

A photograph of a narrow, rocky path leading up to a stone archway in a desert setting. The path is composed of large, light-colored rocks and leads towards a stone archway in the distance. The archway is set within a larger stone structure. The sky is clear and blue. The overall scene is bathed in warm, golden light, suggesting a sunset or sunrise.

THROUGH
THE NARROW
GATE

FRANK ARUNDELL

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Matthew 7: 13-21

Cover: The Steps of Repentance through Moses' Gate of
Confession, Mount Sinai, the Sinai Desert, Egypt, 2009

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ENTER THROUGH THE NARROW GATE

*“Enter through the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and **the way is hard that leads to life**, and those who find it are few.”*

What is this **life** that Jesus says is so difficult that few find it? Most of us struggle, more or less, to find the easy way of doing things; the way to peace, tranquility and satisfaction for our selves, our family and friends. Most of us try to be charitable and decent to those with whom we come in contact along the way, even those we find difficult to know or work with. The most important commandment is reiterated by Jesus from the ancient Jewish sh'ma (Shema):

*“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. **You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.** And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. (Deuteronomy 6: 4-6)*

In Leviticus the Lord God says: *“You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, **but you shall love your neighbor as yourself**: I am the Lord.” (Leviticus 19: 17)*

As for Jesus: *“When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. And one of them, a*

lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: *ı*You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” (Matt. 22: 36-40)

Now in Luke’s gospel the interrogation goes on:

“And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise.”

Jesus makes a distinction here. The neighbor is a Samaritan hated by the Jews for centuries. Pat McCloskey, OFM, the Franciscan editor of St. Anthony Messenger, relates the interesting story, Pat writes:

“I have been perplexed by the rift between the Samaritans and the Jews and their hatred mentioned in the New Testament. One incident is at Jacob’s well.

Yet in one of the parables it is a Samaritan who takes care of the victim who was beaten. Is there anywhere in the Old Testament that records the breaking down of Abraham’s and/or Jacob’s progeny?

Imagine the hatred between Serbs and Muslims in modern Bosnia, the enmity between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland or the feuding between street gangs in Los Angeles or New York, and you have some idea of the feeling and its causes between Jews and Samaritans in the time of Jesus. Both politics and religion were involved.

According to the Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Bible (McGraw Hill) by Louis F. Hartman, C.S.S.R., feelings of ill will probably went back before the separation of the northern and southern Jewish kingdoms. Even then there was a lack of unity between the tribes of Jacob.

After the separation of Judah and Israel in the ninth century BCE, King Omri of the Northern Kingdom bought the hill of Samaria from Shemer (1 Kings 16:24). He built there the city of Samaria which became his capital.

It was strong defensively and controlled the valley through which the main road ran between Jerusalem and Galilee. In 722 B.C. the city fell to the Assyrians and became the headquarters of the Assyrian province of Samarina. While many of the inhabitants of the city and the surrounding area of Samaria were led off into captivity, some farmers and others were left behind. They intermarried with new settlers from Mesopotamia and Syria.

Though the Samaritans were condemned by the Jews, Hartman says they probably had as much pure Jewish blood as the Jews who later returned from the Babylonian exile.

The story of both Israel's and Samaria's failures in keeping to the way of Yahweh is partly told in Chapter 17 of the Second Book of Kings. There, too, the sacred author tells how the king of Assyria sent a priest from among the exiles to teach the Samaritans how to worship God after an attack by lions was attributed to their failure to worship the God of the land. Second Kings recounts how worship of Yahweh was mixed with the worship of strange gods.

When Cyrus permitted the Jews to return from the Babylonian exile, the Samaritans were ready to welcome them back. The exiles, however, despised the Samaritans as renegades. When the Samaritans wanted to join in rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem, their assistance was rejected. You will find this in the Book of Ezra, Chapter Four.

With the rejection came political hostility and opposition. The Samaritans tried to undermine the Jews with their Persian rulers and slowed the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its temple. Nehemiah tells us (Nehemiah 13:28-29) that a grandson of the high priest, Eliashib, had married a daughter of Sanballat, the governor of the province of Samaria.

For defiling the priesthood by marrying a non-Jewish woman, Nehemiah drove Eliashib from Jerusalem—though Sanballat was a worshiper of Yahweh. According to the historian Josephus, Sanballat then had a temple built on Mount Garizim in which his son-in-law Eliashib could function. Apparently this is when the full break between Jews and Samaritans took place.

