



Fickle People

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 7:13-27

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Let me take you back to 2012. Robert Griffin III was being heralded as the new savior in town. He was the nation's top collegiate player. He was awarded the coveted Heisman Trophy. The Redskins traded away three future first round picks and a second rounder for the rights to draft him.

On the Sunday RGIII made his debut, he was referenced no fewer than 29 times on the front page of the Washington Post. He was named Rookie of the Year in his inaugural season. The local press swooned over him. His jersey set a record for single-season sales.

Then, the bottom fell out—a season-ending knee surgery and his struggles to play in a pro-style offense. Fans became restless. Then, the boo-birds let him have it. He was maligned and roundly criticized. For one season, the world was his oyster and everybody knew his name. Thereafter, he was vilified and essentially run out of town. Earlier this month he was unceremoniously released.

Sports fans are fickle. We fawn over our famous athletes when they perform to our expectations. When they let us down, we turn on them faster than a New York minute.

People are fickle. Our Palm Sunday story proves the point. Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a Sunday. A large crowd gathers to celebrate his arrival (Matthew 21:8). The atmosphere is positively electric. People spread coats and wave palm branches as Jesus travels the highway into town. “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they sing. “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.”

Fast forward to Thursday of this same week—Jesus gathers with his disciples to observe the Passover. During the meal, Jesus announces that one of them will defect. Judas excuses himself from the table to set his betrayal into motion. He has already colluded with the religious establishment to hand Jesus over for 30 pieces of silver. As word spreads, a large crowd gathers to witness his arrest (Matthew 26:47).

Jesus is hauled before the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Jews. He is accused of religious blasphemy and crimes against the state. Since this tribunal does not have the power to execute, they send him to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate.

It's now early Friday morning. A large crowd gathers outside Pilate's palace (Matthew 27:17). While Pilate is convinced Jesus has done nothing deserving of death, he's



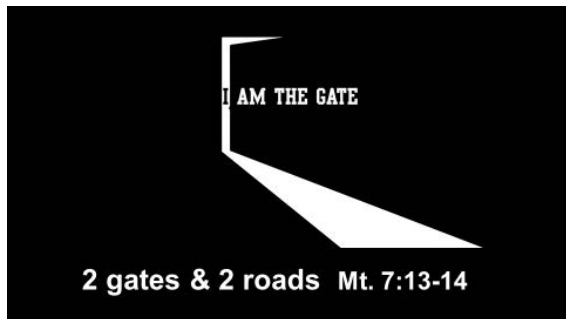
already on thin ice with the Jewish people. So, he devises a scheme to save his bacon. Shall he release Barabbas, a hardened criminal, or this Jesus? He expects them to set Jesus free. Instead, they demand Barabbas to be released. “What shall I do with this Jesus?” Pilate asks. “Crucify him” they cry in unison (Matthew 27:22).

Every year, when we rehearse this Palm Sunday story, it hits me. People are so fickle. On Sunday, the crowd is singing his praises. By Friday, this same crowd is calling for his head. From “Hosanna” to “Crucify him” in a matter of five days.

I read earlier the concluding 15 verses from Jesus' fabled Sermon on the Mount. Jesus addresses fickleness at the end

of his sermon. He challenges the incongruity of saying one thing and doing something else.

Our passage divides neatly into three sections. First, Jesus speaks about two gates that lead in polar opposite directions. Second, he references two kinds of prophets symbolized by two trees yielding different fruit. Third, he speaks about two kinds of builders constructing on two different foundations.



In the first section, verses 13-14, Jesus talks about two gates leading in radically different directions. One of the gates is “wide” and the road that leads there is “easy” (7:13). The other gate is “narrow” and the road that leads there is “difficult” (7:14).

Jesus urges his followers to choose the narrow, difficult way. Most people take the easy way out. The easy way, Jesus says is well-worn and traveled.

In the second section, verses 15-23, Jesus warns of false prophets whom he characterizes as wolves in sheep’s clothing (7:15). These false prophets must be Christians of some sort. While they call Jesus “Lord” and perform miracles in his name, they are actually imposters (7:21-22).

