

The Narrow Door

8/21/22

SJN

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

God's Word comes to us this morning from our Gospel lesson where we hear these words once more: "He went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem. And someone said to him, "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" And he said to them, "Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able." (Luke 13:22-24) This is the Word of the Lord.

Jesus liked to be around people. He was a wonderful teacher who was able to engage people's attention. Even though he had been given a huge task by our Heavenly Father – the salvation of the world – Jesus had time for people. He was very different from the Jewish religious leaders. They were distant and uncaring. Jesus, on the other hand, got involved with people – he got involved with their problems and their questions. During his short three-year ministry... Jesus built bridges to people. He built relationships and friendships. He taught the people about salvation and faith. There is absolutely no doubt that Jesus of Nazareth... was... a "people person."

One day, someone asked Him if only a few people were going to be saved. So let me ask you, beloved. What does the word "saved" mean? Bible scholars say that the word had various meanings back in Jesus' day. It meant to be preserved from peril. It meant to be kept alive... protected from want. Being saved also meant a state of good health. But most importantly... being saved meant that a person's "inner being" was preserved from the danger posed by sin. And so Jesus taught that only those who were "saved" - preserved from the danger posed by sin - would gain entrance into the Kingdom of God.

So... was it true that only a few people were going to be saved? Jesus' answer was "Yes!" ... because - according to Jesus - the door to heaven is narrow and not everyone is allowed through. Consider that we human beings... have an amazing ability to deceive ourselves. We have the ability to convince ourselves that something is true when it's not true at all. The religious leaders of Jesus' day were masters at the art of self-deception. And to make things worse... they taught these untruths to the people – and worst of all... they did it in the name of Almighty God!

The religious leaders emphasized outward acts... whereas Jesus emphasized inward faith. While the religious leaders emphasized doing... Jesus emphasized believing.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus spoke of the importance of a saving relationship with God... and that such a relationship is only made possible by the grace of God. A saving relationship with God is initiated by the Holy Spirit... who works through the Word, Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. Once it has begun... a saving relationship with God is then strengthened through fellowship with God and his people in the church.

God established a saving relationship with us at our baptism. He strengthens that relationship through the bread and wine of Holy Communion. He strengthens that relationship through the fellowship of the church. Jesus tells us to make every effort to enter the narrow door. He tells us that we will need to keep on making that effort all our lives. The door to the Kingdom of heaven stands wide open and Christ Himself is the door. Believers let God remove their sins and their wrongful pride. Believers let God take away their self-righteousness. The door to the Kingdom stands wide open for all those who trust God and his Son Jesus Christ. And we make it through that door only by the grace and mercy of God.

And when we die... that door is closed. When death comes... it is too late to believe. And when God's Son returns to this earth at the end of the age... it will be too late to believe for the whole human race. And when that door is closed, there is nothing we can do... NOTHING... to open it.

In our text this morning, Jesus warned that some people who thought everything was fine in their lives - spiritually speaking - were going to be shocked when they found the door to the Kingdom closed to them. Some people... were clinging to a false hope. Some people had allowed themselves to be deceived. Many would try to enter the door to the Kingdom... and not be able to. The owner of the house – a reference to God the Father – would close the door... and that would be it! To add insult to injury... the owner of the house would say to those knocking at the door – “I don't know you, or where you come from.”

In Scripture, the verb “to know” implies a very special relationship between people – a closeness. So when the owner of the house – God – says that he doesn't know the people knocking on his door... it means that he doesn't have a saving relationship with them. It means that those knocking at his door aren't connected to him in any way. In the Scriptural sense... they are not “saved.”

The religious leaders thought they had an “in” with God because they were descendants of Abraham. They thought they were going to be saved by virtue of their religious and national “pedigree.” They thought they were going to be saved by what they did for God – keeping His Law. The very thought that they might be excluded from his blessings... never even crossed their minds. That’s why Jesus’ words that day were so shocking.

Some people in Jesus’ day were willing to argue with God about their exclusion from the Kingdom. They argued that they “ate and drank” with the Lord. In other words, they were physically close to Jesus during his earthly ministry. But that’s all. They never believed in him... or lived by his standards. What they saw in him and what they heard from him had absolutely no effect on or in their lives. They didn’t let God’s Word change their hearts... they resisted. They didn’t let God’s Word forgive their sins. They had no relationship of trust and faith in him... and that means that their faith wasn’t the real thing. They were deceiving themselves. Some will be excluded from God’s Kingdom... but many others will be included. Those who thought they would be first in the Kingdom of God – people like the religious leaders - would be last. And others would be first.

