

“THE NARROW DOOR”

Luke 13:22-30, Proper 16-C, Pentecost 14, Aug. 21, 2016

Anyone who has ever played the game of Monopoly is certainly familiar with the words: “Go to jail, go directly to jail, do not pass “GO” and do not collect \$200.” These words are a command. These words are to be obeyed. These words incite people to action!

In much a greater way, with greater power and authority, these words of Jesus in our Gospel lesson this morning are a command too: “Strive to enter the narrow door; for many will try to enter and will not be able!”

The Greek verb here translated as “to strive” is *agonisthe*, from which we get the English word: “to agonize.” That’s why the NIV translates these words of Jesus like this: “Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, for many will try and will not be able!”

These words have authority and power connected to them only because of the One who first spoke these words and yet still speaks these words to us today. He is the Holy Son of God, conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.

On another occasion he said one day: “I am the door. If anyone enters by me he will go in and out and find pasture” (John 10:9).

Jesus was speaking about a shepherd and his sheep. At night time the shepherd would call his sheep by name, by the name he had given them, into the sheep pen; a little four-sided enclosure made of stone walls, but on one side of those four stone walls...there would be an entryway...but it did not have a literally door attached to it. In the evening once the good shepherd had gathered all of his sheep into the sheep pen; he would then lay his body down on the ground as the door to the sheep pen; not only so that they could not get out, but also for the purpose of keeping them safe.

Jesus speaks these words in response to a question a man in the crowd asked him one day: “Lord, will those who are saved be few?”

Why would this man ask such a question? Times when he drew a crowd of a thousand people or more...there were times when people seemed to be indifferent to him too. They exhibited a “take it or leave it” attitude.

Back in chapter 9, we read of Jesus’ desire to enter a Samaritan village. Jesus himself commented on the “fickleness” of the people who had gathered to listen to him occasionally. In chapter 11 he says: “*For as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so the Son of Man will be a sign to this generation. The Queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the Wisdom of Solomon, and behold, Someone greater than Solomon is here. The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here*” (Luke 11:30-32)!

Life is a series of doors. We cannot live without them! Day by day we are going through all kinds of doors. A door may be an entrance, but it can also be a barrier. In the words of our Gospel lesson today, Jesus says: “*Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many people I tell you will seek to enter and will not be able*” (v. 24)!

These words of Jesus came in response to an anonymous man's question—put to Jesus there that day! “Lord,” the questioner asks, “*Will those who are saved be few*” (Luke 13:23)? Please notice that Jesus does not answer this man's question with a simple “YES” or a “NO” but reverses this man's question, as Jesus so often does,—throwing the ball tossed to our Savior back into this man's own court!

The Holy Son of God ends up changing the original question of: “*Will those who are saved be few?*” but into a far more personal question: “*Will those who are saved be you!*” Jesus responds to this man's question by saying: “*Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able*” (v. 24)!

I. THE DOOR IS NARROW.

When Jesus says: “*Strive to enter the narrow door,*” the Greek verb for “strive” here is *agonisthe* from which we receive our English verb “to agonize.” Therefore, the NIV translates these same words of Jesus like this: “*Make every effort to enter through the narrow door!*”

What does Jesus mean by “The Narrow Door?” To say that the door is narrow does not mean only a few people will be able to enter it because the number of people striving to enter that door is just too great or because the competition is just way too stiff!

Our experience of life on this earth, however, sometimes certainly seems to be this way!

Think of how many people throughout the history of our nation have aspired and striven to become “President of the United States!” Many of them have spent great fortunes, including great portions of their own personal wealth, but were never elected. To become president of the United States you really do have to go through a very “narrow” door.

Or think of that boy who always dreamed of growing up and actually one day playing professional sports: be it football, basketball or baseball! Unfortunately, the competition is so absolutely challenging, that that young man never does realize his dream by being drafted for a team. Or think of all those aspiring young actors and actresses who journey to New York or to Hollywood in the hopes of becoming an actor or actress on Broadway, or maybe even of becoming a movie star in Hollywood!

But this is not the kind of narrowness that Jesus is talking about here!

Have you been downtown yet to watch Columbia's own minor league baseball team—the “Fireflies” play a game of baseball in the new Finley Park? I have and while I was down there noticed something about that beautiful stadium that I couldn't help but notice about many large sports arenas on college campuses or in connection with professional sports all around our country!

As you approach the entrance into the actual ballpark or playing field, that entrance or door into that stadium, from a distance, certainly seems to be very, very wide. But the closer you get, the more you be seriously pushing and struggling your way to get into the park—you soon discover that the gate is not wide at all.

The great crowd that from a distance is very broad, actually narrows down into a mere turnstile—so that people can only enter into that stadium—one person at a time! The

door is narrow because you can only through it one person at a time. When it comes to the kingdom of God, there have been many wives who have desperately wanted to grab a firm hold of their husbands' hands in order to drag them in! Or perhaps there have been a great many fathers who have wished that they could have grabbed a hold on their children's hands and dragged them in too! But Jesus is reminding us here, that it just doesn't work that way!

The door to heaven is much like a turnstile down at the new Finley Park or much like a turnstile at Brice Stadium of USC or like Death Valley at Clemson, you can only enter one person at a time!

II. THE NARROW DOOR IS STILL OPENED TO ALL PEOPLE!

Because many people have never responded to the offer of God's grace and forgiveness that he holds out to all people everywhere, through faith in the gift of his Son Jesus Christ, their greatest misfortunes on the great and Last Day—will be that they will be left sitting on the sidelines, completely dumbfounded by those who are entering into heaven!

