

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.” (Luke 13:22-30)*

Can You Get in this Door?

Last month, when we were on vacation, we went to Washington D.C. Twice while we were there, we tried to go up the Washington Monument. To do that, you have to get tickets. You can get them in advance or you can show up early in the morning and stand in line for the handful that are still available. We didn’t get them in advance. So the first day we tried, there were only about a dozen people in front of us when the tickets ran out. The second day, there was one family ahead of us. We just couldn’t get in. But on both days, the line was very orderly. No one that I saw tried to cut in front of anyone else. That isn’t always the case. Many years ago, my wife and I went to see a movie at a mall. There was a long line out in front, but we stood there waiting for them to open. Just when they did, a group of people rushed the door and pushed past everyone who was waiting. People started shouting and the manager had to come out. But he didn’t do anything. Those people who cut in front got in and the rest of us didn’t.

What do those two incidents have in common? Limited access. There was only one way in and if you didn’t get a ticket, you couldn’t get in. If Jesus had lived in a world that had movie theaters and tourist attractions that controlled admission with tickets, he might’ve used that illustration in the gospel lesson we have before us today. His point is also limited access. There is only one way in to heaven. He calls it “the narrow door.” He’s picturing a very small, tightly controlled entrance to a place we really want to go. His words pose a very important question for us: **can you get in this door?**

I.

Our gospel lesson for this morning begins with a question: **“Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?”** That’s a very interesting question because the Bible kind of answers it both ways. There are passages that speak of a great multitude in heaven that no one can count. And there are passages that call God’s people “a little flock” – we heard Jesus say that just two weeks ago. So it’s kind of a question of perspective. Maybe that’s why Jesus didn’t answer the question directly. Instead, he spoke of how hard it is to enter through the narrow door, and he told us to make every effort to get in.

In fact, he says something that’s kind of scary: **“Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to.”** That makes me think of a crowd pushing and shoving, trying to get in through this narrow, little opening before all the places are taken and the door is slammed shut. Of course, Jesus said the door would be closed and many of the people he was talking to would not get in. Jesus said that they would stand outside, knocking and pleading for the owner of the house to let them in. But he would answer, **“I don’t know you or where you come from.”**

Now, that was a shocking statement for them to hear, because this parable is not hard to understand. The owner of the house is Jesus himself. Going through the door means getting into heaven. If you’re shut out of heaven, then you’re in hell. And Jesus said, **“You will stand outside, knocking and pleading,”** and the master will say **“I don’t know you.”** Jesus was talking to Jews. He was talking to the physical descendants of Abraham, the people that God chose, the people he had promised to save. And God was going to say that he wouldn’t know them or where they came from. Jesus’ words were a spiritual slap in their faces. But he made it

even more pointed: they would remind Jesus that he had eaten and drunk with them and taught in their streets. But Jesus would reply, **“I don’t know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!”** The Jewish people didn’t think of themselves as evildoers. They did expect God to recognize them. They thought of the gentiles as being hopelessly sinful, not even entirely human, and doomed to everlasting hell while they got into heaven. But Jesus said that they would be locked out.

He didn’t pretend like they would like it. When we didn’t get into the Washington Monument, we were very frustrated, especially that second day. If we had just gotten there sooner, we might’ve made it in. But we didn’t. Jesus pictures the frustration of the Jewish people, the people that God put first in line, when they wind up last and don’t get in. He said that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – their ancestors – along with all the Old Testament prophets would be there with God in heaven. Worse, people from all over the world would be welcomed into God’s house, would sit down like family members with their prophets and their ancestors, while they were stuck outside in hell. And they would see it all. And they would weep in sorrow and gnash their teeth -- in Jewish culture, that was a sign of rage and frustration.

That had to be hard to hear. But did you notice what it means for us? We are the people from the east and west and north and south that God brings in through the narrow door to sit with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We are made a part of the true Israel, while God dismisses so many members of the ethnic, biological people as evildoers and as people he doesn’t know. Why do we get in? Not because we’re better than they were. We are just as sinful as anyone else. We have done and continue to do just as much evil as any other person on earth. But God chose us to come in. God sent his Son Jesus to live a perfect life in our place. He never did any evil. His perfect life replaces all the selfish words and actions, all the egotistic thoughts and feeling that run through our lives every single day. So God calls us holy, not evildoers. Jesus died and paid for all that sin. His blood washed it all away. Jesus rose to tell us that the door is open. He rose to take us by the hand and lead us through that narrow door before it slams shut.

