

THE NARROW DOOR

Luke 13:22-30

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost (Series C)

August 25, 2019

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 13, verses 22 through 30. It is on page 738 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, Jesus reveals how exclusive the Kingdom of God is, but also how inclusive it is. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 13, beginning at verse 22, we read in Jesus' name.

²² He went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem. ²³ And someone said to him, "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" And he said to them, ²⁴ "Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. ²⁵ When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, open to us,' then he will answer you, 'I do not know where you come from.' ²⁶ Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.' ²⁷ But he will say, 'I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil!' ²⁸ In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God but you yourselves cast out. ²⁹ And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God. ³⁰ And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

"Will those who are saved be few?" (13:23). Have you ever wondered about that? There are 7.5 billion people in the world, 327 million in the United States, fifty-seven thousand in Grand Forks, about 180 in this congregation, and one in your seat. How many of these people will be saved? "Will those who are saved be few?"

Someone asked Jesus this question, and the answer seems to be "yes," but that's not how Jesus answers the question. "Yes," is the correct answer, but it's not the best the answer. The best answer is, "Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many ... will seek to enter and will not be able." (13:24). Do you see what Jesus is doing? He's taking a theoretical question that has to do with all those other people, and he's making it real and personal. He takes a question about the 7.5 billion people in the world and he makes it about you.

This person asks Jesus a question in the third person. If you're not a grammar nerd, I'll briefly explain what that means. Don't worry; this won't hurt. Pronouns—those are words like "I," "me," "my," "you," "he," "she," "it," "them," and "those"—are categorized into three groups. Whenever you talk about yourself—when you use the words "me," "myself," and "I"—you are talking in the first person. It's a conversation that really only needs one person—the person who's talking. So we call these "first person pronouns." If you use first person pronouns a lot, you might be a narcissist. When you add in a second person, you start using words like "you," "your," and "yours." A conversation with these pronouns requires a second person,

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someone for you to talk to, so we call these “second person pronouns.” If you use a lot of second person pronouns, you might be a very caring individual. But then, if you get bored of talking about yourself and the person you’re talking to, you need a third person to talk about. So you use words like “he,” “she,” “them,” and “those.” Whenever you talk about other people, who are neither you, nor the person you are talking to, you use third person pronouns. This is the least personal category. If you use third person pronouns a lot, you might be a gossip, but that kind of depends on whether you say good things or bad things.

Anyway, this person asks Jesus a question in the third person. What about all those other people? “Will those who are saved be few?” But Jesus doesn’t want to talk about them, so he turns it into a second person conversation. “**Strive to enter through the narrow door.**” Or, we could even translate it, “**You, strive to enter through the narrow door.**” Jesus doesn’t want to talk about all those other people. Jesus wants to talk about you.

So don’t think of this sermon as being for all those other people. Don’t think of it as being for people who aren’t even here. Don’t think of it as being for the person in the pew on the other side of the church. Don’t even think of it as being for the person sitting next to you. This sermon is for you. Yes, there are other people here, and they’re going to hear this too, but they’re really just here to make it less intimidating for me to say to you what needs to be said to you. “**You, strive to enter through the narrow door. For many ... will seek to enter and will not be able.**”

The questioner is right. Those who are saved will be few. But what do we do with this information? Apparently, on the Last Day, there will be many who think they should be admitted into the Kingdom of God, but will be denied. The number of people who think they should be in heaven is far greater than the number of people who actually will be. Many will be surprised on the Last Day. This should cause each and every one of us to consider our own hearts. Will I be one who reclines at table in the Kingdom of God? Or will I be one who stands outside yelling, “Unfair!”?

In the parable, those who are shut out are greatly surprised. The master of the house says, “**I do not know where you come from**” (13:25). And they’re like, “What are you talking about? We’re from here.” They say, “**We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets**” (13:26). But the master of the house says again, “**I tell you, I do not know where you are from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil!**” (13:27).

In the historical context of the parable, these people represent Jews who were around Jesus, but did not believe in him. Maybe they knew Jesus. They might have been on a first name basis. They may have talked with him. They may have eaten a meal with him. They may have listened to his teaching. But they did not believe in him. They were not convinced about the whole Son of God and Messiah thing. They didn’t think they really needed to believe it. Their thought process goes like this: *I don’t really know if this Jesus guy is who he says he is. Maybe he’s the Messiah; maybe he’s not. But if he is the Messiah, he’s the Messiah of Israel, and I’m an Israelite, so I’m good either way.* But, on the Last Day, when the door is shut, they find that the Messiah of Israel did not know where they were from. They were not from his Israel. Of course, many Jews did believe, but those who disbelieved will be cast out.

Meanwhile, all these other people “**from east and west, and from north and south,**” enter through the narrow door, “**and recline at table in the kingdom of God**” (13:29). The Messiah of Israel welcomes these Gentiles as Israelites, because they entered through the narrow door by faith in Jesus, but the Jews who disbelieved are excluded. Jesus does not know where they are from. He does not consider them to have ever been true Israelites.

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This concept of Gentiles being considered Israelites is nothing new. It's what Isaiah prophesied in the Old Testament lesson: "They shall declare my glory among the Gentiles. And they shall bring all your brothers from all the Gentiles as an offering to the LORD. ... And some of them also I will take for priests and for Levites, says the LORD." (Is. 66:19-21). This would have been a shocking thing to the Jews, that God would make priests and Levites out of Gentiles (cf. 1 Peter 2:9-10). But God does this because they enter through the narrow door by faith in Jesus. But what is even more surprising for unbelieving Jews is when they are shut out of the Kingdom of God because of their unbelief.

