

The Heavenly Door

Luke 13:22-30

February 28, 2010

I.

Imagine rushing to an airport departure gate because you're late. You arrive and see the door has closed and you tell the attendant, "Wait, wait, I have a ticket and a seat assignment!" But the attendant says, "I'm sorry, but once we close the door it cannot be reopened."

How would you feel? You thought you were all set, and you still can look out the window at the airplane parked at the end of the jetway, and you can see some of the passengers in their seats. Perhaps someone is sitting in the seat you thought had been assigned to you.

If we could move this scene back two thousand years, we might capture the message in today's Gospel. Some people believed they had a ticket and seat assignment, but Jesus said otherwise.

This can be a fearful reading for some people, can't it? From time to time we hear about the good news of salvation and eternal life with God. But today's reading is the other side of the coin. It's the bad news of rebuke and eternal separation from God.

And this is not a popular topic in some churches. You probably have heard me speak before about the growing contemporary acceptance of "salad bar spirituality." You know how a salad bar works. You take what you like and pass over what you don't want.

And some people look at faith the same way. They pick and choose to create a feel-good religion that has everything they like without the more difficult ideas that are part of important biblical teachings. They want a faith they can live with, not a faith they can live by.

For those who adopt this brand of postmodern Christianity, religion is a consumer item. If you like it, buy it. If not, leave it on the shelf. If it works for you, that's what counts.

But Jesus said what he said. Look at the reading. And even though some people might find harshness in his words, God's grace also is inherent in his message. When Jesus said there will be people on the outside looking in, he also reaffirmed that there will be people on the inside as well.

II.

So let's examine what Jesus said, and the context in which he said it. By this time Jesus had completed the first part of his ministry of teaching and preaching in and around Galilee in northern Palestine, and was making his way south to Jerusalem and his destiny on the cross.

And now the tone of his message began to evolve. He not only continued to proclaim the glory of God's kingdom, but also spoke more frequently of how people are called to live in preparation for it. Jesus' time on earth was getting shorter, and his words became more forceful.

And his teachings must have been ominous to some people who thought they were living in devout ways. One of them asked with apparent alarm, "Lord, will only a few be saved?" People were hearing Jesus' radical message for the first time, and he was turning old ideas upside down.

Jesus answered the question with one of his frequent metaphors; a figure of speech to make a point. He told the people to enter through the narrow door, because many would try to enter through other doors and would not be able. And he said that if people did not come to the right door until after it had closed, they would be turned away. The Lord would not know them.

This message also is in other Gospels. In Matthew Jesus said, "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and [many will] take it. [And] the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and [few will] find it" (7:13-14).

But Jesus also gave us hope and told us how to meet this seemingly difficult standard. In John he said, "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture" (10:9). Jesus is the gate. He is the way. When we follow him the door will not be closed.

I am reminded of the man who fell into a bed of quicksand. Confucius saw the fellow's situation and said, "This man will learn from his experience." Then Buddha observed the man's plight and said, "Let this be a lesson to the rest of the world." Mohammed came by and said, "Alas, it is the will of Allah." Finally, Jesus appeared and said, "Take my hand brother, I will save you."

This story illustrates today's Gospel. Many doors are out there. Many paths can be taken. Faith is disguised in pretty packages. And the world does its best to glamorize the latest books or movies or ideas that tempt us with detours around the road Jesus calls us to take. The world shouts, "Enter here! Here is a new and improved wider door. It's better than that old narrow door!"

You probably are familiar with the TV game show, *Let's Make a Deal*. People who already have won something on the show have a chance to win a bigger prize by trading for something else behind door number one, or door number two, or door number three. But they also could lose if they pick the wrong door.

Think about that game show format in the context of faith. We already have the prizes of salvation and eternal life. They come with trust in Jesus Christ. But at times they might seem off in the distance. We cannot touch or feel them now in a material way. And so we might be susceptible to more immediate gratifications that the world offers through the temptations of other doors.

