

“Through the Narrow Door”

*Make every effort to enter through the narrow door,
because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to (Luke 13:24).*

In today’s reading from Luke we are led to some of the sweetest promises of God that we will ever hear...but the path to those promises is not easy. In fact, at first glance this reading seems to create more questions than it answers and, in many ways, the words that we hear Jesus speak in this text appear to challenge some of our most basic beliefs about grace and salvation. So, to truly understand the meaning of today’s reading we need to take a careful look at the context for Jesus’ words.

As the reading begins, Luke tells us, “Then Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem” (Luke 13:22). To understand the significance of this opening verse, we need to go back into chapter ten of Luke’s Gospel. Here we find Jesus sending out 72 of his disciples, “to every town and place where he was about to go” (Luke 10:1). Before Jesus went into the towns and villages of Judea, He sent His disciples ahead of Him to prepare the people for His visit, and their message was simple; they were to tell the people they encountered, “The Kingdom of God is near” (Luke 10:1). Or, to put it another way...the Messiah has come! The Lord is with us! God has kept His promise to deliver His people! That’s what the people in the town had heard, and whether or not they believed the good news they had heard, the disciples’ message was unmistakable: In this man Jesus, the Kingdom of God had arrived.

The first verse of today’s reading also reveals some important information about Jesus’ destination. Luke tells us that He was on His way to Jerusalem. This is a very interesting detail from Luke because if you look at a map of the Holy Land and you plot the course Jesus took from the beginning of His trip in Luke 9:51 where, we are told, He had “set out for Jerusalem” to the time he actually arrived on Palm Sunday, Jesus was geographically all over the place...but it’s not because He was lost! When Luke tells us that Jesus was making His “way to Jerusalem” in verse 22, it’s not so much a detail about the trajectory of the trip, rather it is a critically important comment on His purpose. Jesus was on His way to the Cross! He is in the midst of a journey that will end in His suffering and death. He is on His way to do what He came to do for us, and it’s this journey to the Cross that provides the backdrop for the question that Jesus is suddenly asked in verse 23.

“Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?” What an odd question. From out of nowhere, this unnamed, unidentified person asks Jesus a question about salvation. Luke doesn’t tell us the motivation for the inquiry, and we don’t know who this person is, but, if you think about it, this is the question of a scorekeeper. I mean, the Kingdom of God is near; the Son of God is standing right in front of you; the Messiah has come to your town and instead of asking the obvious question, “Lord, will I be saved?” or, like the thief on the cross who said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom” (Luke 23:42). This person is counting heads.

I can only imagine that this inquisitive character must have been a Pharisee, or if he wasn’t a Pharisee then he was trying to look good in front of them...because this is not the question of the brokenhearted! This is not the question of a repentant heart! This is the question of the self-righteous person who is more worried about who’s in and who’s out rather than the reality of his own sin. And I know this may be a stretch, but I think the man was actually asking the question, “Lord, are only *a few of us* going to be saved?”

It’s to this falsely secure, audacious, presumptuous, self-righteous question that Jesus speaks: “Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to.” Say what?!?! One of the basic and fundamental tenants of our Christian faith is that we are saved by grace alone. In fact that’s exactly what we are told in Ephesians as Paul writes, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). And each week a preacher stands in this pulpit and preaches Christ crucified for the forgiveness and salvation of sinners. We are saved not by making every effort, not by our striving, but by grace alone, through faith alone, by Christ alone, as revealed to us in Scripture alone...*but that’s not what He says here!* “Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to.”

If we are to understand Jesus’ words in the light of the overwhelming message of the Bible which tells us that salvation is not based on us in any way, then we have to look at the purpose of Jesus’ words. Jesus speaks these words to a man and

to a crowd that is focused on their own good works. Jesus speaks these words to people who are clinging to and banking on their own righteousness. Jesus speaks these words to men and women who have put themselves at the center of their salvation. *Jesus is speaking to people like us!* You see, by our sinful nature, we are born to keep track. By our sinful nature, we are inclined to point to our virtues, to hold up our victories, to bargain with God based on what we think we bring to the table. By our sinful nature, we are just like the people in today's reading and it's to us that Jesus speaks. And to us, Jesus says, "Make every effort."

These words from verse 24 seem to go against everything we hold dear about the Gospel message...and yet there's more to this phrase than meets the eye. The Greek verb recorded here by Luke sounds like our word "agonize" and in other parts of Scripture it is translated as, "fight" or "struggle." In fact, it's a verb that Paul uses repeatedly in his epistles *but he never uses it to describe our efforts toward salvation.* In I Timothy, Paul urges, "Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called" (I Timothy 6:12). Again, to Timothy Paul says, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (II Timothy 4:7). And in Colossians Paul writes, "To this end I labor, struggling with all (God's) energy, which so powerfully works in me" (Colossians 1:29).

Jesus is not telling us that our salvation is based on our efforts. No! He is telling us to fight...to fight against the urge to rely on our evil hearts; to fight against the need to justify ourselves with our own works; to fight the inclination to bring anything with us except the righteousness of Christ with which we have been clothed in our Baptism (Galatians 3:27). The door *is* narrow! Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Like the person who questions Jesus in our reading, the devil, the world and our own sinful flesh would have us believe that it's because of what we bring to the door that we will be admitted, but Jesus says fight that temptation, turn from your sinful self-righteousness and trust in Me because there is no other way!

And to emphasize the seriousness of that point Jesus continued, "Many will try to enter and will not be able to. Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, 'Sir, open the door for us.' But he will answer, 'I don't know you or where you come from.' Then you will say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.' But he will reply, 'I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!'" (Luke 13:24-27).

This picture of judgment is harsh and it is terrifying and it's exactly what this inquiring person needed to hear! The person who approached Jesus in today's reading was comfortable that his own righteousness was enough, that he had been good enough and worked hard enough to get himself into heaven and, in the context of this sinful motive – and for his ultimate good – Jesus shattered his illusions of self-made salvation. "There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but *you yourselves* thrown out" (Luke 13:28).

The Jews of Jesus' day saw salvation as their birthright. To them, the fact that they were "children of Abraham" meant that heaven was automatically theirs. In this exchange Jesus destroyed that thinking and, after telling them that their self-righteous unbelief would keep them out of the Kingdom, Jesus continued by saying the unthinkable; that "People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last" (Luke 13:29-30). And this is the sweetest promise of God that we could ever hear...because He's talking about us!

We who once were far from God; we who were lost in our sin; we who once clung to our works; we have been brought into the Kingdom of God – not because we've done enough; not because of anything in us...but because Jesus walked the narrow way of the Cross and by the blood of Christ alone we have been saved. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (II Corinthians 5:21). This is the way and the truth and the life that has been given to us and it is this great and gracious act of God that gives Jesus' words meaning to us today. My friends, the door to the Kingdom is narrow and it is exclusive and in Jesus Christ it has been opened for us...and by faith in Christ alone we can walk in with full assurance that we who are the last and least, have been welcomed to the feast. Amen.

Reverend Thomas A. Eggold