"Will only a few people be saved?" Unfortunately, “Yes.” Some – like the religious leaders - thought they were a “shoe-in” for membership in God’s Kingdom – but they would be excluded. And others - those who had long been on the sidelines - would be included. Think of it this way::: Jesus was sent first to the people of Israel. The people of Israel were first to hear his words... they were first to see his miracles... and they were first to experience his compassion.

They saw him die on the cross. They were confronted with the empty tomb. But very few Jewish people... believed in him. Very few were willing to allow God to remove the obstacles that blocked the door to his kingdom. Very few were willing to let God take away their pride in religious accomplishments... they resisted Him. But others – many of them Gentiles ... non-Jews – were willing to let God usher them through the narrow door into His Kingdom. On the surface, this seemed unfair. But when you think about it... it was – and is – extremely fair and just.

Human beings have an amazing ability to deceive themselves – especially when it comes to matters of faith. According to Jesus, self-deception in spiritual matters has the potential to exclude people from God’s Kingdom. Here’s the bottom line, friends: not many... are willing to receive God’s salvation... on His terms. They think they know better than the Lord. They don’t have a relationship of faith with Him. They don’t believe his word of forgiveness and life and salvation.

By their actions and their attitudes... they show that they have spurned his grace. And, sadly... their place in the Kingdom of God... has been taken by others... those who believe and trust in Jesus as their personal Savior from sin, death, and the devil.

Scripture is clear. Entrance into the Kingdom of God happens by faith... by grace... through God's Holy Word and the blessed Sacraments. We can take comfort in the fact that God doesn't want anyone to miss out on his blessings. We can take comfort in knowing that God has gone out of his way to bring salvation to everyone. He sent his Son to die on a cross as payment for all human sin. He raised his son from the dead to show that his son's sacrifice was sufficient for everyone. God sends his Holy Spirit to spark faith in every human heart. And He has established His church as the place where word and sacrament ministry takes place.

Our text this morning is saying this:

- Trust him – on his terms.
- Live for him – according to his Word.
- Let his Holy Spirit work in your heart – every day.
- Let him forgive you – and give you a fresh start in life.
- Let him guide you using his roadmap – the Bible.
- Let him discipline you when you wander from the straight and narrow.

Do not resist God. Trust in Him above all things and I can assure you that you will hear his “Well done” on the final day. We have his Word on it – in fact, we have it in writing!

I have been preaching about the danger of false hope. I've pointed out that certain things are absolutely necessary if we are to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth while other things are secondary.

A woman bought a parrot at a pet store, but she returned it the next day.

“This bird doesn't talk,” she told the store clerk.

“Do you have a mirror in his cage?” the clerk asked. “Parrots often start talking when they see themselves in a mirror.”

The woman bought a mirror and left. The next day she returned – the bird still didn't talk.

The clerk asked, “Do you have a ladder in his cage? Parrots love ladders and a happy parrot is a talkative parrot.”

The woman bought a ladder and left. The next day it was a swing. That didn't help either. Soon she returned to the pet store and reported, “The parrot died.”

The clerk sympathized. “I'm so sorry. Did he ever say a word?”

“Yes,” the woman answered, “Just before he died, he said – in a very weak voice – ‘Don't they sell any food at that pet store?’”

The religion of many people today is a religion of mirrors, and ladders, and swings. Those religions have all kinds of nice things... but they don't have what people really need – they don't have true spiritual food - the bread of life, Jesus Christ. So... people starve spiritually. They perish in their sins.

Christ is the spiritual food we need. In his Word, he brings us the bread of life. In the Sacrament of Holy Communion, his very body and blood are offered to us with the bread and wine. May we always be willing – by the enabling of the Holy Spirit – to receive these things from God. And may we also be willing to share these blessings with those around us.

The door to the Kingdom indeed stands wide open... but it is a narrow door. Keep the faith... trust in Jesus as your Savior... and be in relationship with Him – preserved from the danger of sin... that God would usher you through... the narrow door. This is the Word of the Lord. Amen.