

Congregation rises

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The thoughts for the sermon this morning come from the Gospel reading in Luke 13, especially we consider these words: “Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.”

We pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Congregation is seated

It’s quite interesting to see how Jesus responds to what different people say throughout the Gospels. For instance, when Jesus is at the wedding in Cana and His mother Mary tells Him that they are out of wine, Jesus says, “My time has not yet come.” It’s not the kind of response that one would expect.

And then there’s the time in John 12 when two of Jesus’ disciples, Andrew and Phillip, tell Jesus that some Greeks wish to see Him. To which Jesus says, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” Now, I know that we know what Jesus means today, but consider how this statement would have come from left field for Andrew and Phillip. Jesus doesn’t say “OK” or “Not right now” when they tell Jesus that there are some people who want to see Him. Instead, He says, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”

Jesus often responds in ways that people do not expect in the Gospels. This is true when Jesus answers questions too, as we see in Luke 20. That’s when various groups are trying to trap Jesus with a question, but each time He responds with wisdom and an answer that the questioners don’t see coming. And the people in the crowds are astonished at His wisdom.

In the Gospel reading for this morning, Jesus also responds to a question in a little bit of an unexpected way. Luke tells us it begins when “Someone said to him, ‘Lord, will those who are saved be few?’”

Now, Jesus doesn't immediately answer this person's question. This person asks the question about the comparative number of those who are in, of those who will make it. Jesus doesn't say "There will be many" or "There will be just a few." Instead, Jesus replies, "Strive to enter through the narrow door."

Notice how Jesus changes the conversation. He does this, not because He's afraid to answer this person's question. But because this person wasn't focusing on the right thing. But Jesus takes the focus off of the number of people who are in and instead focuses the conversation on the way in.

It's been said that there is no such thing as a bad question, just question with bad intentions. And that's a potential problem with the question in our text this morning. You see, this was a question of comparison. Many or few. If Jesus says it's going to be many, then the questioner might think, "It's going to be easy for me to get in." And if Jesus says it's going to be a few, then the danger is the questioner might think, "I really am doing a lot better than most people." After all, this person might easily think. I'm here with Jesus. I'm not like the other people who are staying home. Why, look how close I am to Jesus.

But as my basketball coach use to say, "Close doesn't count." As Jesus talks about entering the kingdom of God, we see that this is true, close doesn't count. Jesus says, "Many will seek to enter and will not be able to." They will not be able to because the door will be shut. And when these people come knocking, the master will say, "I do not know where you come from." To which the stunned people outside the door will say, "But we ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets." You see, they were close. Close to the Master. Close to Jesus. But that will not count.

No, what will count will be their sins. The Master will say to them, "Depart from me, all you workers of evil!" These people will be judged according to their sins, because they did not enter through the narrow door.

Now, consider how startling this answer must have been for this person who asked the question. Again, this was a question of comparison. The type of question

that might lead one to think that they are really something. Better than so many others. Or one who will get in with no problem at all.

And yet, here is Jesus, on His way to Jerusalem, going from town to town, around so many people. There would have been many people who could have said that they were close to Jesus that they heard Him speak. Or that they saw Him. And many could have even said that they ate with Him. Why we hear this time and again in Luke's Gospel. We hear how Jesus eats with people. He eats with sinners and tax collectors to the dismay of the religious leaders. He eats with the 5000. He also eats with an untold number of others, including his own disciples.

But Jesus, in our reading for this morning, says that some whom He eats with, who heard Him teach will be outside the door knocking when it comes to the Last Day because close doesn't count. Jesus doesn't want people thinking in terms of comparison when it comes to making it into the Kingdom of God.

And you and I need to remember this as well. Close isn't good enough. This is how it is at the Last Day, because this is how it works with God's Law. As God declares in James 2:10, "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it."

We can't think in terms of comparison or closeness. If you or I think to ourselves, "I'm a pretty good person, I'm sure I'll get in" then we'll be left out. If you think, "I'm getting better, God will certainly think I'm good enough" you will end up on the wrong side of the judgment. If you think, "Jesus says that I need to enter through the narrow door, that means that I've got to do everything just right" you will find out just how wrong you are.

You see, close doesn't cut it when it comes to the law. The door is too narrow. It demands the perfect approach. One mistake, one sin, will mean that you miss it.

And that should be your destiny and mine, because what Jesus says about those who are left outside could be said of all of us inside here. We are workers of evil, workers of unrighteousness. We have missed the mark. And if we have missed the mark, then it doesn't matter by how much, we have missed it.

But the Good News for you dear Christian is that Jesus does not. He does not miss the mark. His way is true. He walks the perfect path to Jerusalem. He is totally obedient to the Heavenly Father, even unto death, even death upon a cross.

All of this so that He could declare to you, “I am the way, and the truth and the life. Nobody comes to the Father except **through** me.” You see, Jesus is the narrow door by which you enter the Kingdom of God. The narrow door is not your striving or your goodness. The narrow door is Jesus.

And dear Christians, you are able to enter the narrow door, because you are in Christ! This is a common way that Christians are talked about in the New Testament. God’s Word doesn’t so much describe us as being close to Jesus, but rather in Jesus. In Christ. You are in Christ by virtue of your baptism. For when you were washed with that water, you were united with Christ. Baptized into Him in His death and resurrection so that you could die to sin and rise to walk in new life with Christ. And so, His life and His goodness became yours.

Now, I should say that this does not mean that you and I don’t need to think about or seek goodness according to the Lord’s will. If we live in and through Jesus, how could we do anything else? So, righteousness and holy living can and should be our aim for life in this world. You should strive for righteousness. However, this striving for righteousness isn’t your way into the Kingdom of God. When it comes to making it into the Kingdom of God, Christ is our way and Christ is our righteousness. Because what Jesus does by dying on the cross and rising again, well this is not for His sake, but for yours.

He lived and died and rose for you that you might be His. That He might call you to new life in Him. As He calls you to this new life, He calls you to one of service. Today we install Sunday School teachers here at St. John’s. This is one way that you can serve the Lord. But you can also serve the Lord by helping out with Sound Words Academy. Or volunteering at Topeka Lutheran School. Or serving on a board or committee here at St. John’s. Or by helping, as many of you did last week, with something like our bargain and bake sale. These are ways to serve our Lord here at St. John’s.

But your service doesn't just involve what happens here or at TLS. Your service involves what you do for your family in your home and how you help and bless your neighbors. And your service for your neighbors involves praying for them, especially if they don't know that Jesus is the narrow door. And while praying for them is important, you should also speak to them of Jesus so that they might hear your witness and faith in Jesus, who is the narrow door.

There are too many people in our community who are mixed up about this difference between being in Christ and close to Christ. If you want evidence of this, consider that around 15% of Americans are in church this morning. But nearly 70% of Americans claim to be Christian. There is a disconnect there.

Because it's here, in Church, that you receive the gifts of God that enable you to live in Christ. Here you get God's Word and His forgiveness. Here the Lord renews you in your baptism and feeds you with His body and blood. That's why we need to invite others to church. You see, coming to church isn't our good work for God, it is God working for you.

You see, this is how it is in God's Kingdom. The ones who are the greatest are the ones who serve the most. And Jesus leads the way. Our text ends by saying that people will come from all over. They'll come from east and west, north and south, and they will recline at table, and the greatest of all, Jesus Himself, will serve them.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, you can be certain of this promise, not because of your goodness, but because you live in Christ. And here is the evidence of it. Our Lord comes to serve you at His table today to provide you a foretaste of His feast to come. So come to the feast. Come through the narrow door, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Congregation Rises

Now the peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Congregation is Seated