They will become completely unnerved when they see a great many people now entering into heaven, whom they falsely imagined, could never, if ever, be welcomed into heaven! Didn't Jesus knock the socks off of the scribes and the Pharisees one day when he said to them: *"Truly, I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you! For John the Baptist came to you and showed you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and prostitutes did and even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him!"* The people who will be welcomed into heaven that day—will not only be come from one or two nations, but Jesus says, from the East and the West and the North and the South; from all four corners of the globe!

Jesus, in using this great metaphor, certainly knew that doors, all kinds of doors, fascinate us! They intrigue us! They mystify us! A creaking door haunts us! A slamming door angers us! A locked door frustrates us! But, in opposition to all of this, an opened door invites and welcomes us! But the day is coming when God's Door that is now opened to all people, while they are among us in this earthly strife, will one day become completely closed off to us!

The Bible makes it plain to us that God's offer of salvation is available to all people. St. Paul says of Christ in II Corinthians 5:15 that *"One has died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised to life again!"*

In I John 2:2, we read: *"Christ is the sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours, but also for the sins of the whole world!"*

III. BUT, UNFORTUNATELY, THE NARROW DOOR NOW OPENED TO ALL PEOPLE WILL ONE DAY BE CLOSED FOREVER.

Jesus teaches us here that there is nothing in all of our human experience of our life upon this earth that could ever frustrate us as much as that painful experience will prove itself to be! How frustrating it will be! And will not be just a minor frustration; the kind that people may respond to by saying out loud to themselves: "O fiddlesticks!"

It won't be the kind of frustration a woman experiences, when she suddenly breaks off one of her beautifully manicured fingernails; the kind of frustration that might prompt a woman to say: "O shucks!"

On that day, Jesus himself, mincing no words, says that there will be “weeping and gnashing of teeth”!

The “gnashing of teeth” was an expression of extreme woe. The condition of these people will be intensified when they see the people of God entering into the kingdom of God where they will enjoy life and peace.

Apparently this was an expression often used in Judaism to speak about those experiences in this life that sometimes were obviously viewed as being completely ungodly! The level of frustration that those people will experience, who at long last will now be shut out of heaven completely, will be completely unbearable!

This parable of the narrow door teaches us that a mere knowledge of Jesus is not sufficient to enter into the kingdom of God. Though many people will one day discover the narrow door shut and therefore beg to come in, among the saddest words of Jesus recorded for us anywhere in the pages of the New Testament are these: *“Then he will answer you, ‘I do not know where you come from.’ Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.’ But he will say, ‘I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil’ (Luke 25-27)!*

We are to strive (“agonize”) to enter the kingdom of God, those this may seem like too strong of a word to some people for the kingdom of a loving God. But we shouldn’t be all that surprised, should we?

Someone once said to Paderewski, the great pianist, “Sir, you are a genius.” He replied, “Madam, before I was a genius I was a drudge.” He said that if he missed practice one day, he noticed it; if he missed practice two days, the critics noticed it; if he missed three days, his family noticed it; if he missed four days, the audience noticed it. The door is narrow. Why should we think we can “drift” into the Kingdom of God?

The Christian life is to be a constant striving to do the will of God as Jesus revealed it. Why do we have this this need to strive? Because there are forces of evil all around us, sometimes within us, all trying their best to pull us down from generosity to selfishness; from compassion to indifference; from sacrifice to greed.

A little boy once asked his mother if people who told lies went to heaven. Because she didn’t want to encourage him to tell lies, she replied: “Of course not.” “Well,” he boy replied, “it must be awfully lonely in heaven if only God and George Washington are there!”

Most people here this morning have probably heard of Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus; two of the greatest pro golfers ever on record! But there’s another great golfer from that same era, whose name you might not be familiar with: Gary Player—who was born in South Africa. At the age of 29, Gary Player won the 1965 U.S. Open and became the only non-American to win all four major tournaments that year known as the “Career Grand Slam!”

One morning, this legendary golfer was hitting balls off the practice tee one. The first ball he hit—went 280 yards straight ahead; straight as a bullet. A bystander in the gallery, within earshot responded by saying: “Man, I’d give anything to be able to hit a golf ball like that!” Mr. Palmer, who overheard the man’s comment, walked over to where he was at and said, “No you wouldn’t!”

The guy said, “Yes, I would! I’d give anything to be able to hit a golf ball like that!”

“Would you really?” Mr. Palmer asked. Would you really be willing to do whatever it takes? Because what it takes is to rise early in the morning and hit five hundred golf balls until your hands bleed. Then you stop, tape your hands, and hit five hundred more balls. The next morning you are out there again with your hands so raw you can barely hold your club, but you do it all over again. If are willing to do that through some years of pain, then you can hit a ball like that!” (BOB MERRITT, 7 SIMPLE CHOICES FOR A BETTER TOMORROW, page 136).

These words of Jesus in our appointed Gospel lessons today were chosen by the designers of our church lectionary—precisely because they present us with the challenges of Christian discipleship.

In closing, let me tell you about a pastor one day who found himself wondering whether there were any golf courses in Heaven. He even began to ask the question in his prayers. One day, in answer to his prayers, he received a direct answer from on high.

"Yes," said the Heavenly messenger, "There are many excellent golf courses in Heaven. The greens are always in first class condition, the weather is always perfect and you always get to play with the very nicest people."

"Oh, thank you," said the cleric, "That really is marvelous news!"

"Yes, isn't it?" replied the messenger, "And we've got you down for a foursome next Saturday."

Amen