

**"OLE SLICK"**  
**Fourth Sunday in Lent**  
**Matthew 7:13-29**  
**March 31, 2019**

**NRSV**

*"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.*

*"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, you will know them by their fruits.*

*"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. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?' Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.'*

*"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!"*

*Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.*

## The Message

"Don't look for shortcuts to God. The market is flooded with surefire, easygoing formulas for a successful life that can be practiced in your spare time. Don't fall for that stuff, even though crowds of people do. The way to life—to God! —is vigorous and requires total attention.

"Be wary of false preachers who smile a lot, dripping with practiced sincerity. Chances are they are out to rip you off some way or other. Don't be impressed with charisma; look for character. Who preachers are is the main thing, not what they say. A genuine leader will never exploit your emotions or your pocketbook. These diseased trees with their bad apples are going to be chopped down and burned.

"Knowing the correct password—saying 'Master, Master,' for instance— isn't going to get you anywhere with me. What is required is serious obedience—*doing what my Father wills*. I can see it now—at the Final Judgment thousands strutting up to me and saying, 'Master, we preached the Message, we bashed the demons, our God-sponsored projects had everyone talking.' And do you know what I am going to say? 'You missed the boat. All you did was use me to make yourselves important. You don't impress me one bit. You're out of here.'

"These words I speak to you are not incidental additions to your life, homeowner improvements to your standard of living. They are foundational words, words to build a life on. If you work these words into your life, you are like a smart carpenter who built his house on

solid rock. Rain poured down, the river flooded, a tornado hit—but nothing moved that house. It was fixed to the rock.

“But if you just use my words in Bible studies and don’t work them into your life, you are like a stupid carpenter who built his house on the sandy beach. When a storm rolled in and the waves came up, it collapsed like a house of cards.”

When Jesus concluded his address, the crowd burst into applause. They had never heard teaching like this. It was apparent that he was living everything he was saying—quite a contrast to their religion teachers! This was the best teaching they had ever heard.

*[This week I’ve included translations of this passage both from the new Revised Standard Version of the Bible, and from The Message Bible, because I will be using both of them in the sermon.]*

One of my favorite musicals is *The Music Man*. I see that Hugh Jackman is set to star in the revival of this classic next year on Broadway. I would like to see that one! For me, the 1962 classic always brings to mind Robert Preston as Professor Henry Hill, Shirley Jones as Marian, the Librarian, and Ron Howard as her naïve little brother who sees the good in everyone. That’s why I had Karen put Robert Preston’s picture on the front of this week’s bulletin. The *Music Man* came to mind when I read the scripture passage this week, when I thought of the type of person suggested by the text.

The basic storyline of *The Music Man* goes like this: When Harold Hill, a traveling con man, arrives in River City from Gary, Indiana, he convinces the locals to start a band by purchasing the uniforms and instruments from him. His intention is to flee as soon as he receives the money. Librarian Marian suspects Harold is a fraud, but holds her tongue since her moody brother, Winthrop, is excited about the band. As Harold begins to develop feelings for Marian, he faces a difficult decision about skipping town. In other words, love intercedes and transforms the fraudulent into the authentic. Love turns Ole Slick into someone capable of fidelity, honor, and value.

I had a childhood pastor who was kind of like Henry Hill. He preached a passable sermon, though his primary literary form was lecture, especially to the young people of the congregation. "Do, this, don't do that, you're all in need of salvation because you are hopelessly sinful and it's a good thing your Savior died on the cross for your sins or you would sure burn in the fires of hell, blah blah blah." He really turned me off and it was easy to tune him out, because his message was built on a foundation of sand, not rock. His showman holiness didn't square up with the human being I knew him to be out of the pulpit.

He warned us of the evils of alcohol and then he openly drank to excess at the homes of his parishioners. He told us not to smoke and then he would sit back in his office and light up his pipe. He told us not

to have sex outside of marriage, but as it turned out he was having affairs with several of the church wives. When this was discovered, he was unapologetic, blaming his immoral conduct on their weakness.

Yes, Rev. Ole Slick was a piece of work.

Jesus is preaching to the crowds who have come out of their curiosity to see and hear The Music Man. "Who is this new preacher," they ask, "and what bill of goods has he come to sell us?" The people have learned from experience to be wary. There are charlatans and magicians, salesmen and phony healers coming through their towns and cities all the time, all of them promising the latest and greatest of formulas to relieve them of their oppression, sure tickets to the kingdom of heaven. Most of these fakers are just out to take what little money people have or to steal away with their possessions in the middle of the night.

Why is Jesus any different? He overhears some folks disdainfully mutter about him and his heritage, "Nothing good ever comes out of Nazareth." The people have come to see, but they are wary of buying in to his message. Is he for real—does he really speak for God, or is he just Ole Slick, another in a great long line of false prophets?

