this sinful society. This isn't unique to Radcliff. The sinful nature is sinful nature in America the same as it is in Japan, or Afghanistan, or anywhere in the world.

Are you thoroughly discouraged yet? Do you want to quit before you start? Are we so afraid of those who are rushing down this wide, broad road, and afraid of who they are, and how they might react? Have we thought, "Well, that's who they are and where they are going. They're too far down the road. It's not going to do any good for me to tell them about Jesus. They won't change." Have we completely lost sight of who we are, what God has armed us with (his Almighty Word), and what God has assigned us to do? If that's who they are and that's where they are going, doesn't that make God's mission that much more important? Doesn't that make the message you have to share with them that much more precious? Jesus died for them, too, didn't he? Hasn't Jesus forgiven their sin? Hasn't God declared them innocent for Jesus' sake the same as us? If we don't carry out God's mission, what does that say about us? What does that say about who we are? If we are willfully thwarting the will of God by refusing to carry out his mission, what makes us any different from them?

God needs us to understand the reality that there are a lot of ways to get to hell, because it's easy for us to be drawn in. We may not be traveling this same wide, broad road, but we live in the same world as those who are. We have a sinful human nature that thinks the same way that unbelievers do! Do you see it in your own life? Making my own rules for living; managing God's possessions and time my way; living life without Jesus' Word, and thinking that's ok... and then too many times I find myself walking dangerously close to this highway.

Have you ever been driving your car and you suddenly discover that you're not on the right road? Your directions say one thing but the road signs say another. So you phone a friend and they give you a completely different set of directions! You're totally frustrated. When we seek to carry out God's mission to preach the good news of Jesus to the people of this world, we will have great expectations. But the reality is, the road to hell is wide and broad, and that often causes us great frustration. Jesus offers you reassurance.

Jesus knows that you get frustrated. He knows that at times you are afraid. He knows that there are times you get sucked in by the herd, blindly wandering along the wide, broad road. He knows... because he, too, worked and lived among these same people. He, too, was attacked by the same temptations of the same sinful world. Satan tried to use the people of Israel to tempt Jesus to distract him from his mission. Unlike us, Jesus didn't walk down that road. Satan tried to use the Pharisees and Sadducees, the religious leaders of the Jews, to frustrate Jesus' mission to share the good news. Unlike us, Jesus didn't walk down that road. Satan tried to use both the Jews and the Romans to terminate Jesus and end his Father's plan to save the world from that wide, broad road which arrives at the gates of hell.

That's the road Jesus walked down... the road of his Father's will, the one narrow road, a road that only he could travel. Neither his mother Mary nor his disciples nor we could help him. Only he could walk the road of perfection and perseverance under temptation. Only he could walk the road to the cross. Only he could walk the road that led to suffering the agony of hell, and walk the road to his grave. Only he could bury your sins and mine there in his grave; our

sins of falling in with the herd, our sins of failing to step up and say something to the herd. That's the road he walked, a road to victory, where sins were forgiven, where Satan was defeated, where death was conquered by resurrection. He says to you and to me, "**Enter through the narrow gate.**" Yes, there is only one way, only one gate, to eternal life, to forgiveness, to salvation from death and sin. That way is through Jesus Christ.

Jesus reassures you through your baptism that you have entered through the narrow gate. Through the waters of baptism you have walked the road Jesus walked, a road not littered with fear or frustration but with confidence and resolve. Through the waters of baptism you have walked the road Jesus walked; the hell he suffered is the hell you suffered. The cross he bore laden with sins, is the cross you bore laden with sins. The death he died is the death you died. The grave he conquered is the grave you have conquered. The road to eternal life is the road you travel on. Through Word and Sacrament Jesus wants to reassure you that the road to heaven is still through him, the narrow gate. And that gate is open to all people.

Jesus also reminds us that the road is not easy. "**Small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to eternal life.**" Literally in the original Greek, "Narrow is the gate and difficult is the road that is leading to life, and few find it." Why is this road difficult? Jesus tells us right here - it's a narrow gate; there's only one way. And the majority of people are traveling down the other road. There will be many people who will not be captive to that message. Along the 20 lane highway to hell Satan has erected many billboards that say, "There are many different paths to a nicer place after this life. Most of them involve you, what you can do to get there." The people traveling down this road will ridicule you for sharing with them the message of one, narrow gate. They will slam doors. They will ignore invitations.

Does that mean we don't carry out Christ's command to go and preach the gospel even though it feels, at times, that the odds are against us? No. Because the road to heaven is still through Jesus. We will boldly go and snatch more sheep out of the jaws of Satan. We will boldly drag them out of the herd that is rumbling toward the gates of hell. We will do that with gentleness, patience, and careful instruction with only one message, "**Enter through the narrow gate.**" Enter through faith in Jesus and him alone. And when that is our message and our mission, he will bless our work. Let's pray for that now.

O Lord, let this your little flock, your name alone confessing,
Continue in your loving care, true unity confessing.
Your sacraments, O Lord, and your saving Word
To us e'er pure retain. Grant that they may remain
Our only strength and comfort.

And for your gospel let us dare to sacrifice all treasure:
Teach us to bear your blessed cross, to find in you all pleasure.
Oh, grant us steadfastness in joy and distress,
Lord, for your mercy's sake, let us by grace partake
Of endless joy and glory. Amen.

*Hymn 536 stanzas 2,4 "Lord Jesus Christ, the Church's Head"
Johann Mentzer, 1658-1734*