

“The Easy Way and the Hard Way”
September 28, 2025

Proverbs 4:10-18
Matthew 7:13-14

During the recent Jimmy Kimmel dust-up, Brendan Carr, the chair of the FCC, spoke on a podcast about the need for ABC to, as he put it “take action on Kimmel.” He said “We can do this the easy way or we can do it the hard way.”

That comment didn’t sit well with a lot of people, including Senator Ted Cruz, who heard the echo of a mob boss in Carr’s words. He added: “I think it is unbelievably dangerous for government to put itself in the position of saying we’re going to decide what speech we like and what we don’t, and we’re going to threaten to take you off air if we don’t like what you’re saying.”

Many people found themselves a little disconcerted to be in agreement with the good Senator from Texas, but such are the times we live in.

Then, last Monday, Carr said that his words were in no way a threat. Come on, folks—lighten up. It was a joke, we were told. Lighten up.

Maybe so.

Maybe so.

In the middle of all of this, I woke up on Tuesday morning thinking about the “easy way and the hard way.” Quite unexpectedly, those words of Jesus came back to me: “The road is easy that leads to destruction...and the road is hard that leads to life.”

We have a choice. We can go the easy way or the hard way.

At a time when great evil was rising up, Albus Dumbledore, the headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry said: “The time will soon come when each of us will have to choose between what is easy and what is right.”

This, of course, is not just the way of fiction.

We know this from our lives.

A worker at Bread Garden is hauled away by ICE agents—as is the Superintendent of the Des Moines public schools. A US Attorney who told border agents to follow the law on immigration raids was fired by the President. US troops are sent to major cities.

The time will soon come...

It is not easy to act with courage in the face of policies and people who tear down and destroy. It is not easy to act with compassion in the face of mean-spirited hate.

So, we turn to our scriptures.

This morning, the book of Proverbs presented us with the contrast between the way of wisdom, the paths of righteousness and the way of the wicked, the way of evildoers. The wise person, we are told, will choose the first path.

Together we read about the two ways from in Psalm 1. This stands as an introduction of sorts to all 150 Psalms, and affirms that “The Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of wicked will perish.” This theme is repeated throughout the Psalms, probably because the choice between the two ways keeps coming up in our lives.

And we listened as Jesus recommended choosing the hard way over the easy—because it leads to life.

As a congregation that has covenanted to follow in the ways of Jesus Christ, known and to be made known to us, we are people who are choosing to “do it the hard way.” Together we travel the road that is hard. Together we seek to enter through the narrow gate.

For decades now, as many have made a very concerted effort to cast Christianity in a ridged, conservative image—and even in a regressive and authoritarian image—out of our liberal Protestant tradition we have called people to a grace-filled and tolerant (in the best sense of those words) way as we advanced civil rights, restored the environment, advocated for the now threatened right for all people to marry, and worked to end hunger and homelessness and poverty in America.

It is not a way that all would choose.

As people of faith and spirit, we pray for the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the victims of disasters. And because we are people of faith and spirit, we also find ourselves helping to rebuild cities; we find ourselves welcoming the homeless, feeding the hungry; we find ourselves working for policies and practices that would lessen poverty in Iowa City and around the globe.

We walk along the hard road with a joy that supports us when the way seems especially rough, as it does to many in these days. Out of our liberal Protestant tradition we continue to bring the good news of God’s love to the world rather than being shaped into what others think we are or should be as Christians.

I know that liberal Protestants—and this congregation in particular—are a puzzle to many. As the church historian and ethicist Gary Dorrien says, we offer a third way between orthodox over-belief and atheistic disbelief. Liberal Protestants champion the right to academic freedom, accept biblical criticism, and allow science to explain the physical world. We are comfortable looking beyond the church for answers as we seek to be relevant to the modern world.¹

Not all would choose such a hard way.

But here we are.