So they do what anyone would do. They argue their case. And this is kind of funny. They don't say, "Oh, you're right. We should have believed in you. Now we believe. Please forgive us." No one does that. Instead, they argue their case. They argued that, based on their proximity to Jesus, they should be allowed in. They're standing at the door crying, "Unfair!" This is what it will be like on the Last Day.

When I imagine the scene on the Last Day, when many are cast out, I used to imagine that all of them will be trying to repent, as if they finally realize their error, but it's too late to fix it. But, based on this parable and other parables of Jesus (e.g., Matt. 25), we see that unbelievers will continue to be unbelievers. My imagination was wrong. My imagination painted God as a ruthless judge who condemns all these people on the technicality that their repentance is twenty seconds too late. But my imagination was wrong. That is not how it will be. The unrepentant will continue to be unrepentant. What we will see is unbelievers arguing for entrance into the Kingdom of God on the basis of anything but Jesus' blood. They will say, "But I'm an Israelite," or, "I went to church every Sunday." Or they will say, "But I was a good person, better than most." Or they'll say, "But I just followed a different god, and I followed him really well. That should count for something." They will argue that they deserve to be there. No one deserves to be there. Thinking that we deserve God's kindness is just unbelief, and it might be the worst kind of unbelief. Unbelievers in life will continue to be unbelievers in death. So instead of trying to repent, they stand at the door shouting, "Unfair."

But, remember, this isn't about everyone else. This is about you. Will you be one of those standing at the door shouting, "Unfair"? Will you be the one saying, "But I did everything I was supposed to. I went to church. I brought food to the potluck. I paid my taxes. I voted the right way. I mowed my lawn every week. I never double-parked. I was better than average. You have to let me in." But Jesus will answer, "**I never knew you; Depart from me**" (Matt. 7:23).

That's what this is really about. It's about knowing Jesus. Or, to be more precise, it's about Jesus knowing you (Gal. 4:9). It's about your name being written in his book. And this is faith. Faith is simply dependence on Jesus for our salvation. Entering through the narrow door means entering through Jesus Christ. He is our door. He is the entrance. He is our access to the Father.

The straight and narrow isn't about good works. The straight and narrow is Jesus. He is the one who walked the path of God perfectly. He was obedient, even to the point of death, so that he might open the door to us. And so he is the narrow door. No one enters except by him. But all who enter by him find forgiveness, life, and salvation.

The Kingdom of God sounds very exclusive. And it is. It is extremely exclusive. The door is narrow. It is as narrow as one man. But it is also as inclusive as anything ever has been. It is both extremely exclusive, and infinitely inclusive at the same time. It is exclusive in the sense that there is only one way in. But it is infinitely inclusive because this narrow door is open to all. And

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we see both sides of this paradox in this text. We see the narrow door, but we also see many “from east and west, and from north and south” entering through the narrow door to “recline at table in the kingdom of God.” The door is narrow, but God’s mercy is wide enough for the entire world.

So is God unloving to make it so exclusive? No, not at all. God is infinitely loving, because he has made a way for all to enter. He has opened this door at the expense of his own blood.

Imagine a great building that you want to get into. Someone says, “The door’s right here.” But you look at the door. It’s kind of narrow. It has blood on it. And you don’t want anyone to tell you how to get in. So you say, “No, I think there’s another door over there.” So you go and push against the wall, hoping there will be a door there. When that doesn’t work, you walk around the side of the building, and you feel along that wall for a secret door. Then you walk around the yard tapping on the trees. If one of them is hollow, perhaps it might be a secret tunnel. Someone says again to you, “The door’s right there.” You call that person “judgmental,” and you resolve to never use their narrow door. You get a can of paint, and you paint your own door on the side of the building. You push, and it doesn’t open, so you get a good running start, and you try to crash through the side of the building. This goes badly. You destroy yourself trying to find your own way in. Is the building exclusive? Yes, because there’s only one door. But it is also inclusive, because this door is open to everyone, and multiple people are inviting you in.

So remember the two sides of this coin. If you expect the door to be wide, you won’t make it. Or if you expect the door to be somewhere else—if you expect the door to be your own righteousness or one of the false gods—you will not be able to enter through that fake door. There is only one door, it is as narrow as one man. But remember the other side of it too. That door is open to all, and no one who enters by that narrow door will ever be put to shame.

“Strive to enter through the narrow door.” What does this mean? It means fix your eyes on Jesus. Never take your focus off of Christ. There are so many things that compete for our attention. Some of those things might even be good. But if they take your focus off of Christ, they are bad for you. The devil is happy with anything that takes our eyes off of Jesus. Fix your eyes on the narrow door. Do the things before you that are good, but never take your focus off of Christ. Fix your eyes on the one who was crucified and raised from the dead for you.

God has made a door through his Son Jesus Christ, and he has opened it to all who believe in Christ. This door was opened by Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven. He sacrificed himself for the sins of the world. And that means he sacrificed himself for you. He rose from the dead. And he did this for you too, that you might also be raised with him. And he has ascended into heaven, opening a door for all who trust in him.

Will those who are saved be few? “Many ... will seek to enter and will not be able.” But all who trust in Jesus Christ will enter through the narrow door. Enter through the narrow door, and be saved. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.