

“The Narrow Door”

Luke 13:22-30

August 25, 2013

14th Sunday After Pentecost

A man was bragging to his friend about what a fine archer he was. He said, “I’m not perfect – nobody is – but I do shoot very well.” The friend was not convinced and asked for a demonstration. So the pair went to the man’s backyard where he had a target set up on the back of his garage. The man started shooting, but, instead of hitting the target, the arrows were going into the garage wall. A couple went over the garage or missed the garage to the left or to the right. When the man was out of arrows, he calmly went to the garage wall and began drawing a series of concentric circles around each arrow until each arrow looked like it was in the middle of a target. “See?”, said the man. “I told you I could shoot well.”

The man was deluding himself. Instead of using a fixed point like the target to determine his shooting ability, he was merely shooting in every direction and inventing a standard for success after he had already shot. In other words, the action determined the target instead of the other way around.

This would be either sad or funny if it wasn’t the way that most people view sin. Most will admit to some failure. Our amateur archer even admitted to missing the garage once in awhile. Christians know from the Scripture that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23), much like an arrow falls short of a target. Even non-Christians will admit from experience that, “Everyone’s human. No one’s perfect.”

But, instead of using the Law of God like a fixed target to measure our other behavior, we act first and then add qualifications, justifications, and explanations like circles around the arrow of our behavior to make it look like it was all right.

A person who uses God’s name in a curse will say, “But I didn’t mean anything by it.” Those who fail to hold the Word of God sacred and gladly hear and learn it will say, “I didn’t come to church,

didn't read the Bible, didn't have devotions, but I intend to. It's just that my work, my play, or anything else I really want to do gets in the way." Children would say, "I didn't obey my parents, even though I should. But they are just so unfair." I've heard unmarried couples say, "We knew the Bible forbids premarital sex, but we want to test our love for each and it's not like no one else is doing it." Similar rationalizations are made for other sinful sexual behavior – adultery, homosexuality, and the like. It's okay because our society says it's ok. People speak negatively about people, yet claim they weren't gossiping because they were simply "sharing concerns." The list could go on and on. Extenuating circumstances, the behavior of other people, and good intentions are the circles we draw around our behavior to make it look better.

This is the way we would like to look at sin: in a very broad way. Most behavior is all right. Behavior that is not all right is made right if we had good intentions while doing it or a good explanation for why we did it. And God judges us on what we meant to do, rather than what we actually did. This sounds so sensitive and inclusive. This is just the way our world thinks and the way Christians are being brain washed to think and act. Unfortunately, this is not the way that God thinks.

In our text for today, while Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem, someone wanted to have a theoretical theological debate with him. Having heard some of Jesus' difficult teaching, this man asks, "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" By talking about it in the third person, the man kept the discussion comfortable and safe. But Jesus will have none of this hypothetical debate. Jesus says, "You – strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able."

Jesus does not go along with the popular notion that the way to heaven is easy and can be successfully traveled by anyone who tries his best and who has good intentions or explanations when he doesn't do his best. The door to the eternal heavenly banquet is quite narrow and quite difficult to enter. Best efforts do not gain entrance for you. Good intentions are not good enough. There is an

old proverb which says, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.” This echoes Jesus’ own words in Matthew where he says, “For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it.” (Matt. 7:13)

Listen closely to what Jesus is saying about all your good intentions and all your explanations for your behavior. Intending to do what is right is not the same as doing right in God’s eyes. An explanation for doing wrong does not excuse you for having done wrong in God’s judgment. Going to hell is quite an easy thing. The road to hell is quite wide and simple to travel. Hell can be achieved, not only by doing wrong, but even by trying your best.

God’s way though is very strict and narrow. Jesus’ interpretation of the Law had been very narrow with no exceptions. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had said that it was not only wrong to kill your neighbor; it was wrong to hate him. It was not only wrong to commit adultery; it was wrong to lust after another person. It was not only wrong to swear by the wrong thing; it was wrong to swear at all. It was not enough to love your neighbor and hate your enemy; you had to love your enemies, too.

Our Lord’s interpretation of the 10 Commandments was so narrow, that even the Pharisees were squirming to find some kind of wiggle room. Even the experts in the Law were hard-pressed with our Lord’s narrow approach to the Commandments. They began to ask Him for exceptions to the rules. But Our Lord Jesus would not admit any exceptions to the perfect keeping of God’s Commandments; He counted words, even thoughts as violations of God’s Commandments. In our Lord’s narrow explanation of God’s Perfect will—we can’t do, we can’t speak, we can’t even think—without breaking God’s Commandments.

