

"SIGNS OF THE CHURCH: EXCLUSIVE"

A Sermon delivered at St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, Virginia

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By the Rev. Dr. B. F. Nass, Pastor Emeritus

Dear exclusive members and guest of St. John's:

Exclusive!! That can't really be a descriptor of the church, can it? When I think of "exclusive", what comes to mind are words like 'elitism,' 'top of the line', 'a cut above,' 'super achievement attained by only a few.' We have recognizable symbols that shout "exclusive" in vibrant tones –million dollar homes in gated communities, red carpets, the secret handshake of THE club or organization, the earned advanced degree, the badge or insignia of an elite unit, the winner's trophy or cup, an Olympic gold medal, a super-bowl ring, a black belt, a green jacket, a blue ribbon, yes, even the proud bumper sticker that boast, "My child is an honor roll student at such and such a school." To be exclusive means only a few achieve that distinction.

That appears to be the answer Jesus suggests to an unnamed member of his class in one of the many villages he passed through as he slowly made his final way to Jerusalem. The question, "Lord, will only a few be saved?" comes out of nowhere with no context as to what was being discussed, what prompted this unusual question, or who the 'somebody' was that asked the question. Our reporter, St. Luke, assumes these issues were well known to the first century audience but fills in some helpful details in the continuation of his gospel which we know as the Book of Acts. So let's try to unpack this account as best we can and get inside the prevailing thought and events of that time that might have occasioned this event.

Ah, but where to begin? Let me try this. The opposite of exclusive is inclusive and inclusive describes the original intent of God in creating mankind. God wanted and still wants to have a loving relationship with every member of his creation, with you and me and everyone else. He wants to shower the blessing of his love into our every day existence but expects in return that we love and obey him. That last part, as you well know, is the problem.

God's attempt for universal inclusion was thwarted by the sin of Adam and Eve. But God didn't give up. His attempts at inclusion become the subject of the scriptural accounts and resemble a funnel. Starting at the rim God tried to renew his creation with the flood and was again thwarted by Noah and his descendents. Then God tapped Abraham and his descendents to be his conduit to the rest of creation to bring them into the circle of his loving care. With a mighty hand and an outstretched arm he freed them from slavery, miraculously saved them by parting the sea, and gave them a land flowing with milk and honey. In return for his gift of undeserved grace, God gave his directions or commandments – as we heard in today's epistle - on how to respond to his love in ways that please him and so impress the surround nations by Israel's behavior that they, too, would clamor to be included inside that circle of God's grace.

But that didn't happen. Instead of becoming a showcase to the nations of God's inclusive desire to form a mutual relationship with all, that invitation was not extended. Little by little, the inclusive love of God for others became exclusive and limited to themselves which made them a little bit superior. Their very word for the "nations" – *goyim* -- became a word of ridicule rather than a people to be reclaimed. Eventually, simply being a descendent of Abraham and following only the minutia of the law was considered all that was necessary, while the spirit and the intent of God's expected response was abandoned, in spite of the frequent warnings issued by prophetic voices which were either ignored or silenced. So God acted.

In 722 B.C. ten of the twelve tribes of Israel were decimated by the conquering Assyrians reducing their number remarkably. Less than 50 years later, the two remaining two tribes were led into exile by the Babylonians. Almost a century passed until small increments of the people began returning to their homeland. Even within this purified remnant there were a multitude of factions formed, each opposing one another and claiming that only members of their faction were going to be saved.

With that as background, as we see the circles of the funnel getting smaller and smaller, if you were in Jesus' class, your question, too, might be: "Lord, are only a few going to be saved?" Has the universal intent of God been reduced to simply an exclusive few?

To counter that conclusion, God again acted decisively by providing, not an exclusive few, but an exclusive ONE. Because God loved the world so much, this same Jesus who is being questioned in this text would complete his journey to Jerusalem and there change the course of human and salvation history by his innocent, sinless, and horrific death on a cross. And his victorious resurrection was God's declaration that the salvation funnel had been turned upside down. A new day had dawned to shed the light of God's love out from the tunnel of the funnel out to the circumference of the earth. The invitation to be saved is now extended to and available to everyone. All they have to do is accept what God has already done for them through his son to become a part of the exclusive and expanding number. When they do our text says: "*Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God.*"

That is the exclusive mission of those who are being saved – to go into all the world and make disciples, to increase and include more and more inside the circle of God's loving relationship. That takes courage and discipline. Our words must be clear and our actions exemplary lest by trying to save others we ourselves might be lost. Jesus exhorts us to "strive to squeeze through the narrow opening," and the translation – "strive" – doesn't capture the Greek original which is to agonize, meaning put your heart and soul into the effort, give it all ya got. Jesus adds his prophetic voice to the difficulty and urgency by declaring there is a cut-off point, a day of judgment, when "*the owner of the house has got up and shut the door.*" After that it's too late.

"Lord, will only a few be saved?" It seems the tide of time had turned the funnel the other way again. Instead of increasing, the number who profess and express their faith in God continues to decline almost exponentially. The voice of the Church is weakened by opposing denominations and factions and members who fail to strive for the narrow door. Each of us must renew our total commitment and put all of our effort, skill, and determination to insure that the few who will be saved become the many, so that when we sit down to eat the banquet feast in the kingdom of God, the banquet hall will be filled, and we can recognize many faces which smile in your direction and say, "We are here because of you." That will make you really exclusive. Amen.