

Fourteenth Sunday of Pentecost
September 2, 2007
Luke 13:22-30

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

Access to God's Kingdom is through the Narrow Door

1. Don't fall for faulty notions
2. Make every effort to enter
3. Be ready for some surprises

^{NIV} Luke 13:22 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."

Fellow Members of the Kingdom of Heaven,

I'd like you to picture for yourself a big house, more than that, a mansion. The most beautiful house you can imagine. Manicured grounds. Pillars out front. Lavish in every way. But one more thing about this house: It's got only one door through which to enter. And it's not some great big tall, wide door but a door that is exceptionally narrow, maybe only a foot wide, 15 inches at the most, so that most people would have to turn sideways to get through it. And then it would be a tight fit.

That's the picture that stands before us in our Gospel lesson this morning. The narrow door to the kingdom of God or, to say it another way, the narrow door through which we enter to be saved. Let's take a closer look at these verses to see what Jesus has in mind with such a picture.

1. Don't fall for faulty notions

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem here, but along the way he stops to teach. At one point someone asks him, "*Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?*" You could understand how someone who's been listening to Jesus might ask this. In the preceding chapters of Luke's Gospel we've heard Jesus take the teachers of the law to task. He said to them, "**Woe to you...because you have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourselves have not entered, and you have hindered those who were entering.**" (11:52) Jesus faulted the Pharisees for their hypocrisy (12:1) and the rich man who hadn't counted on dying anytime soon. Towards the beginning of this chapter he said, "**Unless you repent, you too will all perish.**" (13:5) So it's a fair question of Jesus, "*Are only a few people going to be saved?*"

But instead of answering the question directly, Jesus says, "*Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to.*" It was like saying, "Let's stop the speculative stuff. Just make sure that you're among the saved." That *was* an answer to the question. Many will try but won't be able to enter through the narrow door. Some of the rabbis back then were teaching that if you were a Jew, then you'd be saved, just by virtue of your Jewishness. According to Jesus, that was a faulty notion. Being saved is not a matter of ethnicity, race or nationality. It's entering through the narrow door. But despite what Jesus said, there are still people who hold to this idea of **universalism**. They say it doesn't matter what you believe, because in the end everyone will be saved. And this belief is often combined with the belief that there is no hell. "God wouldn't be so cruel! We're all his children and he's going to save us all." But you adopt such a belief only by ignoring the clear words of Jesus: "*Many will try to enter and will not be able to...Away from me, you evildoers! There will be weeping there and gnashing of teeth.*" Jesus leads us to believe that there are many who *won't* be saved.

Some won't be saved because they've bought into another faulty notion. It's the notion that a **loose connection** with Jesus is all that's necessary to be saved. Did you hear what they said when the owner

of the house got up and closed the narrow door? They pleaded, "*We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.*" It's sort of like saying, "Jesus, remember? We had lunch a couple of times! I was there when you came to our town. I didn't go and hear you, but you came to my town." But again, being saved is not a matter of having known Jesus socially or having been in close proximity to him. It's entering through the narrow door. But this faulty notion is still alive and well, too. How many nominal Christians are out there, giving hardly a thought to the matter of their salvation? If the issue comes up, they guess that having been baptized or having their names on a church's membership list will be good enough for God. Besides they do go to church once or twice a year and Grandma went to church enough for all the rest of us. But church membership and Bible ownership are no guarantees of salvation. Do you hear what the owner of the big, beautiful house says? "*I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!*" When Jesus speaks of the members of his flock, he says, "***I know my sheep and my sheep know me.***" (John 10:14) But these folks trying to get past that closed door, he doesn't know them at all.

But, you know, it's possible to repent of the false believe of universalism. And it's possible to repent of having substituted a loose connection with Jesus for genuine faith in him. But for too many people, it's a third faulty notion that's going to do them in. It's the faulty notion that **there's plenty of time to get right with God.** These are the people who thought there's always be time to enter through the narrow door, but right now they have better things to do. Are some of you among those ambitious people who spring out of bed early on the morning of December 26, ready to race for the bargains at Wal-Mart or Target? They have four or six or maybe eight big doors to enter those stores. Yet on the morning of December 26, there can be quite a press as the manager starts to open the doors. Too many people; not enough doors. That's how it will be on the day Jesus returns. Just one narrow door to enter that big beautiful house called the kingdom of God. And that door is shut and locked. There wasn't plenty of time after all.

