

Sermon

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 16, Year C

August 26, 2007

by the Rev. Norman Bray

The task of engaging the scriptures, working with them and trying to hear what they are saying to us today is something that I really enjoy but occasionally I run into a passage that brings me up short. Today's gospel is a good example of this and I have had a lively week trying to find a way to bring this gospel into our world, trying to find a way that this makes sense, because on the face of it, this story has Jesus saying things that do not fit with any of his other teachings. "Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you will try to enter and not be able." Doesn't fit very well with John, chapter 14 "In my father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also." How do we reconcile these two very different sayings?

To begin, we first have to recognize who Jesus was talking to at the time. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and he is preaching and healing and working miracles along the way. His ministry is to Israel right at this time, he is after all the Messiah, but Israel cannot recognize that this is their last chance. God has called them back so many times and this time, like so many of those times before, very few answer God's call. Jesus is warning Israel that there is still time but only for a little while because once Jesus is crucified the salvation that belonged to Israel is going to be opened up to the people that Israel has been struggling against for centuries, the Gentiles. Not only will salvation be open to the Gentiles but Israel will soon cease to exist. Forty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus the Gospel has spread over half of the known world, the Temple has been razed to the ground and the Jews have been dispersed, put out of their lands. The narrow door closed for Israel when Jesus died.

The narrow door may have closed for Israel but it is still open for us, right? That is what we believe, that salvation is available to us but not through any work on our part but rather through the grace of God. So, what do we do with that part that says "Strive to enter through the narrow door", that sounds like we are supposed to be working at something, but Paul tells us in Romans chapter 3 that we are justified by faith, not by works. Does that mean that we just have to say "I believe" and all of our worries are over? Somehow I don't think that it is that easy and the apostle Paul in his letter to the church at Ephesus says "**Ephesians 2:10** For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." That sounds to me like we are supposed to be doing something here on earth, working at being something, working at perhaps living out the Gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. If that is true, what would that look like? Jesus gives us several examples but I think that the best one is in **Luke 6:27-35** Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹ If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰ Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you. ³² "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³ If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴ If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. ³⁵ But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. ³⁷ "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; ³⁸ give, and it will be given to you." That sounds like a pretty good description of striving to enter through the narrow door. We have two ministries here at St. Luke's that would be identifiable in this description, the Food Pantry and the Rector's Discretionary Fund. The Food Pantry is open to anyone who asks, there are no restrictions other than one visit per month and

only one bag of food at a time. The Rector's Discretionary Fund is similar in that we do not ask people to qualify for our assistance, it is enough that they ask. We do try to limit the amount of our assistance in order that more people can be helped but there are times that call for extraordinary measures. Both of these functions are what we call "Outreach," they are intended to help those who are not necessarily members of this congregation. It is giving for the sake of giving and I think that is the very highest form of giving because it carries no expectation of return or of performance of any action on the part of the participants. But there is something here that is troubling to me as well. Both of these means of giving are funded independently of the church's budget. On one hand that speaks very well of the people of St. Luke's, there are those among us who are doing the good works of giving but that giving is from individuals, not from us corporately and I am troubled and confused by that because the evidence is very clear that this kind of giving, this kind of outreach is important to us as individuals. This is another piece of the stewardship puzzle, the giving back to God from the abundance that God has given us, and I want the church as a whole to model the behavior that the Gospel's preach. When it comes time for the annual, budget I will do all that I can to see that we have a line item for outreach and it should be at least 10% of the budget, that is a good place to start but my vision is that one day we are giving away 1/2 of our budget in outreach. That is a big number, I know, and it may disturb some people but we are a church, we are not a bank, and it is up to us to show the world what it means to "strive to enter by the narrow door." We are not saved by our works, we know that, we are saved by faith and through the grace of God, but we are led to these works by our faith and so we strive to live the gospels, we work to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, take care of widows and orphans, and visit the prisoners. That is what we are called to do, because we are Christians, followers of Christ, we are called to these works, and we are called to strive to enter through that narrow door. The image of the narrow door and some people who worked hard to enter being turned away is disturbing and it still does not match anything that we here from Jesus about salvation but I think that we disregard this warning at our own peril, this is one case where being wrong could entail a heavy penalty. So come, let us strive together, let us strive to enter through the narrow door not because of fear of being left out of salvation but because that is what our faith, that is what our God has called us to do.