

Luke 13:22-30

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

August 21, 2022

The claim comes frequently, "It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you are sincere. We're all going to the same place." Those sentiments may fit the American ideals of freedom and individual rights. Sincerity is good, but does it save? We know it doesn't work out that way geographically: all roads do not lead to the same destination. It's also not true spiritually. Jesus here proclaims the one way of salvation, a way which he invites all to receive, calling out

ENTER THE NARROW DOOR

- I. Christ is the only way
- II. The door stands open now
- III. Enjoy the feast inside

Jesus was heading to Jerusalem for the final time. He knew, and we know also, what would happen: there he would suffer and die. He had come to this world for the purpose of laying down his life for the sins of the world, and the time for it was approaching. He intended to go through with the whole, horrible process. His route was not a direct beeline, however. He continued the important task of teaching people all the while. He sought out everyone as he went to various towns and villages. Wherever there were people he could reach with his message, there he went. As the end was nearing for himself, he warned increasingly of the approaching end for all people, the final judgment, and urged being prepared for it. Those thoughts were prominent in the teaching he did when he came to Jerusalem that final week.

Perhaps his urgency seemed unusual. Some of the rabbis, the Jewish teachers, taught that all the people of Israel were going to be saved. If that's the case there's no big deal about getting ready. That feeling may have led to the question that came, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?"

There's a better question to ask in light of what Jesus had been teaching. The Savior directs our thoughts to what needs to be our real concern: am I going to be saved, and how? His answer was, "Make every effort to enter the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to." The narrow door means entering through Jesus and by faith in him. Faith makes a person small as you recognize your lack of personal powers. You are nothing. It involves the humility of repentance for all your sins and wrongs, and faith that in Jesus you have full forgiveness.

We're not always so eager to become that small. We may think we haven't been all that bad. We are good citizens of the nation and community. We work faithfully on the job or in school. We try to be effective parents or obedient children. We tell the truth—well, at least most of the time. We don't murder or steal—that is, if you don't count taking home a few office supplies from work or using the copier for personal items without paying. And look how good we were to the neighbors down the street when their relative died. Think of your works as loaded in a bag that you are lugging around. You won't fit through the narrow door with it. Besides, when we really think about it, maybe we haven't been all that great. Especially when we compare our behavior and attitudes with the standard of absolute perfection that God sets down in his law, our sin stands out. So coming in the smallness of repentance is appropriate. Enter the narrow door. Since the door is narrow, that also tells us that people do not come through as a nation or a group. We are saved individually, one at a time.

Jesus had said, "Make every effort to enter." Hm, that doesn't sound very Lutheran. Don't we teach salvation by God's grace, not by our efforts? Didn't we just note that our bag of works won't fit through the door? Salvation is by faith alone. The Bible is clear on that, but we face strong opposition to being and remaining in faith. The devil, the world with all its distractions and our sinful nature all oppose our faith. We must struggle to put them down. It takes disciplined action like an athlete puts toward competition. (That's the picture in the word Jesus used.) Draw on his power as it comes through the means of grace.

It isn't popular to assert that there is only one way into the kingdom of God. But it is true. It was concern for souls that led our Lord Jesus to state it and that leads us to do the same. Do not try to enter where there is no opening, that is, by looking to other saviors. Believe in Christ, the only way. He is the only way and he is the complete way. His perfect life is placed on our account, giving us the standing of holy before God, and his death on the cross paid for all of our sins. His work makes everything right between us and him. Trust Christ, the only way.

II.

Jesus Christ is the door and the door stands open now. God provides us with a time of grace. The message of Jesus is proclaimed in word and sacrament. We learn of his life and work for us as we gather for worship, in classes, and around the Word in our homes. We receive the gospel love of Christ when we partake of Holy Communion and when we recall his baptismal grace. Those precious opportunities proclaim Christ, the narrow door. So we do not have to open the door. It is open already, inviting us in.

Some day that time of grace will end, when "the owner of the house gets up and closes the door." It will happen for all when God brings the world to an end. Then there is no more time for anyone to come to faith. But the opportunity for each of us to come to believe will also end. That will happen on the day of our death. Another way it can happen is if we continually reject the Savior and his patience reaches its limit. He may remove our opportunities to hear the gospel. That can happen on an individual basis and to nations.

So some will be shut out of God's kingdom. He sees the heart, and he looks for personal faith there. Where it is lacking he must say, "I don't know you or where you come from." Of course, he knows everything, but he is telling us he does not know such a person as his own. They don't belong to him in faith. That is tragic, since Christ offered his life for them also. His work is wasted.

They will protest, "We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets." That may well be true, but it made no difference. They weren't accepting his Word. We realize the warning Jesus was giving. He was right there among these people. They knew him; they saw him regularly. But they didn't know him in faith.

We hear similar claims. "I belonged to the church all my life. It was even the right one, a church body faithful to the Word. I was baptized and confirmed. I attended church. I lived right next door. I serve the church in many ways." Does that really happen, you may wonder. It does. I remember calling on a family to express concern about their lengthy lack of hearing God's Word and what danger that posed to their faith. The lady of the house pointed out, "Our daughter attended your school." Never mind that she had graduated 28 years earlier and the family might never have been back to church since then. I also remember a man who objected to our concern about his absence, "My grandfather works hard for the church and my father attends regularly." Their active faith was great, and we appreciated their labors but what did it say about the man himself? No one is saved by another person's believing. No one else and no outward items form the basis of our trust. Our faith rests in Jesus alone.

For the person who rejected the Savior during their opportunities, any later remorse will be too late. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. It is tragic, but there is no second chance after this life.

Clearly, we want to avoid such a scene. Repent and believe, now. If you have advantages, and you do—numerous opportunities to hear Jesus—use them. Enter the narrow door while it is open.

III.

Wonderful conditions await as we enter. Jesus described a feast. He frequently helped our understanding of the life to come by comparing it with a wedding banquet. It is a celebration of joy. A perfect life is in store for us. We're talking about heaven. There, in the presence of God himself, we will have pleasures beyond description. Instead of weeping, our tears will be wiped away. Tears of joy will be the only possibility.

Who will be there to enjoy the wonderful conditions? Jesus mentioned the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as well as the prophets. There will be believers of Bible times, heroes of faith we read about. Imagine getting to meet them. And there are more: "People will come from east and west and north and south and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God." From all over they will stream in. Jesus was saying there would be Gentiles, non-Jewish people, who would believe in him. They come from all nations, wherever his gospel is preached. They include you and me.

This heavenly scene reveals a wonderful fellowship, a reunion with all the believers who have gone before us, as well as those who are yet to come in. What a thrill to be together! We look forward to the happy experience. We don't have to wait to start enjoying it. We get a foretaste now when we are in the church, sharing the bond of faith and fellowship with other believers.

Doesn't this answer of our Lord Jesus add urgency to our lives as Christians? We want to hear and cling to the gospel. We want to share it with our children and grandchildren, our neighbors and the whole world so they can enter the narrow door. Some of the first, those who had the greatest opportunities, will be last, that is, lost. Others will remain first, enjoying the Savior's blessings now and eternally.

The door is narrow, but there is a long procession entering it. We ask not how many, but how to enter. Jesus answers that question for us. There is only one way, through faith in him. He is not conceited in telling us so, but concerned that we know that only way. Enter without delay. Trust in the Savior.