

“Gates and Fruit, Trails and Trees”
Matthew 7:13-20/Galatians 5:16-25
FPC/August 9, 2009
By Rev. Dr. Glenn Hink

I. Text

This summer we have taken a look at Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in the gospel of Matthew, chapters 5-7. Today we draw near the conclusion of the Sermon. I will be reading from **Matthew 7:13-20**.

II. Introduction

There was an old homestead with an orchard on the side of the mountain, above my parent’s home, where I grew up. We simply called it “the orchard.” I would ride my motorcycle up a narrow road made by loggers to get there. The forest had been pushed back from about 5-6 acres, and apple, pear and plum trees planted. An old, two story farmhouse was there, the paint long gone and collapsing in on itself. A small barn had become a rotten pile of rubble. A type of wild meadow grass and flowers seemed to carpet the whole place.

I would pass through “the orchard” on my motorcycle on my way to other narrow dirt roads up the mountain. I would go there and listen to the wind whisper through forest. And I went there more than a few times to watch a thunder storm come up the valley, and then race the rain home before I got drenched.

And every time I went to “the orchard” I wondered “what happened?” I wondered who had lived there, and how long ago. I wondered why they had gone to all the work to clear the land, build the house, and plant all the fruit trees.....and then leave? I wondered what had happened? I always thought the place was a little quiet.....like it had a secret....an old orchard, up a narrow road, on the side of a mountain.

III. Brief Exegesis

Jesus has been teaching people probably an hour or more. He’s on the side of a mountain, and perhaps people sat up the hill from him, like a small auditorium. Maybe there was a small dirt road to get there.....and maybe there was wild meadow grass and flowers there.....and maybe it was an old orchard all around them....and maybe it was the place of secrets. The people sat and listened as Jesus taught about what it meant to be one of his followers. And perhaps after an hour people were getting a little restless, looking at their watches, and thinking about lunch. Jesus knows it’s time to bring this “sermon on a mount” to a close.

For more than an hour Jesus has been teaching about something more than religious busyness. He's been teaching about the demands of a greater faithfulness to God, and the joy of catching glimpses of God's kingdom here and now. "If you want to follow me," Jesus says;

"You'll need to let go of hurts, and forgive."

"You'll need to love those who are your enemies, and pray for them."

"You'll need to practice a great generosity, and grow in prayer."

"If you really want to be one of my followers," Jesus continues;

"You'll need to serve God, and not money."

"You'll need to learn to trust God, and not worry."

"You'll need to seek first God's kingdom.....and not the Republican or Democrat kingdom."

And for more than an hour the folks on that hill have been nodding their heads in agreement, and whispering to each other, "That's right. Jesus is right." Their heads are now filled with new ideas. They have new insights into faithfulness. Jesus has painted a wonderful picture of a new way of life together. They wonder if maybe God's kingdom is also "here and now." And they have a new way to pray, "Our Father, who art in heaven....."

But Jesus is not just about ideas and insights. He's not just about entertainment and escape on Sunday morning. He's into a new way of life. He's into "doing the faith." He's into action. And so, as Jesus concludes this "sermon," he sees the narrow gate and the steep dirt trail that folks have traveled through and on to get there. "To choose a faithful way of life," Jesus says, "is like coming through this narrow gate, and walking up this difficult trail. Hear the noise from the traffic down on the highway? It's easy and wide.....and most people travel by it. But you have chosen a different way. You have walked up a difficult trail, and through a narrow gate.....and few people will do that. You've heard about a different way of life.....and few people will do that. But those who do, will find life; life with joy and meaning and hope and God...now.....and more life in the age to come. And those on the wide, easy way below, will sooner or later come to know the emptiness of their lives.....ask if there was more, and know it is too late. The way is hard, and narrow, and few will find it.....but it does lead to life."

Now folks on that orchard hillside are little uneasy. They're thinking about Jesus' words; forgiving, loving enemies, generosity, serving God, trusting God, seeking the kingdom of God. They think about the words, and their lives, and change. It is a hard, narrow way. But they see it in Jesus, and they know he is right.

