

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost; September 11, 2022

+ Luke 13:22-30 +

“Make Every Effort to Enter through Jesus”

He went on his way from one town and village to another, teaching and making his way to Jerusalem. Someone said to him, “Lord, are only a few going to be saved?”

He said to them, “Strive to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able. Once the master of the house gets up and shuts the door, you will begin to stand outside and knock on the door, saying, ‘Lord, open for us!’ He will tell you in reply, ‘I don’t know who you are where you come from.’ Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.’ And he will say, ‘I don’t know where you come from. Depart from me, all you evildoers.’ There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown outside. People will come from east and west, from north and south, and will recline at the table in the kingdom of God. And note this: Some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.”

Jesus is still on his way to Jerusalem. We’ve been following him on his way there for a long time. We followed him into the house of Simon the Pharisee, where a woman showed much love for Jesus because he forgave her many sins. We have heard Peter confess that Jesus is the Christ, and then Christ tell his followers to take up their cross and follow him. We have seen Jesus’ determination to get to Jerusalem, even when Samaritans refused to help him. We’ve seen him send out seventy-two missionaries with the good news of the kingdom, tell the story of the Good Samaritan, visit Mary and Martha, teach us how to pray, and, over the past couple of weeks, teach us to rest our hearts in heaven without greed, worry, or fear.

We’ve been following Jesus for a long time. With all we’ve watched him do and heard him say in this Pentecost season, we may need to remember where he’s been heading all this time. **He went on his way from one town and village to another, teaching and making his way to Jerusalem.** And today, on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus hears a question that cuts to the heart of things, because it goes straight to his purpose for this journey: **Someone said to him, “Lord, are only a few going to be saved?”** Jesus goes to Jerusalem to save. He goes to Jerusalem to complete his holy life, to sacrifice it for our sins on the cross, and then to rise on the third day. So, we get a question that strikes right in the middle of Jesus’ mission: a question about salvation. Who will be saved? Will there be many, or only a few?

A simple yes or no question! Hurray! This should be easy, then, right? Are only a few going to be saved? Yes or no? Jesus does not answer with one word. His answer is neither yes nor no. Instead, he answers it this way: Who is saved in the end will depend on each individual fitting through the narrow door; and the ones who are saved are not generally who you would expect to be saved.

There is a debate among the religious leaders in Israel at Jesus’ time. Will all Israelites, all people with Abraham’s DNA, inherit the kingdom of heaven simply because they are Israelites? In other words, will there be salvation by association? Can you get into heaven because you’re part of a certain bloodline or institution? The answer to that is no.

In many places Jesus pictures heaven as a banquet, and in others he pictures himself as the door through which people enter heaven. Here Jesus fuses the two pictures. The banquet of heaven is waiting, and

Jesus is the door through which we enter. But here Jesus calls himself, the door, “narrow.” The type of narrow door Jesus speaks of only can only fit one person at a time. Groups could not walk through the door together. Crowds could not come in all at once. One by one, individuals entered through this type of door.

So, no, huge crowds of people won’t be entering heaven in groups. Individuals enter, one at a time. There is no salvation by association. That was true for the Israelites: just because you have Abraham’s blood doesn’t mean you’ll be entering heaven in a giant clump of all Israelites. One a time. A believer is saved through his or her personal, individual faith in Jesus Christ.

That means: a lot of people you would expect to find in heaven, you won’t. Anyone who thinks they’ll get in just because they’re part of a particular nation or tribe or institution will in the end be shut out. **He said to them, “Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able. Once the master of the house gets up and shuts the door, you will begin to stand outside and knock on the door, saying, ‘Lord, open for us!’ He will tell you in reply, ‘I don’t know who you are where you come from.’ Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.’ And he will say, ‘I don’t know where you come from. Depart from me, all you evildoers.’ There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown outside.”**

During Jesus’ ministry, there were many Israelites who assumed salvation was automatically theirs because of their bloodlines. But Jesus says no. You’re not getting in because of your connection to a group or a nation. You only get in – one a time – if you fit through me, the door. Through faith in me – your personal, individual faith, and no one else’s – you enter. The door is narrow. One a time.

So be careful. The most important question isn’t, “Will many or few be saved?” The most important question is, “Will I be saved?” And that depends on your personal, individual relationship with Jesus Christ. One at a time enters through him.

So, I don’t think anyone here would be tempted to think they will enter the heavenly banquet because of their bloodline. But this dangerous idea that salvation comes in groups, by association, can be stubborn. “I come from a Christian family.” “I’ve been a member of a church for seventy years.” “I am among the group that gives big to support all kinds of Christian ministries and charities.”

