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Luke 13:22-30
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 26, 2007
Title: Christ, the Narrow Door

The basis for our sermon this morning is the Gospel lesson read earlier in which we heard the Lord's response to an odd question regarding the number of those who would be saved rather than the more obvious question of *how* one is to be saved.

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

The date was December 5, 1876 and over a thousand people including families with children had crowded into the Brooklyn Theater to catch the popular melodrama of that time, *The Two Orphans*. Of those that attended, nearly 400 had walked up the narrow staircase to their seats in the balcony. Typical of theaters built in that era, there were very few exits and worse, illumination came by kerosene lamps. During the course of the second act, backstage scenery was being moved about for the next scene, when a kerosene lamp broke setting fire to the tinder dry wooden props used in the play. Within minutes, a dark choking smoke began to billow out over the heads of the audience. In order to avert panic, the stage manager stood on the stage's edge and shouted out directions for an orderly exit of the theater. While those closest to the stage heard and obeyed the commands of this brave individual, those in the balcony could not, or chose not to, and 400 people simultaneously rushed for the two small doorways. Consequently, many of them were unable to pass through those narrow doorways and out of the burning theater.

The next morning, the Brooklyn newspaper described what happened in that upper balcony from an eyewitness, I quote. "The panic that possessed these poor beings is something

too intense to be described. The whole mass struggled to the doors when a huge block occurred. The young and the weak were knocked down and trampled upon and at the doors the people were literally wedged together...many losing their senses, becoming frantic, insane through fear and utterly despairing of life..." Ultimately, 295 people died because none was willing to be last out of the balcony and through the narrow doors, although by so doing, many might have been saved from this disaster. The description of this tragic event is perhaps a very accurate portrayal of so many peoples lives and in particular, their faith lives. Everyone scrabbling for the door of everlasting life, while paying no attention to the one giving instructions that will lead to it.

Doors, we often don't think much of them until their doorknobs don't work and they fail in their purpose of preventing or allowing access. Jesus often used the imagery of a door's function in describing both access and denial of passage into the Kingdom of Heaven. In today's Gospel reading, someone's rather odd question concerning the number of those who will gain entrance into heaven, leads Jesus to ask the questioner to examine himself when he said, "I say to you." Likewise, this reading asks us to examine ourselves to ascertain whether we can or will pass through the narrow door that leads to eternal life, or more accurately, what is needed to pass through that door. In fact, the real question is, do we even know what door to look for?

This exchange between Jesus and this individual took place while he was traveling towards Jerusalem, a journey that would ultimately take him to the cross and the fulfillment of God's plan of reconciliation for humankind. On his way, Jesus took every opportunity to proclaim and teach the Gospel message wherever people could be found. No person or place was so insignificant that Jesus wouldn't go there to proclaim the Kingdom of God and that *he* was in

fact the doorway to eternal life. In John's Gospel, Jesus said, "*I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.*" This is in fact the Gospel message, that Jesus is the doorway.

However, in our Gospel reading from this morning, when Jesus also said, "*Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.*" We need to be mindful of what Jesus meant by this statement, for this has led many people to follow false ideas or worse, fall from true saving faith. What Jesus was *not* saying, is that it is through our moral efforts, or some other means or duties that we are required to fulfill, that will allow us to pass through into eternal life. To attempt to do so would be similar to those poor individuals who struggled and tried to fight their way off that balcony 150 years ago. Rather this "struggling or striving" is what the believer will have to endure to enter into repentance. The struggle is with Satan and our prideful human condition when confronted with the Word of God, which calls us to repent of our sins and to trust in Christ alone for our salvation and *not* upon ourselves.

A general rule of evacuation, from either an airplane or a burning building, is to leave behind your purses or baggage, as they will undoubtedly hinder your successful escape. Likewise, we must leave behind our pride, which often attempts to reshape the door to eternal life into a door that would allow us to gain access to God without leaving behind our sinful actions and thoughts. To do so in reality would only prevent our safe passage.

In addressing these kinds of issues, C.F.W. Walther the first president of the LCMS wrote, "*There is no true faith where a person knowingly departs from one single Word of God. God is not satisfied when we accept only some of His Holy Word, no matter how acceptable it appears to our reason and our feelings [to do so].*" I can almost assure you that there were individuals in that balcony who were convinced that they knew better than the stage manger barking out

directions below and that his instructions to them seemed contrary to reason. However, if they had, they might have saved their lives. Attempting to pass through the narrow door through one's own efforts are useless.

This passage from Luke's Gospel may seem overly harsh to our ears, and indeed, it was meant to be, for Jesus wished to emphasize that our time of grace *is* limited. The door to everlasting life closes upon our death. Therefore, it *is* imperative as the psalmist wrote in Psalm 32, that, "...everyone who is godly [should] pray to you [Lord] while you may be found..." Once death closes our eyes it will be too late to seek out the Lord. If we have not already placed our faith in him at death, the door to heaven will be closed forever. Even those who claim to have had faith but who in reality rejected Christ will not be admitted, because as Paul wrote concerning such individuals, they are without righteousness. It is not by any external relationship with Christ that we are saved, but rather the righteousness of Christ.

In Paul's letter to the Romans he wrote, "...clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ..." In this simple but beautiful analogy, Paul is expressing what must be done in order to pass through the narrow doorway that leads to eternal life using the illustration of wearing clothes. For instance, with my long sleeves, you cannot see or discern whether my arm is dirty or clean because all you see is the sleeve of my robe. Likewise, although we ourselves are stained with sin, when we put on Christ, through faith, God the Father only sees the righteousness of His Son. It is by the work of the Holy Spirit, through the means of grace, God's Word, our Baptism, the Lord's Supper, that we clothe ourselves with Christ and *his* righteousness not anything of ourselves. We who are last have become first because he who was first became last. St. Peter

wrote, *“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God...”*

For us here this morning, the door is still open. Death has not closed our eyes for the last time and we can still receive the forgiveness of sins bought and paid for by Christ’s sacrifice upon the cross. Here in this place, God’s Word and Sacraments, which impart faith, are dispensed so that Christ’s words from today’s reading may be fulfilled. That, *“People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God.”* However, in order for people from every nation to become believers and take their places at the feast in Christ’s kingdom, they must first hear the Gospel message.

In a world where people are struggling to pass through the narrow door carrying the burdensome baggage of their sins, they need to hear the message that they need to let go of the sins that they carry and that Jesus Christ has carried them for each and every one of us. Jesus said, *“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”* But how can they know if they have not heard?

Today, some of our youth will (have) receive(d) Bibles, Catechisms or hymnals as they begin or continue in their study of God’s saving work through Jesus Christ. Like the stage manager who cried out instructions that those within his theater so that people might be saved from death, likewise, these books are instruments of the church that are used to instruct us in the Gospel message. It is through the Gospel message contained within these various books that our knowledge of what Christ has done for us may be increased and that the Holy Spirit may create in us a saving faith, that, we may escape internal death.

It is my prayer that these books will only be the beginning of a life long journey of studying God's Word so that these words of the prophet Isaiah maybe fulfilled in your lives.

“Behold, you shall call a nation that you do not know, and a nation that did not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, and of the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you. "Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.”

Now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.