According to John McKenzie in his Dictionary of the Bible, the Samaritans later allied themselves with the Seleucids in the Maccabean wars and in 108 B.C. the Jews destroyed the Samaritan temple and ravaged the territory. Around the time of Jesus' birth, a band of Samaritans profaned the Temple in Jerusalem by scattering the bones of dead people in the sanctuary. In our own era which has witnessed the vandalism of

synagogues and the burning of black churches, we should be able to understand the anger and hate such acts would incite. The fact that there was such dislike and hostility between Jews and Samaritans is what gives the use of the Samaritan in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37) such force! The Samaritan is the one who is able to rise above the bigotry and prejudices of centuries and show mercy and compassion for the injured Jew after the Jew's own countrymen pass him by!

It is with those centuries of opposition and incidents behind their peoples that we can understand the surprise of the Samaritan woman (John 4:9) when Jesus rises above the social and religious restrictions not just of a man talking to a woman, but also of a Jew talking to a Samaritan.”

One would have to presume that the point of Jesus' parable is that every single person of the human race is our neighbor; not just those whose religion, race and creed conforms to ours as it was with the biblical Jews. Love is most certainly based on the Father's love for his creatures in all of Creation rather than on a temporal decision of kin, class or clan.

“I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven He causes his sun to rise on evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Do not even tax collectors do the same?”

Is this then the “hard way” leading to the “narrow gate” which few find – the way that leads to **“life?”**

Which ever way you may think about the origin of *life* we all need to take a step back and try to determine philosophically

and theologically about *initial causality of all that is, why is their something rather than nothing*, Jesus said:

“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way to where I am going.” Thomas said to him, *“Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”* Jesus said to him, ***“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.*** (John 14: 1-7)

Those who call themselves Christians know how difficult it is to follow the Lord's teaching; to choose the “steps of repentance.” The world-view calls love by every other name. Look around— there are those who love to hate and those who hate to love; those that despise any truth beyond their own conflicted personal “truth”. Many can easily separate themselves from the fact of Ultimate Truth and comply with the false idea of freedom by holding that truth is relative for every independent being. God simply doesn't exist because they haven't seen him. Pilate, was and remains the “example-in-chief” among those. To fight them, on the basis of our truth against their truth, is to fall into the trap of relativism, where, there is no Ultimate Truth. This very well may be the “wide and easy way that leads to destruction for the “many.”

With freedom comes the option to choose between what is difficult and what is not with regard to our personal choices. It is not easy to always follow the Commandments of God; the Commandments and rubrics of the church to which we belong;

the Corporal or Spiritual Works of Mercy; to forgive those who hate you and calumniate you; to turn the other cheek; to love your enemies. Most of us, not all, are only “wanna-be” saints, who may not necessarily “wanna” walk-the-walk that Jesus walked. It’s doubtful that many of us would eagerly want to be thrown to the lions in the name of Jesus. Most of us today would have succumbed to entering by the wider gate, the easy way out: “Hey, I was only kidding, who could buy the fantasy of an Incarnation and God himself becoming a man?” By the strength of our faith we each have to answer that question for ourselves and to understand, it is only by the grace of God that our faith is made strong,— strong enough to say “I truly believe.” Many would ask: Where do we sign up to register for this “grace?”

Most Christians were signed up at a baptismal font, usually in a local church if their parents were graced to believe that the rite of the Sacrament of Baptism was, for some reason, important to them. In the event the parents, parent or Godparents do not “believe,” regardless, the child received the grace of God in the sacrament on the “faith of the church”. A church which has continually traversed the precarious climb to enter through the narrow gate; to God who is the very Life of the world.

Most “Christians believe that through Baptism they have been taken into communion with the crucified and resurrected Christ, who has vanquished death and brought new life. Christians therefore live not only toward death, but always away from death.”

(Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988))

This *life* promised by the Father, through Jesus in the Spirit, surely is also the *eternal-life* that lies on the other side of that metaphor of the Narrow Gate.

*“Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of **life** that God has promised to those who love Him”* (James 1: 12)

There can be no doubt that we human beings, especially in this post modern era, find it very difficult to concede to any knowledge other than that gained by mental and physical experience. Even many of those who have been raised in a religious environment relying on the bible and a catechism, may not be able to suspend enough practical reason, to leave room for metaphysical understanding. Too many would be reticent to believe in “a spirit-world.” When Jesus said: “*God is Spirit,*” or “*The Kingdom of God is among you,*” many, other than committed clergymen or theologians, would rather not think about what he meant, and could simply set aside a reality which includes spirituality as too spooky.