A hand then goes up in the crowd. When Jesus looks at him the man asks, "How will we know? How will we know the right way? How will we know the right teacher to

trust? How will we know the right teaching to follow? How will we know the narrow gate, the hard way, the way to life?"

Jesus pauses as he listens to the wind whisper through the trees. It's a good question. "You will know," he says with a smile. "You will know, because you know the difference between good and bad fruit. Look at the orchards around you. Good trees produce good fruit, and bad trees produce bad fruit. If the fruit is good, trust the tree. If you see people doing what I have just taught you, trust the tree. If you see love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23a), trust the tree. Don't trust intelligence, or charisma, or money, or smooth words, or "good looks." Look for the character in a life.....the fruit produced in the way of life. You know the trees that produce bitter, rotten wormy fruit are bad. Don't trust them. The time will come when they will be cut down and burned, just as you do with bad trees. Look carefully, and you will know the truth by the fruit. The true character of 'all trees' is shown in the fruit." The folks on that hillside orchard looked at the trees around them, and thought about what Jesus said.

IV. Final Reflections

A number of years ago my mom send me a book entitled A Place Called Deep Creek, by Maureen Hern. The book is about the author's recollections of growing up in the 1940's by the Deep Creek School, about a "stone's throw away" from my parent's home. It was a book of local history one generation earlier than mine. I found it interesting as I knew most of the families and places mentioned. It gave the fuller story to some things I had wondered about.

One of the places Maureen Hern told about was "the orchard." By the time she was a little girl in the 1940's it had been abandoned, but her mother knew and told the story. A pioneering family by the name of Erickson had bought the land. Many Swedish families settled the area, and they were one of them. They cleared the land, built the house and barn, and planted the trees. When you plant an orchard you plan to stay for a few generations, and so they did. But then tuberculosis struck the family. The hard work required in such a place became impossible with the failing health of the family. After only a few years the Erickson's left "the orchard" for the city. They told their neighbors to pick the fruit. They never sold the place, perhaps hoping to one day return. Or perhaps they could not let go of a dream.

Maureen Hern said as a little girl in the 1940's they would walk up the long, steep, narrow road to "the orchard," and pick apples, pears and plums for pies. They were saddened by the story of the Ericksons when they saw the empty house, and

thankful for their generosity so to share the orchard with their neighbors. The trees were still strong and the fruit was still good.

Over 30 years would then pass by the time I would first visit “the orchard” on my motorcycle as a kid. I didn’t know the story of the Erickson family, but it remained as Maureen Hern described it, just older and more worn down. The road was still narrow and steep. The house had all but collapsed. And no one came to “the orchard” to pick fruit anymore. The long abandoned trees had grown wild. Snow, wind and time had broken many limbs. Any fruit produced was small, bitter and wormy. Jesus was right, bad trees produce bad fruit.....you know the truth by the fruit.

Another 30 years would then pass. I was up in “the orchard” a few years ago, probably for the last time. The house was now a pile of rubble. The forest was beginning to reclaim the orchard clearing. The living fruit trees were few. But there was still a green carpet of wild meadow grass and flowers. In the stillness I heard cars go by on the highway below. Few people find their way up the dirt road to “the orchard.” I thought about the Erickson’s and the story of the orchard. I thought of children 60 years ago coming to “the orchard” to pick pears, apples and plums for pies. I thought how time had brought change, and in time the story and “the orchard” would disappear. It is the way of most things.

There was another orchard in the area of Galilee. It too was on the side of a mountain. It too was covered with meadow grass and wild flowers. It too had a narrow road to get there. But it has not disappeared.....not in 2000 years. Folks, like us, still come to “the orchard” to hear Jesus’ teaching. We hear about the narrow, hard way. We hear about forgiveness, generosity, prayer, trusting God, seeking God’s kingdom.....finding life. We are reminded again that good trees produce good fruit. We walk the narrow way, produce some good fruit ourselves, and hear the stories. And we believe that “this orchard” will always have good fruit for us, our children and grandchildren to pick.....this orchard that will not change or disappear because it is the orchard in the kingdom of God.

A narrow gate.....a hard way.....good fruit.....and it leads to life.