So the thing to do, then, is to pay attention to the words of Jesus and none of these faulty notions will trip us up. "*Make every effort to enter through the narrow door.*"

2. Make every effort to enter

The words "make every effort" are one word in the original language. It's the word from which we get our English word "agonize" and it's a

word that was borrowed from the Greek sports arena. Contestants in the Greek games would “make every effort” to win the prize. Roman gladiators would “make every effort” to fend off wild beasts or to best their opponents. Jesus calls for that same intensity of effort when it comes to the matter of being saved. *“Make every effort to enter through the narrow door.”*

But wait a minute! *My* effort? I thought my salvation depended on the efforts of Jesus. He was the one who fasted for six weeks and then faced the wiles of the Tempter. He was the one who had the will to stay silent and sinless before his tormenters. He was the one who picked up that cross made so unspeakably heavy with the sins of the whole world and carried it to Calvary. He persevered to suffer abandonment by God like no living soul has ever suffered abandonment and did it while forgiving all those who were responsible for his suffering. Only Jesus could by his own efforts raise himself to life deliver sin and death and Satan a stunning defeat. It’s true: the narrowness of the door to the kingdom of God precludes any possibility of coming in on someone else’s back or trying to bring an armful of my good works along so as to gain entrance. Jesus is the narrow door. We enter that big, beautiful house called heaven through faith in him or we don’t enter it at all. My efforts won’t get me there, nor will yours. His be the glory.

But when we’re clear on this all-important matter that our salvation is by the grace of God alone, through faith in Jesus Christ alone, it is still valid to give an encouragement to “make every effort.” As far as I can tell there’s just one other place in the New Testament where this “make every effort” word is used in a similar sense. It’s a familiar passage in which Paul writes to Timothy, ***“Fight the good fight of faith.”*** (1 Tim. 6:12) Rather than buying into universalism or settling for a loose connection with Christ or mistakenly believing that there’s always time to take this matter of salvation seriously, “Fight the good fight.” Paul explained this encouragement in the previous verse when he wrote, ***“Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness.”*** (1 Tim. 6:11) These qualities are all the gifts of God’s grace and they come to those who seek to know their Savior better through his Word, to those who treasure his sacraments as means through which God works in us to strengthen our faith. After warning the people of his day of some very similar faulty notions, the apostle Peter wrote, ***“Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position.”*** Then he advises us what to do proactively.

He writes, "***But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.***" (2 Pet. 3:17-18) That's how we make every effort to enter through the narrow door.

It's our Savior's desire and his goal to have every one of us enter through the narrow door and be saved. He wants us there with him in that big, beautiful mansion of heaven. He paid an awesome price to have us there with him. But when we get there, we should be ready for some surprises.

3. Be ready for some surprises

The final verses of our Gospel are a portrait of heaven. "*You (will) see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God.*" That's not a surprise. We expect to see the patriarchs and the prophets in heaven. But what comes next was, at least for some Jewish ears, surprising: "*People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God.*" As we'll see in our Sunday morning Bible study on *Jonah*, God even had a prophet who didn't expect to see anyone but Jews in heaven. It's a testimony to the wideness of God's mercy when Jesus speaks of believers from the four corners of the world streaming into his kingdom. Like we sang earlier, "***With God there is no tribe or race; In him we all are one He loves us as his children through Our faith in his dear Son.***" (CW 539) This really shouldn't be a surprise because we all know that God so loved *the world*, but here's more proof of the variety and diversity that will be found in heaven. Are only a few people going to be saved? It sounds like a pretty big gathering here.

Here's another surprise: "*Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last.*" It sounds like some people that nobody expected to see in heaven who will be there and there are others who are odds-on favorites to be present in heaven who won't be there. Finally, only God knows now those who are his. But I don't really expect us to be wandering around heaven in a daze of surprise because our expectations of who would be there and who wouldn't were so far off. If we're lost in anything in heaven, it will be awe—awe at being in the presence of our God and Savior, awe at being united with that vast throng of believers of every age from every tribe and nation and language, awe at the beauty of this place that Jesus prepared for us by his death and resurrection.

But for right now, our job isn't to guess who or how many will actually be there in heaven. It isn't even our job to speculate now on what

God hasn't revealed to us about the nature of heaven. The thing that deserves our consistent and concerted effort is entering through the narrow door, Jesus Christ. Through faith in him our questions will all be answered one day. Amen.