Who else other than Jesus would be better able to explain it:

*Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again I he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of **water and the Spirit**, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is*

born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind I blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Jesus' instructions to Nicodemus leaves little doubt as to the unseen reality of the Spirit. One could say that it's the flip-side of physicality (including "mind") or even mortal-life itself within which we have our connection to God, in his image so to speak. In other words we are all spiritual beings, in a material body; the unity of which is called "soul." An essay, *The Enigmatic Default* offered on <<http://renovabis.com>> (Library) provides a pretty good explanation of the power-in-the-water of Baptism for those who may be interested. It would be almost impossible for Secular Humanists to concede to spirituality as anything other than pure fantasy.

The Catholic Church, ie, the "Mother Church" speaks of a *conversion, a second birth*:

"You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God." One must appreciate the magnitude of the gift God has given us

in the sacraments of Christian initiation in order to grasp the degree to which sin is excluded for him who has “put on Christ.” But the apostle John also says: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” And the Lord himself taught us to pray: “Forgive us our trespasses,” linking our forgiveness of one another's offenses to the forgiveness of our sins that God will grant us. (CCC 1425)

Conversion to Christ, the new birth of Baptism, the gift of the Holy Spirit and the Body and Blood of Christ received as food have made us “holy and without blemish,” just as the Church herself, the Bride of Christ, is “holy and without blemish.” Nevertheless the new life received in Christian initiation has not abolished the frailty and weakness of human nature, nor the inclination to sin that tradition calls *concupiscence*, which remains in the baptized such that with the help of the grace of Christ they may prove themselves in the struggle of Christian life.¹⁴ This is the struggle of *conversion* directed toward holiness and eternal life to which the Lord never ceases to call us. (CCC 1426)

III THE CONVERSION OF THE BAPTIZED

Jesus calls to conversion. This call is an essential part of the proclamation of the kingdom: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.” In the Church's preaching this call is addressed first to those who do not yet know Christ and his Gospel. Also, Baptism is the principal place for the first and fundamental conversion. It is by faith in the Gospel and by Baptism that one renounces evil and gains salvation, that is, the forgiveness of all sins and the gift of new life. (CCC 1427)

Christ's call to conversion continues to resound in the lives of Christians. This *second conversion* is an uninterrupted task for the whole Church who, “clasping sinners to her bosom, [is] at once holy and always in need of purification, [and] follows constantly the path of penance and renewal.” This endeavor of conversion is not just a human work. It is the movement of a “contrite heart,” drawn and moved by grace to respond to the merciful love of God who loved us first. (CCC 1429)

St. Peter's conversion after he had denied his master three times bears witness to this. Jesus' look of infinite mercy drew tears of repentance from Peter and, after the Lord's resurrection, a threefold affirmation of love for him. The second conversion also has a *communitarian* dimension, as is clear in the Lord's call to a whole Church: “Repent!” (CCC1429)

St. Ambrose says of the two conversions in the Church, “there are water and tears: the water of Baptism and the tears of repentance.”

The Church, a sacrament of herself, bears within her institutional reality *the seven-sacraments* “instituted by Christ to give grace;” conveyed to “The People of God” by a legitimate hierarchy also instituted by Christ through Peter. What is sad is that many of its members over the centuries turned out to be not exactly “the salt of the earth”. Every human being is given to know by conscience that he or she must pay the price for their transgressions, before they are called before the “judgement-seat” of God. The fact is that many men and women were not able or willing to acknowledge the grace of God when offered by the Spirit, and not willing to trust the Word of God in scripture. They see them only as faulted, historical compilations prepared by the early Church fathers to suit their own agenda

The schism's which followed were based on theological disagreements, and on political misunderstandings attributed to men of ill will. The blame game is not new to religious convictions Who understood human desire more than the Savior of the world whom they crucified, and yet forgave them in the name of the Father in the Spirit?

*“Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, **which the Son of Man will give to you.** For on him God the Father has set his seal.”* (John 6: 26-28)

A strong reference to the Eucharist is intimated in these verses from John for those who struggle with the Catholic Christian faith as being too difficult, and there are many who would rather practice a less demanding faith.

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.”(Matthew 7: 15)

Prayer and perseverance may very well be the way up the “steps of repentance” to **life** beyond the Narrow Gate promised by a merciful Christ in his Sacraments. The real-presence of Christ in the Eucharist, through the Spirit for those receive him worthily, is our saving grace.

Tuesday of the 1st week of Advent
Saint John Damascene, Priest, Doctor

Gospel:

Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, “I give you praise, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden

these things from the wise and the learned you have revealed them to the childlike. Yes, Father, such has been your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father. No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal him.”

Turning to the disciples in private he said, “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. For I say to you, many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.”