And there will come a day of reckoning. The Lord will arise and shut the door to life. People will be left outside. When they beg for admittance, the Lord will say, “I do not know where you came from.” When they list all of their outward connections to Christ – having had fellowship around His table and having heard Him teach in their home town – it matters nothing to Jesus who says, “I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil.”

Evaluate your good intentions and how far they will get you with God. Think of all the rationalizations, justifications, and explanations for why you did what you shouldn't have done or why you didn't do what you should have. Will they stand up before God's judgment? On that last day, when the door is closed, will it really matter to Jesus that you went to Sunday School, got confirmed, attended communion regularly and were a member in good standing of a Christian congregation? Or will Jesus look at you and say, "I do not know where you come from"?

But wait a minute. Jesus talks about the door being closed on that day. Do you know what that means? It means that the door to the eternal banquet is still open now. The door is narrow but it is wide open to all. God loves all and wants all to enter through it. Even more good news is that this door – this way to the unbelievable and unimaginable joys of heaven – is not an inanimate object or a lifeless thing. The door is a person, Jesus Christ. Jesus says, "I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved." (John 10:9) Jesus is a narrow door in the sense that He is the only door – the only entrance into the heavenly feast. As He said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)

Jesus came from the Father to us. Jesus left the heavenly banquet so that He might bring us to it. By taking the sin of the world upon Himself on the cross, it was Jesus who had the door to heaven slammed in His face. His own Heavenly Father turned His back on Him, causing Jesus to cry in agony, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" Yet by forsaking Jesus and heaping upon Him our punishment, God was able to accept us and heap blessing upon us. By Jesus' sacrifice of His own life on the cross, the Father forgave our sins and gave us new life. By opening the door to tomb the tomb three days later in Jesus' resurrection, God opened the door to heaven and granted access to the wedding supper of the Lamb which will never end.

When Jesus says, "Strive to enter through the narrow door," He is not talking about moral effort to get through the door or some human responsibility to make things right in order to get into heaven. We cannot achieve the moral perfection to get through the door. God requires holiness which we can

never achieve. There is nothing we need to make right. God accepted Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf and we enter only by His grace. The struggle and striving (the Greek word used here is the one from which we get our word "agony") "is produced when the Word of God – such as the teaching of Jesus here – calls one to repent and trust in Christ, but sinful human nature wars against God's Word." (Just, p.551) In other words, the striving is about repentance. "This ongoing, lifelong struggle characterizes the lives of all who are baptized into Christ." (Just, p.551)

Yet it is being baptized into Christ, not only being connected to His humble death but also being connected to His powerful resurrection, which strengthens us in this struggle. Daily, we return to our baptism with the sign of the cross, the words into which were baptized ("in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit) and claim its power. As the catechism says, "The Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever." (SC, p.25) As one commentator explained it, "Entrance through the narrow door is gained by those who repent and see in Jesus the Lord of the eschatological banquet, for this door opens up into the house in which the end-time feast is about to be celebrated." (Just, p.551)

Do not ignore the open door now. For those who do, it will be too late when the final feast arrives at Jesus' return. You will be left on the outside looking in at "Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God but you yourselves cast out." You'll see people there from all over who you never expected to be there, but who are there by grace through repentance and faith.

Instead, live lives of daily repentance where you freely admit your sin without justification, rationalization, or explanation. Turn from that behavior. Be at the door in faith where the door (Jesus) has promised to be through His Word. See the Lord's Supper, not as just another part of the service that takes up too much time and is often done by rote repetition, but as a foretaste of the feast to come and participate in it with anticipation and hope.

Today's text is a warning. Generally, we don't like warnings, especially when they criticize and conflict with our current behavior. But warnings are good and helpful when they save us from ourselves. Many today are on the broad road which leads to a wide gate into hell. It is the easier and more acceptable road to travel and the more frequently used gate. But don't be fooled. Instead, heed Jesus' warning' here. The way is hard and the door is narrow that leads to life. But remember: He has placed you on that way in your baptism. He is with you as you strive and struggle along the way with His Word and Spirit. He will bring you through that door into the heavenly banquet which has no end. And then all the struggling, all the striving, and all the suffering will be worth it. Amen.