Matthew's narrative has Jesus just 3 chapters earlier emerging out of his wilderness time where he has successfully faced off against his own demons. I spoke of these just a few weeks ago. Jesus has

been tempted to seize power in the spoken word: While suffering from intense hunger, Ole Slick has offered Jesus, "Just invoke the power of your God and turn these stones into bread. I know you can do it. Then you can fill your belly." If Jesus will just use his words for his own benefit, the world will be laid at his feet. He can choose who will be fed and who will be starved. Jesus says no.

His demons have tempted him a second time. They have encouraged him to prove that the angels will catch him if he jumps off the roof of the Temple. If Jesus will just be arrogant, if he will just throw himself into believing the press releases about him, he will have throngs of adoring fans praising him and worshipping him. He will be protected from the wrath of both the Pharisees and the Empire. He can choose who will be accepted and who will be rejected. Ole Slick tries to get him to claim invulnerability. Jesus says no.

Evil wants the soul of everyman and everywoman; it stops at nothing to get us in its grip. The same is so with Jesus when Satan offers him his own kingdom if he will just switch teams and leave the God Squad for the devil's own work. "Just bow down and worship me," Ole Slick invites him, "and I will give you an earthly kingdom to rule and exploit. We'll make great partners." He can choose whether the world will follow after good or chase after bad. Jesus says no.

Jesus makes it through his test with his demons. He comes out from his wilderness time committed, focused, and on track to become

Messiah for the people, the embodiment of God's unconditional love for humanity.

He begins preaching to those who have gathered around him. Some of them are becoming converts to his way of being in God's space; some of them are looking for evidence against him so as to have him arrested and silenced.

Still others look at him and see Professor Henry Hill. "He says all the right things," they whisper, "but is he for real? Or has he bought what the devil has been selling, and are we in mortal danger if we follow him?" Many, maybe even most of them, are skeptical, but still they listen intently, beginning to question their own values, beginning to wonder if Jesus is on to something that can possibly save their lives.

And some are like little Ronny Howard, little Winthrop of River City, Iowa, who looks at Jesus and sees goodness, who listens to Jesus and hears truth, who watches Jesus stand up to the false preachers and finds the courage to be a disciple.

Jesus has an audience, and he puts the choice to us: Live the God-centered life, building your future on solid rock, or live on a foundation of shifting sand and fly-by-night faith and watch what happens when the heavy rains come. There's nothing sly or slick about this offer. Jesus is very clear; he is not impressed with one's ability to spit scriptures back at him. He wants to know how we are *living* what we have read or heard and memorized. It's not a game show quiz to see

who can name more prophets. Pick one and learn about him and her instead, taking what they say and applying it to your life. It's not who can best and fastest list the Ten Commandments in order; it's about who is living a life of honesty, fidelity, and faith-in-action.

In our alternate translation, Jesus talks about choosing the narrow gate rather than the wide one, about walking the narrow and rocky path rather than the broad and smooth super-highway. Brian McLaren imagines the sermon this way: "Go along with the crowd," Jesus implies, "and you'll end up in disaster. But dare to be different, dare to follow a new and different path, and you'll learn what it means to be alive."

In that alternate translation, Jesus tells us that we can choose an approach to life that produces thorns, briars, and thistles, or we can choose to nurture the life that produces luscious fruits. Again, McLaren summarizes the point of the analogy: Jesus warns, "Get your inner identity straight, and your life will be fruitful."

As to the builder who chooses the easy way of constructing on sand vs. the one who takes more time and effort to build on rock, their experience is the same in one respect:

They both experience falling rain, rising floodwaters, and buffeting winds. The big difference? The person who builds on the solid foundation of Christ, whose structure withstands the storm, doesn't just *hear* Jesus' message; they translate it into *action*.



Each pair of images challenges us to move beyond mere interest and agreement to commitment and action. And what is the desired action? To take everything Jesus has taught us—all we have considered as we have listened to him here on this hillside—and translate it into our way of living, our way of being alive.

This is the choice we all have this Lent. We can choose a superficial Christian life, or we can choose to be committed and to be bold in living out our stated faith.

*The Music Man* wouldn't be nearly the endearing and enduring musical story that it has been these past 55-plus years if the theme of redemption did not win out the day. We love Professor Henry Hill in the end because love saves him from himself—from his wilderness demons. Love redeems him and we rejoice as he chooses an authentic life, a life where the faith of his followers is at last rewarded. The town's children play their new instruments and march in their new uniforms. To this they may sound like a screeching mess, but to their loving tone-deaf parents, they sound like the very angels of heaven.

Redemption is always available. The most vacuous of lives have time to be turned around and count for something. No one is beyond repair. No one is beyond hope, beyond real-time saving. This is not about what happens when you die; this is about how you reject the trappings of Ole Slick in favor of the teachings of the Authentic Christ, our Rock, our Foundation.

Henry Hill puts it this way in his when he is confronted by Marion about his past and he sees the folly of his ways, "You pile up enough tomorrows, and you'll find you are left with nothing but a lot of empty yesterdays. I don't know about you, but I'd like to make today worth remembering."

*May it Be So.*