My friends, Jesus chose us to know that truth. He chose us to have faith before the world began. Then he sent that message to us and made us believers. Why did he choose us? Because we’re more spiritual than the Jewish people were? Because we’re smarter? Because we treat people better and we’re more tolerant of other cultures? No. In the Old Testament, God told his people that he did not chose them because they were greater or stronger or better than anyone else. He chose them because he loved them. And the same is true for us. God simply loves us. Even that is hard for us to understand, because we tend to love people who deserve it. We love people who are attractive or nice or fun. But God didn’t see anything loveable in us at all. And he loved us anyway. He adopted us into his true family. He gave us faith in Christ, which is makes you part of his family. Everyone who believes in Jesus is part of the true Israel of God. That’s God’s gift to you and me. **Can you get in this door? You will! Because you are now true children of Abraham!**

II.

Abraham trusted in Jesus, even though he lived two thousand years before Jesus was born. He trusted God’s promise that the Savior would come. Everyone who trusts in that Savior is Abraham’s child and heir. So God really doesn’t care about physical descent. He doesn’t care if we’re black or white, Jewish or Gentile, American or African or Asian. He cares that we trust in our Savior. That’s why he told his Jewish listeners and us to make every effort to enter through the narrow door.

What is the narrow door? It’s the gospel of Jesus Christ. That is the only way to heaven. We live in a world in which you can’t count the different religions and personal philosophies, like “spiritual, not religious” which is very popular today. Many non-religious people are very sincere in the beliefs they choose, just as many people who belong to non-Christian religions are very sincere. Jesus said that many would try to get in to heaven, but would fail. Why do they fail if they’re sincere? In the end, all those other religions and philosophies have one thing in common: to get into heaven, you have to be a good person. You either have to do some specific things that a religion commands or you have to come up with a definition of what you think a good person is and do your best to live that way. But you know what? No one gets into heaven by being good. Even if we they’re great neighbors and wonderful people, to get into heaven, you have to be perfect. None of us are, no matter how sincere we are in our beliefs.

The only way to be perfect is through Jesus. Understand what I mean. I don’t mean that being a Christian makes you a better and better person until you’re “practically perfect in every way” like Mary Poppins. I mean that Jesus was perfect in our place. Jesus died and paid for all our sins – yesterday’s and

today's and tomorrow's. So God doesn't see that sin anymore. Faith means you trust his promise that you are perfect and holy in God's sight. That faith comes only through the gospel. So that gospel is the narrow door that we go through to enter heaven. Jesus tells us to make every effort to enter through that door. He's not telling unbelievers to work harder until you're perfect. Rather, he's telling them to look harder until you find the gospel, the only door that's there. He's telling them to recognize how empty and worthless all their efforts to be good people are, and listen to his message, his free gift of eternal life.

But we already know that message. So what is Jesus telling us? To recognize that most of us probably won't go to heaven today. Every day that we're here, the devil works to take our faith away. So we can't just lean back and say, "Well, I was confirmed when I finished 8th grade." We can't just depend on our membership in the Lutheran Church. The narrow door is the gospel. But you go in through the door by trusting in that gospel message. Faith needs to be fed or it will die. It's our responsibility to feed our faith. So we make every effort by being faithful in hearing the word. Sunday after Sunday, we make coming to church a priority. We come to communion. We come to Bible classes. We confess our sins. And we open our Bibles at home and study them. All those things keep our faith alive so that when the time comes, we enter eternal life.

And we recognize the threats. How does the devil work against us? He tries to gradually draw you away. He tries to trip you up with sins that your sinful nature enjoys. If he can get you to plunge deep enough into those sins, your faith will die. So what do we do? We repent. We recognize our sin. We trust in our Savior for forgiveness. Then we rededicate ourselves to resisting those sins that we fall into most. We flee from temptation – we recognize the situations that lead us to sin and we avoid them. Every day, we turn to Jesus for forgiveness and strength. All that is making every effort to enter through the narrow door. It's only possible because Jesus has made us new in the gospel. He now lives in our hearts by faith. He promises to bless our efforts to feed our faith. He will keep that faith alive. So we know the answer to his question. It's not a guessing game or a maybe. **Can you get in this door? You will! So make every effort to go through it.**

One of the really frustrating parts of our effort to go up the Washington Monument was the fact that you can reserve tickets in advance and then you're guaranteed a spot at a specific time. The tickets are even free. But you have to plan for it. We didn't. We were so busy with other things that we did very little planning for our vacation, so we missed that opportunity. Did it ruin our vacation? No. We did lots of other things. But it was a disappointment. In life, some things are disappointments. Some things are disasters that can ruin your whole life. It's easy to put feeding your faith in second or third or fourth place because you're just so busy. But you know what? If you wind up outside weeping and gnashing your teeth in frustration, will it be any consolation that you had a good job or a nice house or you had a lot of fun doing things late Saturday nights? Make every effort to enter through the narrow door. Plan for and prioritize feeding your faith with the good news of Jesus Christ. I guarantee that for all eternity, you will glad that you did. Amen.