

Enter (or Exit?) by the narrow gate

In today's reading from St. Luke Jesus warns us that the gateway to heaven may not only be a tight squeeze but actually closed by the time we consider entering. That's a depressing thought for a summer afternoon. But I think we may better understand what Jesus is saying if we shift over to chapter 7 of Matthew's Gospel where he makes a similar remark: *Enter by the narrow gate, for the road is wide that leads to destruction and many there are who take that route; while the gate to life is so tight and its path so narrow that few can even find it.* And notice how St. Matthew locates that remark right after Jesus' long Sermon on the Mount. Let me summarize it for you:

"Hold no grudges. Don't obsess over offenses; stop nursing your anger. Don't sneer at anyone for, as far as I'm concerned, it's equivalent to murder! See in every woman you meet the unique person she is; don't reduce her to a consumable object. Don't be so litigious. When you say Yes, mean Yes; when you say No, mean No; be candid, trusting and trustworthy. Don't think of getting even; if somebody rips you off, send him a gratuity. Give and forgive as extravagantly as God gives and forgives. Love not cautiously but adventurously, seeing potential friendship even among people who despise you. Make money a means, not an end. As an alternative to the Wall Street Journal, look for the immense dividends that await you in the Book of Job, the Gospel of John (or the tragedies of Shakespeare). Stop worrying; let go and let God. And pass no judgment; take the speck out of your own eye before assuming to become your brother's oculist."

Now compare that to the broad, reckless *alternative behavioral freeway* people prefer in order not so much to live as *to survive* :

"Never let go of a grudge or forget an injury. Treat women as second class citizens. Litigate at the drop of a hat! Avoid simple solutions; if you can make things complex, do so by all means. And don't get mad, get even. Demand an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, or (better still) a million dollar settlement for a fender bender. If you don't like someone, brood, savor your hatred, salivate over his downfall. Forget about pie in the sky; money in the bank is what matters. For your daily spiritual reading, study the stock market. And by all means, worry! Worry about clothes, food, school, retirement. And never let a day go by without evaluating others, ferreting out the faults of X, smirking at the ignorance of Y, gossiping over the lechery of Z - all the while, of course, maintaining a pious facade yourself."

There's the wide open, hell bent way society – in not so subtle ways - encourages us to live by - the behavioral freeway where everyone must race to stay ahead and passing on the right is fine if you can get away with it and cursing the slowpoke ahead of you comes naturally, especially if you're provoked by some demagogue's voice issuing from your dashboard.

So, given the popularity of Broadway! it's no wonder Jesus sounds pessimistic about anyone ever noticing the simple exit he offers us to fulness of life -- or even a nominal Christian getting past the toll booth - because, you see, the difficult thing about Jesus' narrow gate is we have to be very "BIG" to get through it - whereas all Broadway requires is that we remain comfortably "small".