Not long ago, someone suggested that congregations such as ours should “identify the things missing from contemporary culture and offer them in absorbing and attractive ways, making them readily available and reducing their strangeness. It’s not hard to see,” he said, “what’s missing in our self-actualizing culture: deep contemplation, true companionship, sincere dialogue across difference, an identity beyond self-expression, tangible and profound belonging. All such things have a significant place in historic Christianity, and many people are at least somewhat aware that their lives are impoverished without them.”²

And that is what we do:

We stand as a mediating presence between individuals and those larger forces and institutions. We offer a place of belonging. At a time when great power and great wealth are concentrated in the hands of very few, we join with one another as a place where individuals—often with little power on their own—can find the ability to act as we come *together* for positive ends.

We listen carefully when Jesus speaks hard words.

We live out the good news that in places of anonymity and alienation—in Iowa City, at the University—we are no longer strangers. We are known by one another. Together we gather to worship, we work with each other in mission, we study in groups, we bear one another’s burdens, and we talk and laugh together over coffee.

We announce and show the good news of God’s love when disasters strike, when refugees are demonized, when students are lonely, when children are hungry.

As liberal Protestants, we learn not only from the ancient stories of scripture but also from our own stories of faith and doubt, love and fear, as we discern the living God in the midst of daily life.

All lives might be enriched as we share these aspects of our liberal Christian faith.

It’s been said of this congregation that we are a “serious” church and that “What might be called the seriousness of the church arises from a belief that Christianity is demanding and a desire to understand its demands and to be encouraged and supported in responding to them.”

Christianity *is* demanding.

We have realized that liberal Christianity is not as “freewheeling” as people often think it is. To be a part of this congregation takes some discipline so that in what we do we might *all* choose the harder way of love. It is a great calling and a high challenge that we take on in covenanting to be a member of this congregation. Christianity is a demanding way of life. It requires much and gives even more. A liberal, open-hearted Christianity calls for the best in us as individuals *and* as a congregation.

Following on the hard road does not necessarily come easily.

Herman Melville touched on this in *Moby Dick* when he wrote: “All the things that God would have us do are hard for us to do—remember that—and hence, God oftener commands us rather than endeavors to persuade. And if we obey God, we must disobey ourselves.”

As we seek to follow Jesus, we often find that we are not following our own impulses. So, we need each other to help all of us follow on the way.

The road is hard that leads to life. Because we choose to travel that road, we discover the deep peace of God shining on our lives in unexpected ways, in unexpected places. When the peace of God comes upon us, we are stirred from lethargy, we see what might be, and we seek the new thing that God is doing in the world.

The road is hard that leads to life. Because we choose to travel that road, we recognize the value of each individual human being—of you and me, of neighbors and the strangers who walk by or through our doors. We recognize the value of each human being, grounded in the fact that we are the children of God.

The road is hard that leads to life. Because we choose to travel that road, we can live through difficult times and make unpopular choices with the courage that comes from knowing we are loved by God. When we act with courage in the face of those things that destroy, it will not be easy. By God’s grace, we find ourselves faithful enough and dissatisfied enough to choose correctly.

The road is hard that leads to life. Because we choose to travel that road, we are those who bring some light and warmth to a dark and cold world. Sometimes it is a brilliant light that amazes and inspires all who see it. Sometimes the light is faint, but it is enough to see a little better, a little further down the road that we travel.

Christianity is demanding.

The road that leads to life is a hard way.

Let us continue to walk it together as we welcome others who will join us on the way.

¹ <https://adfontesjournal.com/interview/understanding-liberal-theology-an-interview-with-gary-dorrien/#:~:text=Elsewhere%20you've%20defined%20it%20as%20like%20a,compels%20right%20belief%20on%20any%20particular%20thing>

²Samuel Wells, “Three Responses to Church Decline,” *Christian Century*, October 2024.
https://www.christiancentury.org/voices/three-responses-church-decline?code=jFEkxYjXOZJqHqSGYm04&utm_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm_campaign=fa6bc8327f-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_DEEPER_2024-10-02&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_-cb6a0e7463-%5BLIST_EMAIL_ID%5D