

**St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church, Modesto,
California
The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 5, 2004**

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

Luke 13:22-30

²² Then Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. ²³ Someone asked him, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?"

He said to them, ²⁴ "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. ²⁵ Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, 'Sir, open the door for us.'

"But he will answer, 'I don't know you or where you come from.'

²⁶ "Then you will say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.'

²⁷ "But he will reply, 'I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!'

²⁸ "There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out. ²⁹ People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. ³⁰ Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last." (NIV)

**"Are Only a Few People Going to Be Saved?"
Jesus Corrects Some Misconceptions**

"Are only a few people going to be saved?"

It's a good question. And it's a question that people have answered. A poll taken earlier this year by the Barna Group, a religious polling service, found this: "54% [of Americans polled] believe that if a person is generally good, or does enough good things for others during their life, they will earn a place in heaven." And in response to the statement, "All good people will live in heaven after they die on earth," 50% agree. That's down slightly from 55% two years ago, but still it's about half of people who believe that.

So half of Americans, it seems, answer the question with a "No." "Are only a few people going to be saved? No, not a few but many people will be saved."

But then someone chimes in with a different response. His name is Jesus. "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door," he says.

"Are only a few people going to be saved?" We don't know who asked the question of Jesus, but that's okay. We can each pretend that we asked it. And, more importantly, we can listen to Jesus' response. His response clears up some misconceptions about this critical question—misconceptions that even you and I might have.

"A better question to ask is..."

Whoever asked this question of Jesus, it's a good question. I'm sure the person who asked it was not the only one wondering. Jesus had been teaching people as he traveled toward Jerusalem. He had been not been mincing words; he told those who followed him that it would be a difficult road to walk, full of opposition and conflict. He had been making it sound as if only a relatively few people would be with him in the end. So someone asked him bluntly, "Are only a few people going to be saved?" A good question.

More interesting than the question, though, is the way Jesus answers it. He could have said just "yes" or "no." But he doesn't say either. Instead, he says, "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door," and then he goes on to tell a little parable.

With the indirect response he gives to this straightforward question, why, Jesus could run for office! In the middle of an election year, we get used to this: a reporter asks a simple question, and the candidate gives a complicated answer. So complicated sometimes that by the time they're done talking, you've forgotten what the question was. Is that what Jesus is doing here? Being dodgy? Is he afraid to commit to an answer? Is he afraid he'll offend someone?

Not at all. First, we know Jesus is not being evasive so as not to offend someone because the answer he gives is plenty offensive to many people! More than that, though, Jesus doesn't answer this question directly because he knows that there is a better and more important question to ask. Better than, "Are only a few going to be saved?" is this: "Are you going to be saved?"

Jesus has a way of doing that. He turns things personal. For instance, Jesus once asked his disciples, "Who do people say I am?" An opinion poll of sorts. But then he quickly followed up with, "What about you? Who do you say I am?" Earlier in this chapter some people brought up a mass murder that had taken place. Jesus sensed that people were wondering, "Why do sudden, tragic events happen?" But Jesus quickly made them think of another question, "What if a sudden tragedy were to happen to you? What if you died? Where would you go?" So it is here. Instead of asking, "Are only a few people going to be saved?", Jesus suggests this question: "Are you going to be saved?"

That's a good way to approach it. I've noticed that sometimes—not all the time, but sometimes—people want to argue religion or theology in order to avoid thinking about how religion applies to them personally. They want to debate theology rather than listening to what it says to them. But Jesus isn't content with that. He knows that a person can know lots of answers to theological and religious questions and still miss out on enjoying God's gifts.

"Are only a few people going to be saved?" A better question is, "Are you going to be saved?"

Let's look more at how Jesus responds to the question now that he's made it more personal.

"Instead of thinking 'wide,' think..."

According to Barna, about half of Americans think that generally good people go to heaven. I suspect that many of these people might say, "Any religious beliefs are okay, as long as they are sincere and they lead you to do good things." Put another way, many people believe that the door to eternal life is pretty wide. Do good, and you'll go to heaven.

But Jesus says things this way: Make every effort to enter through the narrow door... The way to heaven, he says, is not as wide open as you think: ...many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to.

Maybe now would be a good time to pause for a moment to define something. The question we're thinking about is, "Are only a few people going to be saved?" What does it mean to "be saved"? To be saved, in Bible terms, means to be rescued or delivered from something. From what? The Bible says that what we need to be saved from is the judgment and punishment that God promises to pour out on sinful people. And God is not kidding when he speaks of this. Hell is a real place, even though if we took an opinion poll, many people would deny this, and even though people going to hell is not at all a politically correct thing. But listen to God speak as he did in the First Lesson today: "And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind." (Isaiah 66:24) How can we be saved from this? God says that the only way to escape hell is to be absolutely perfect in his sight. The only way to be free from hell is to be completely without sin and guilt. How can we ever be free from hell, then? We sin every day. And perfect? That's not us. But listen to what God promises. He promises that all who look to Jesus, trusting that he's real, that what he did was for them—they will have all their sins removed by God, free of charge. God promises that all who look to Jesus, trusting in him—they will all be credited with Jesus' perfect life.