This is where the two trees, with two different kinds of fruit, come into play. Diseased trees will invariably produce bad fruit just as healthy trees produce good fruit. Trees are known by their fruit. False prophets are known in the same way, “By their fruits you shall recognize them” Jesus said (7:16).

The Didache was a first century handbook for new believers preparing for baptism and church membership.

There is a section in this catechism devoted to false prophets. If an itinerant preacher stays more than three days or asks for money, he should be considered a false prophet (11:5-6).

Jesus contrasts those who say they believe with those who do what he says. “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven” (7:21). Again from the Didache, “Any prophet who teaches the truth but does not do what he teaches is a false prophet.”

In the third and final section, verses 24-27, Jesus references two kinds of builders constructing homes on vastly different foundations. While the wise builder constructs his house on solid ground (rock), the foolish builder builds on sand. In the Middle East, building on solid ground protects a dwelling from flash floods that result from sudden desert storms. I’m reminded of the hymn we sing, “On Christ the solid rock, I stand. All other ground is sinking sand.”



End of Jesus’ sermon! The crowd is amazed; astonished at Jesus’ authority. He challenges people who say all the right things, but don’t follow through. He singles out their duplicity. It’s not the *saying*, but the *doing* that counts. Jesus commends both hearing *and* doing...believing *and* practicing. Evidently, more people profess allegiance to Jesus than actually follow him.

So what does Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount have to do with my life? I suppose that depends on where you are with this Jesus. Let me speak to those of you who are new to faith and this church. How do you begin a life of faith?

You start at the beginning. You make introductions. I'd like to get to know you, Jesus. I want to know that you are real. I'm opening myself to you. I'm tired of living life alone. I'm open to going your way.

Jesus said in his sermon that he is the gate that leads God's way. Jesus said elsewhere; "I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved" (John 10:8).



Following Jesus is the road less traveled. Remember how Robert Frost concluded his immortal poem on *The Road Not Taken*, "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less travelled by, and that has made all the difference."

Jesus said in this sermon that not many go his way. Maybe they're too busy going their own ways. I'm not sure why people are so insistent on going their own ways, especially since the road they're on leads to no place special. Jesus said his road leads to a full, rich life. How sad. Most people have a really distorted notion of what it means to follow Jesus.

There's no secret handshake to know or elaborate ritual to perform. Opening your life to Jesus is simple enough that a child can do it. Inviting Christ into your life begins with a simple prayer. "Jesus, come into my life."

I opened my life to Jesus at age 19. I invited Christ to take up residence in me. I really didn't know what I was doing. I was willing, yet wary. I was wary of religious people. I thought religious people were, well, weird. I was afraid that Jesus might be sending me to Siberia on a mission. I had no idea all the wonderful ways Jesus would redirect my puny, self-absorbed life.

Okay, some of you have taken this step. You have trusted your life to Christ. But it's so easy to become sidetracked. We can lose our way so quickly. Maybe you have become sidetracked this week and need to come back. The good news is that Jesus always takes us back.

For those of you who want to walk with Christ, my suggestion is to devote yourself to his teaching. Make his teaching a priority. We can't do what he says if we don't know what he teaches.



I've loved preaching on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount these last three months. You can't make this stuff up. Jesus' words are so arresting and counter-cultural. Jesus calls us to love our enemies and turn the other cheek. His most scathing criticism is reserved for religious people. No one is left standing by the end of Jesus' sermon. We are all cut down to proper size. Here's the amazing part: while he brings the hammer down on self-righteous people, he shows mercy to the brokenhearted.

I challenge you to read Jesus' Sermon on the Mount this week. Matthew 5-7 is all of three chapters and 109 verses long. Notice what Jesus cares about. Ask for his help in closing the gap between saying and doing, believing and practicing.

Our focus this year is renewal. "Renew us, O Lord. Make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved" (Psalm 80:3, 7, 11). Jesus, save me from duplicity. Jesus, pilot me in the storms of life. Jesus, anchor my soul in hope.