

**The Way is Hard,  
But It Leads to Life**

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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 (Matthew 7:13-14).*

A few weeks ago I learned that, God willing, on or about my sixty-fifth birthday next St. Patrick's Day, I should become a grandfather.

I look forward to joining the ranks of those who get that big, deep smile when they talk about their grandchildren, and I'm already making a list of things I want to do with the next generation that I never got around to doing with the one in between. Magic tricks are on the list, and maybe fishing, and remembering the names of all the trees for long walks in the woods, and the stories behind more constellations in the nighttime sky.

The combination of milestones next March has me thinking even more about what's worth focusing on in life, and worth passing along to our children and grandchildren. I've long since decided that money isn't, but Jesus is. I hope to leave a little of the former, just to help out, but it's a big mistake to focus on money, or leave too much, because that often has the effect of shrinking souls and tempting them to dwell on things that are far too small. Jesus, on the other hand, enlarges the soul. He makes people magnanimous, and stretches their horizons as far as they're willing to go.

Jesus has a way of saying things that almost sound like contradictions, and yet somehow they all turn out to be true. Nils Bohr, the great theoretical physicist, said that a

really deep truth is one for which its opposite is also true. He was thinking, for example, of the fact that light behaves like a particle, but it also acts like a wave, even though waves and particles ordinarily behave in very different ways. Bohr focused on physics, but his insight reaches into all sorts of deep places in the world of our experience.

So Jesus says, on the one hand, “Take up your cross and follow me.” Of course, he wasn’t talking about the pretty little crosses we make into jewelry, but the big, heavy ones with splinters – not the kind you can hang around your neck, but the kind on which the Romans would hang a whole man. “Take up your cross” isn’t a very clever recruiting slogan; truth be told, we’d all rather wear a little cross than bear a big one.

But on the other hand, Jesus says, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” How can that be? How is it that a man who will carry a cross can also claim that his burden is light? He seems to say that his own experience of deep joy can become our experience, too, if we’re willing to trust him and follow wherever he leads.

Jesus says something similar when he talks about gates and roads. The Greek word for “road” also means “way,” and Jesus means all the different ways we might go in life. People tend to prefer ways that are easy, so those paths are popular. But the easy way may only be easy for a while, before it turns to trouble. Sometimes it leads to ruin or destruction, Jesus says. The road to ruin may or may not be well marked with signs, but it’s heavily travelled, if only because it’s so easy to follow.

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By contrast, the gate Jesus invites us through is narrower, and the way he leads is harder, especially at first, as in the beginning of a long hike before we find our stride. It's no surprise, then, that many people talk the talk but never really walk the walk with Jesus. *The way can be hard*, he says, but it is the way that leads to life. Not just life when you come to the end of the road, but rich and full and abundant life all along the way.

Think of the things that make you feel most alive. What are they? Love? Friendship? Beauty? Laughter? Work that's stimulating and rewarding? Having something to contribute, and knowing your contributions will make a difference?

Those are just the kinds of things Jesus offers, because he's the one through whom all good things come. "All things came into being through him," John's gospel says, and "in him was life."

Now that raises an interesting question. If we're made to enjoy abundant life, why should the way that leads to life be hard? Why isn't the easy way always the most life-giving way?

The answer the Bible gives has to do with the fact that we're made in the image of God. Of course, that doesn't mean God looks like us in any crudely anthropomorphic way. It means God made humankind with some of God's own capacities: to love; to create, and delight in creativity; to be deeply moved by things that are beautiful; to choose and make decisions, including some that have great consequences.

As C. S. Lewis said, we humans are a kind of amphibian – part animal, part spirit. The animal part of us is pretty simple. It seeks pleasure and avoids pain. It does what feels good now, and doesn't look very far ahead, beyond our immediate comfort or threats to our security. That part of human nature alone accounts for an enormous amount of our behavior.

But we also have a spiritual side, with more intelligence than other animals – at least if we choose to use it. We can look further ahead to anticipate the results of our actions, and the same imagination that makes us creative also makes us morally responsible.