So in a sense, being saved from God's wrath and punishment is easy; we don't do anything. Jesus does it. God himself rescues us, saves us. Then he says, "Believe what's true: you are saved."

Then why does Jesus say, Make every effort to enter through the narrow door? Why "narrow door"? Because Jesus is the only way to be saved. He is the only one who can make us pure and holy in God's sight. He is the only one who can wash us from our sins in his own blood. When Jesus says, Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, he knows that many things will try to pull us away from him. "Don't let them," he says. "Repent. Turn from your sins every day. And trust in me. Believe me when I say that you are fully pardoned. I make you safe."

50% of Americans think that the door to heaven is wide, that just generally doing good in this life is the key to getting in. But it's not. The door is much narrower than that. Only Jesus and his work—not us and our work—only Jesus is the door to life. Instead of thinking “wide,” think “narrow.” Think “Jesus only.”

“Finally, know that the time is...”

One more point Jesus wants to make. He pictures himself as the owner of a house in which a banquet is about to be thrown. He says that the owner will eventually close the door, even though many haven't yet entered it. “Open up for us!” those on the outside will say. It seems that only when the door closes do they start to show some interest in coming inside. But the owner will say, “I don't know you.” The people will object, “Sure you do! You walked among us. You ate with us, drank with us. You taught in our streets.” But to no avail. The owner of the house will refuse to be with them. Once the door is closed, it's closed for good.

Not a very happy ending for a story, is it? The people listening to Jesus as he spoke this for the first time, I'm guessing, got the point of what he was saying. There were many people who had contact with him as he went around teaching, healing, proclaiming. And many of these were very religious people. Yet many of them would miss out on the banquet of heaven because they didn't listen to and believe what Jesus was saying to them. Meanwhile, people from pagan backgrounds were listening and they were believing. Here Jesus says, “You who had so much contact with me and my words will miss out. Meanwhile, people from all the nations you look down on will be feasting with me and your ancestors in heaven. Those you thought were last in line will be first, and you, who thought you were first, will end up last.” Jesus' point: The time to enter the narrow door, the time to repent and believe in him is *now*.

The door will close for each of us, too. Opportunities to repent and believe in Jesus will end, either when we die or when Jesus comes again, whichever happens first. Many people will find themselves on the wrong side of the door when it closes. They'll say to God, “Okay God, now I'm interested in coming in.” But God will say, “I don't know you.”

People in our country might object, don't you think? When God closes the door on someone's life, I can imagine him or her saying, “You don't know me? Yes, you do, God! There are churches all over the place where I live. I've been in some of them. And here, look at this money I've got. See what it says? ‘In God we trust.’ And God, when they wanted to take you out of the Pledge of Allegiance, I said, ‘Over my dead body!’ That counts for something, right?”

But God would say, “But did you take to heart what I said to you? When I said, ‘Repent,’ did you? When I said, ‘Here's my only Son, Jesus. Believe in him,’ did you? Or did you think the door to heaven was wide? Did you think that some generic belief in ‘god’ was enough? You're going to miss out on the banquet, though you had so many opportunities to come in. Meanwhile people

from China, Russia, Africa who believed my word when it came to them are feasting with me forever."

Let's not be satisfied with superficial religious beliefs. Let's not content ourselves with having a passing acquaintance with God. Let's not wait to know him better. Let's not wait till the door is closed. Let's listen. Let's repent. Let's believe in Jesus Christ and come through the door.

This section of the Bible is pretty harsh. It's easy to come away from this kind of depressed. But Jesus doesn't want you to. In addition to heeding his warnings, he wants you to remember some comforting things:

First, don't miss his personal concern for you. He wants each of us to really think over our spiritual lives and futures. That's why he hits hard with his words.

Consider also a detail in this section that we kind of skipped over. Think about what Jesus is doing as he speaks these words: he's traveling to Jerusalem. Why? To go to the cross to pay for your sins. He's going there to save you. He's going there to wash you clean, to save you from God's judgment by enduring it himself. Don't miss that love Jesus is showing to you.

And don't miss this fact: the door is open right now. No matter who you are, no matter where you're from, no matter where or what you've been. Jesus Christ is real, and he is here for you. Repent. Believe. The door is open.

"Are only a few people going to be saved?" Looking at the Scriptures, we must answer, "Yes. Relatively few will be saved, for only Jesus is the way." At the same time, though, we stand in awe of God's grace; because of that, we will be among those feasting with him forever. Amen.