

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
5327 W. Washington Blvd.
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 26, 2007
Luke 13:22-30

“The Door is Narrow – Will You Get Through It?”

by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

It will happen on Monday morning. They will be lining up at the door. Some will be eager and excited. Others will be not quite as happy to be back. But all of them will file through the front door of our Christian Day School as another school year begins. That image came to mind as I was considering the words of the Gospel lesson for this week as Jesus speaks about another door and its central role in our salvation. The teaching of Jesus on this subject brings up some hard questions as well. But at the same time it also reminds us of the promise of His grace and the great glory which awaits His own. These thoughts are given added emphasis in the other readings for this day as well. May the Holy Spirit bless us as we consider our theme: The Door is Narrow–Will You Get Through It?

I. The Door is Narrow

By happenstance, Friday morning I came across a comic strip on the Internet which appears in some newspapers across the country. The one character asks the other: “Do you think all people get to heaven...?” To which the answer is, “Every single one.” Now this view is not altogether surprising since the universalism of our time is rather widespread (though most people have their list of at least some they do not think are in heaven). But this view stands in sharp contrast to the words of Jesus in the Gospel lesson for today. He speaks in answer to a question that was asked Him as He travelled through the towns and villages on His way to Jerusalem. For one of the crowd that was following Him asked, “Lord, will those who are saved be few?” Perhaps the questioner was aware of the many people who had followed Jesus at one time but had now turned away. Perhaps he was thinking of the many people who were opposed to what Jesus taught and rejected Him outright. Whatever the case, our Lord took the question and turned it around. Jesus said, “YOU strive to enter through the narrow door.” The question of salvation must always be seen as a personal one. It does not matter what your neighbors or friends believe, it does not matter whether the other members of your family are fine Christian people and go to church faithfully. YOU strive.

The Greek word used here interestingly is AGONIZESTHE --agonize, struggle. It is a word of the the same root used in last week's epistle about running the race. It is a reminder of Jesus' words that anyone who would follow after Him must “deny themselves and take up their cross and follow him.” And the way is narrow. It is precise and demanding. Commentators see in Jesus' words reference to the necessity of people to put off their sinful selves, in repentance and contrition to follow Him. In ancient city walls, the one passage that went through unhindered was always very small. The only way through was by leaving your horse and armor and weapons behind and by coming through one by one. This was a great

defense against enemy attack. In the same way, people cannot come through the narrow door encumbered by their sins and other stuff. On another occasion Jesus said, "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few." (Matthew 7:13-14) Quite a different picture than "everyone will make it to heaven". For as Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

And in that sense, the narrow door is Jesus Himself. As He Himself said, "I am the Door." He is the one way into the kingdom of heaven for by His perfect obedience and sacrificial suffering and death and by His glorious resurrection He purchased for us the forgiveness of sins. And the other important point to note here is that there is only this one way.

II. The Door Will Be Shut

In the following verses of the Gospel, the image becomes even more distressing if you will. For the door will be shut when the master of the house has arisen. And the clamor will be great: "Lord, open to us!" "We ate and drank in your presence, and You taught in our streets." But what solemn words we hear from the Lord, "I do not know where you come from. Depart from me all you workers of iniquity. And there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophet in the kingdom of God but you yourselves cast out." Here is a solemn warning. It was addressed to the people of Jesus' own day who saw themselves as the descendants of the patriarchs of old, but it is addressed to all today as well. Take seriously the call to salvation. Take seriously the words of Jesus. The door is narrow--will you get through it?

III. A Heavenly Vision

But in spite of the fact that it is a narrow way, many will enter by that door. Many have already entered that way and will continue to do so until the last day comes. For Jesus is standing there and he is the way. The door is not shut yet. And as the closing verses of our Gospel remind us: "And people will come from east and west and north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God. And behold some are last who will be first and some are first who will be last." This is the promise of the Gospel to the nations. Words that are prophesied in the Old Testament lesson for today: "And they shall bring all your brothers from all the nations as an offering to the Lord, on horses and in chariots ... to my holy mountain Jerusalem." It is the same picture painted by the writer to the Hebrews in the Epistle in his vision of the church militant and triumphant: "You have come to Mt. Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, ... to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant ..." (Hebrews 12:21-23) Saints and angels in heaven, faithful believers on earth, and Jesus, the mediator and the Savior--what a tremendous picture this is as we are reminded that the Holy Christian church has its anchor both on an earthly and on a heavenly shore.

The door to heaven is open. It is narrow. For the Lord's Word has reminded us that there is just one way through by faith in Jesus Christ. But every Sunday we have the opportunity to hear that Word and to receive the Lord's promise. We should also be ever mindful of His Presence in the Sacrament. He calls persistently and urgently for the time is short. Some day soon the door will be closed. Pastor Struve has recently spoken about the list of names of individuals in this congregation who are unlocatable or unreachable and who have not made faithful use of worship and the means of grace. Our congregation faces a decision on what to do with these individuals. One thing that is sure. We need to pray for them. If you see anyone on that list whom you know, make an effort to contact them. The Lord would have us seek after the straying. For the time is short. A recent reminder that the time is short: As you leave church this morning, look on the front lawn of the school at the large piece of the stone cap of the school roof—apparently blown off by lightning during the storm last Wednesday. Or think of the three people in Madison so suddenly and tragically carried away. The time is short. For soon, as we sang in the hymn of the day it will be the day of triumph:

The heavens shall ring with an anthem more
grand
Than ever on earth was recorded;
The blest of the Lord shall receive at His hand
The crown to the victors awarded.
Have mercy upon us, O Jesus.

That same thought will be echoed in the words of our closing hymn for today, a hymn written by Paul Gerhardt and still often in Germany in the summer months. For he too speaks of the final triumph of the saints:

6. What thrilling joy when on our sight
Christ's garden beams in cloudless light,
Where all the air is sweet,
Still laden with the unwearied hymn
From all the thousand seraphim
Who God's high praise repeat!
7. And set me, Lord, in Paradise
When I have bloom'd beneath these skies
Till my last leaf is flown;
Thus let me serve Thee here in time,
And after, in that happier clime,
And Thee, my God, alone!

In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, forever and ever. Amen.