

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
August 24-25, 2019
Luke 13:22-30

“The Narrow Door”

One of the challenges of living in an older home is the space arrangement. A lot has changed in home design over the years. Walled off smaller rooms have given way to open concept floor plans where it's one big space that you can define however you want. A formal living and dining room is not what people really want anymore. For example, the family room in my 1968 home is off the kitchen and dining room, but you have to jog around a pretty tight corner to get into it. That presents a real challenge when it comes to getting furniture through the door into this room. Over the years, we've tried every which way you can imagine to squeeze and push furniture into that room, but there's only so much you can do. What we've finally figured out works best is furniture that has a removable back. It's still a tight space, but that removable back makes things so much easier. In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus is talking about something far more serious than pushing furniture around. He is talking about the narrow door through which we all must pass in order to enter into the kingdom of God. On this last Sunday in August, this is what's before us today in a message entitled, “The Narrow Door.” May the Lord's rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus' sake.

An unidentified person asks Jesus a question, “**Lord, will those who are saved be few?**” (Luke 13:23). The question is asked in curiosity, but Jesus doesn't have much patience for speculative questions like this. Jesus turns that question into a very practical application as he, in so many words, tells the individual who first asked it: “Quit speculating about how many people will end up being saved. Just make sure that you will be one of those people.” “**Strive to enter through the narrow door**” means that the life of discipleship in following Jesus is not the wide and easy pathway, but it is like going through that narrow door. Salvation is most certainly a gift of divine grace, and we contribute nothing to it. We only receive this gift through humble faith and trust in Jesus who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6). In receiving that gift, the struggle begins. Accepting the gift and clinging to it is a constant struggle with temptation, with forces within and without ourselves that are actively working to make us refuse that gift or let go of it, as today's Epistle lesson notes (Hebrews 12:4-24). Jesus' image of that narrow door is a powerful one. We can't bring with us all the baggage we might like to take along. “In other words, one must say good-bye to one's pet sins and forbidden enjoyments to be a member of God's family” (*Concordia Classic Commentary Series: Luke*, by William F. Arndt. St. Louis: Concordia, 1956; p. 332). We have to let these things go. We can't have it both ways: either we have to let these things go in order to enter through that narrow door, or we can't get through that narrow door at all. It's one or the other. Jesus would have us know “that the salvation of our souls is not a matter to be trifled with and that preparation for the hour of Judgment has to be made before it is too late” (Ibid). It is a narrow door, indeed.

Sometimes we wonder what heaven will be like. The Word of God does not go into as much detail here as we'd like, and maybe that is for the best. But Jesus does tell us that there will be some surprises: there will be people there we would not have expected, and people not there that we would have expected. Jesus says: “**And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God**” (Luke 13:28). In saying this, Jesus makes clear that people outside of God's chosen people of Israel, who are from every corner of the earth, will be coming into the kingdom as the prophets foretold while the chosen ones are shut out because of their rejection of the grace of God in Jesus the Messiah (see Isaiah 49:12; 59:19). Jesus' final words here are a solemn warning to us all: “**And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last**” (Luke 13:30). Rejected will be those who were acquainted with Jesus, those who were his neighbors, those who actually heard him speak, but who did not believe in him as the promised Messiah, the Son of God, in whom there

is forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. And that is still true today. There are many people who believe that Jesus was a great teacher, a model for the ages, a very good and righteous man, but do not believe that he is the Messiah, the Savior, who has paid the price for our sin and disobedience through his suffering and death. There are many people who know *about* Jesus, but do not know Jesus. Sadly, they will be shut out of the kingdom on that great and final day, where there **“will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”** (Luke 13:28). They will knock at the door and cry, **“Lord, open to us”** (Luke 13:25), and the terrible words will then be spoken: **“I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil”** (Luke 13:27). It is a tragic thing at the end of life when a person feels regret over what might have been; to feel that heavy burden of “What if?” That is what, we are told, those outside the door will experience on that great and final day. God’s desire is that all people be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4), even as the Word of the Lord tells us through the prophet Isaiah in today’s Old Testament lesson (Isaiah 66:28-23). Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29), but merely being descendants of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, or Luther, does not automatically guarantee us a ticket into heaven. It is not an outward association, but an inward relationship with Jesus that makes us fit for the banquet in the kingdom of God. Jesus himself is the door that leads to salvation as he tells us: **“I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture”** (John 10:9). The free gift of salvation in Jesus Christ is for all people, but no one can believe for someone else. That free gift of salvation must be received in faith by each and every person. God’s blessed gifts of his Word and Sacrament are here this day to strengthen and encourage us in this gift of salvation as we enter through that narrow door and walk in the Lord’s ways until Christ shall come again.

As we wait and watch for Christ’s promised coming again, many believers may become worried and afraid in thinking about that Judgment Day. But Judgment Day is no judgment for the child of God because that judgment has already been passed on Christ. The judgment of condemnation for sin that should have been ours was shouldered by Jesus, as the Word of God tells us: **“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”** (Romans 8:1). That great and final day means freedom and redemption, not judgment and condemnation, for the believer whose sins have all been washed clean in Jesus’ blood (1 John 1:7). With Christ as our Judge and Friend, who or what can accuse us? No one and no thing in heaven, on earth, or under the earth. Who or what is going to judge the Judge? Christ himself would have to be condemned before anyone or anything could condemn us, since we are clothed in garments of salvation given to us by God himself (Isaiah 61:10). This is the confidence of faith that we have in Jesus our risen, reigning, and returning Lord. With this confidence of faith, we enter through that narrow door, **“keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, scorning the shame, and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God”** (Hebrews 12:2). Amen.