The door is narrow. One at a time. Being from a Christian family is not going to get you through the door. Neither will being a member of a Christian church. You will approach the narrow door without coattails to grab. You alone.

That means, a lot of people you would expect to see in the banquet won’t be there. They were in a group that looked close to Jesus. He walked in their streets and they ate and drank with him and they even heard him preach. They were associated with others who knew Jesus. But personally, they did not believe. That was true for many of the people in Israel. As a group, they appeared close to God. As a group, they had the prophets and the Scriptures and even the Son of God to walk with and talk to and eat with. But the narrow door was closed in the end to all without faith in their hearts. Only the ones who believed in the Savior will be inside. The rest will be outside, filled with regret.

And Jesus makes it clear: once the master has closed the door, it's too late. There are no second chances. We only get as long as our lives in this world, or until Jesus returns, to fit through the narrow door through faith in Christ.

And you must enter one at a time. Not in a group, not by association. We need to get that wrong idea out of our minds before it's too late, and listen to Jesus when he calls himself the narrow door. Jesus warns the Israelites that many of them will be on the outside looking in. They will think that should be inside because they belong to a certain group. They won't be the only ones. There will be many others on that day, too, who will be able to say, "Jesus, I heard your Word. Jesus, I was baptized. I knew you! I was part of a church. I knew you!" But not by faith. And that's what counts. The one-to-one connection to Christ by faith. So there will be some unpleasant surprises at the wedding banquet. A lot of people who looked close to Jesus won't be in there.

So we need to listen when our Savior says, "**Strive to enter through the narrow door.**" If you are a good little Lutheran, perhaps it makes you squirm a bit to hear your Savior tell you to make effort to enter the banquet of heaven. Well, I'll make you squirm a little more. The verb "make every effort" involves a great amount of effort. It was a verb for the action grappling wrestlers and training soldiers. Those are two activities that take a lot of effort. So does entering through the narrow door of heaven.

It does not take your effort to take your sins away. That is Jesus' work. And it does not take effort for you to come to faith in Jesus. That's the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit. But Scripture does teach this: after a person comes to faith in Jesus, they must work at remaining in him. They must use the tools that the Holy Spirit uses to keep their personal, individual faith that will get them through the narrow door strong and vibrant.

And that is a struggle. We have to fight against our own sinful nature that wants to spend time and energy on everyone except Jesus. We have to fight a world that wants our attention on everything except Jesus. This is a struggle. It takes effort to remain faithful in hearing God's Word and receiving his sacrament to keep our faith strong.

And this is where Christian family and friends and a Christian church do make a huge difference! Support from other Christians helps us make the effort to remain in Christ. No, you're not going to get into heaven by your association with a Christian family or a Christian church, but they do help. A lot. We help each other in our families and our church to remain in Jesus by remaining in his gospel. We need each other for that.

More than anything though, we need Jesus' own encouragement. And what strength he gives us with this statement: **People will come from east and west, from north and south, and will recline at the table in the kingdom of God.** Yes, there will be unpleasant surprises when it comes to who's at the banquet. But there will also be a whole lot of pleasant surprises. People who grew up a world away and millennia away from where Jesus walked will be there. People you wouldn't expect. But Jesus died for them, too. The Word reached them, and the Spirit worked faith in each of their individual hearts. And God strengthened them for the struggle to keep their faith strong to the end. So from east and west, from north and south, they will come. You wouldn't have thought so, because they looked so far away from Jesus. But he called them to faith, and kept them in it.

So they will enter through the narrow door one at a time. But there will lots and lots of them. More than anyone can count, John says in Revelation, from everywhere and every time. What a pleasant surprise at the heavenly banquet!

What grace God has shown us, to send his Son to die for us. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He's going to get there. He will live perfectly for us all the way to his final breath. When he breathes his last, it will be the end of our sin in God's eyes. When he rises, we know we will, too. And now what grace God shows in sending his Spirit to call those far away (like us!) to faith in his Son, fitting them through the door one a time. **"Some are last who will be first."** That's us, by the grace of God.

So, dear fellow last-who-are-first. Keep up the struggle. Make every effort to remain in Christ and enter through the narrow door. Support and help your fellow Christians to make the effort, too. Hear his Word, use his sacrament, and let's file in, one a time, with saving faith in each of our individual hearts. Once we're inside, we'll be part of the biggest pleasant surprise in the universe. People from far away, celebrating together at Jesus' eternal banquet. Amen.