Some of our fellow creatures have a rudimentary sense of responsibility – chimpanzees, for example, that depend on social acceptance within their band, and dogs that evolved to respond to human behavior. We train dogs in part by saying “Good dog” and “Bad dog,” not because dogs have given much thought to moral philosophy, but because they want our approval and fear disapproval and punishment, rather like our own little toddlers whose understanding is just beginning to grow.

The animal part of us seeks pleasure and avoids pain, all in the short run – which pretty well describes what we mean by “the easy way.” What comes easily to us is what feels good now. What comes much harder is what the spirit sees that the flesh does not: when our intelligence foresees the outcome of our actions, and our conscience knows which choices will be right in the end, even if doing the right thing might bring more pain than pleasure for the time being.

The story of Adam and Eve's fall in Genesis captures this tension in a wonderful way. They eat of the tree of the

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knowledge of good and evil because it's attractive, even though God has warned them not to touch it. People rarely do bad things because they wake up in the morning and consciously decide to choose evil. We make most of our bad choices just because they come easily. They bring more pleasure than pain in the short run.

We can think of all sorts of examples. It's easier to eat things that taste good now, than to resist because they might harm our health later on. It's easier to spend all our money than to save for retirement, which is why economists say we discount the future. It's easier to lash out in anger when someone offends us than to tame our tongue, even though our righteous wrath might damage a relationship that takes a lifetime to repair.

What's true in our personal lives is also true in our life together as a community. It's easy to say that if people are poor, or lack benefits we take for granted, that's their own fault; it's harder to ask whether some things might be wrong with the structure of our society. It's easy to dismiss people's claims of discrimination when we don't experience it ourselves; it's harder to listen to them and ask how we would feel if we were in their situation. It's easy to send a little money for victims of natural disasters; it's harder to ask whether there are ways we might be contributing to those disasters, and whether we could afford to do some things differently that would make them less severe in the future. It's easy to call people names – “She's just a liberal.” “He's just a conservative”; it's harder to challenge our own assumptions and consider some other truth we might have missed.

We all tend to do what's easy, but what's easy now can be hard to correct later on. We know that from our own

experience – from the dumb things we’ve done, only to see clearly in hindsight the choices we should have made when we had the chance.

“The way is easy that leads to destruction,” Jesus says, “and there are many who take it.” The road to ruin is a superhighway, and it can carry an amazing amount of traffic. On the other hand, “The way is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.” The way to life is more like a country road that not everyone knows, but the scenery there is so much better.

How do people find this road less traveled, the road that leads to life? There are two basic answers, I think, and they’re really about the same thing described at different levels.

Much of the time people do what’s easy, but whenever they do what’s hard, it’s usually because of something or someone they love. Some people work very hard, and devote enormous amounts of time and energy to something they love: a business or profession, or even a game like golf. “I do it because I love it,” they say, and their effort is a witness to their devotion.

Other people do hard things on account of the people they love. Parents routinely devote themselves to their children, watching them constantly when they’re little, spending sleepless nights when they’re sick, hauling them around to endless activities as they get older, and sacrificing huge amounts of money and effort to see that they get a good education, launching them into adulthood.

People who care for loved ones with chronic illness or other needs do even harder things, year after year, but often



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they do it without complaining, with a sense of purpose, and even gratitude for the privilege of being able to help. The hard work of caring might be for family or friends, but lots of people – doctors and nurses and teachers and social workers and people in other professions, or those who just volunteer – work hard to care for total strangers, simply because they've learned how to love, and love does not discriminate about who should receive it.

And that points to the second answer as to why some people take the narrow road that leads to life, which is that the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, moves in and through them, and the Spirit of God is love. People will do hard things, amazing things, when we're driven by love, because we're made in the image of God. And the farther our love extends, the more some things that used to be hard will become much easier.

Jesus tells us to enter by the narrow gate because, as he says in John's gospel, "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved." He says, "The way is hard that leads to life," but again he tells us, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." To follow Jesus is to find the way that leads to life, on the road where the surface itself is paved with love.