And at times the church falls victim to these blandishments. It happens whenever we try to follow the sheep instead of lead the sheep. It happens whenever the church brings itself down to society's level in a misguided attempt to be relevant rather than holding itself up so that society also can be uplifted.

And for the church, as well as for all people in God's creation, it happens whenever we think there is another way or another door. We are Christians. We are called to put our faith in Jesus Christ. There is no other way for us, and there is no other door. That is the teaching of today's Gospel.

III.

So how do we go about entering the narrow door? And what kind of a door is it, anyway? Where does it lead? Some theologians say the narrow door is something we go through when we become Christians, and it shapes us for the rest of our lives.

And certainly coming to faith is important. But that is not what Jesus meant in today's reading. It is not a door we see in this life, but rather the door to the next life. And we are called to live in faith now to prepare for the narrow door later. Jesus said to strive for the narrow door, and that means doing things now that will save us when we inevitably account for the content of our lives.

But doesn't this raise a basic question about our Christian beliefs. Isn't faith enough? Do we have to do something in addition to believing? After all, St. Paul said in Romans, "We hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works" (3:28). And Ephesians says that "By grace [we] have been saved through faith, and [it] is the gift of God—not the result of works" (2:8-9).

Those words certainly are true, and today's reading does not challenge them. In the end, we are saved by our faith. But what do we mean by saving faith? Can it exist in the absence of works? Are professions of faith well-founded if not supported by things that evidence that faith?

Although we ought not judge the faith of others, we can look at ourselves. And we will see that that good works naturally flow from faith in spontaneous obedience to God. If we have faith we cannot help but do good works. This is because saving faith is a belief that God produces in us, and that leads us to do his will. It is not something we can create or manufacture on our own.

Another story might illustrate this. An admiral was visiting a Navy ship and asked some enlisted men, "What would you do if another sailor fell overboard?" One of the men said "I would raise the alarm and toss him a life preserver, sir." The admiral then asked a second question: "What would you do if it were an officer?" The enlisted man promptly replied, "Which officer, sir?"

The point is the officer might seem to be worthy on the surface, but being saved from the sea would depend upon what the officer had done, or failed to do, in carrying out his or her duties to the ship and crew. The gospel reading is the same. It requires us to strive to attend the heavenly banquet, and the narrow door of Christianity is the standard to which we are called to aspire.

IV.

Have we met that standard? We all believe we are and have been good and faithful Christians. We anticipate seeing our loved ones in heaven. But will our lives be sufficient to ensure our salvation? And is that even the right question to ask?

Probably not. The real question is about our relationships with God rather than lists of our good deeds. Those come naturally with our faith. And we probably have a good idea about how we stand with God right now. We know the answer if we are honest with ourselves, and if we don't like the answer there is time to do something about it.

Let's ask ourselves some questions; appropriate questions for Lent. How do we treat other people? Is our primary concern about being successful, or being faithful? Jesus gave us two Great Commandments. Love God and love our neighbors. Do those words influence our lives every day, or only if we hear them on Sunday?

And what about the church? The church is the body of Christ. Jesus created the church and left it behind to continue his teachings, and to perpetuate the meaning of his sacrifice on the cross and his resurrection. The church is a holy institution.

Where is the church in our lives? We probably also know the answer to that question. We know whether we participate in the liturgy with meaning, or just routinely. We know whether we believe we share Jesus Christ in the Eucharist, or whether it's just a good idea to take communion.

And I could go on with other questions and comparisons. You all probably could ask the same questions and make the same comparisons without any prompting from me.

V.

So, we are called to do two things. The first is to recognize that there is a narrow door. And of course we know that Jesus did not mean a narrow door in a literal sense, but rather narrow in terms of options. You cannot get to heaven any other way through any other door. As the inheritors of Paul's teachings we can have no relationship with God that does not involve our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

And the second thing we are called to do is strive to enter through that narrow door. We have to work at it, but the work comes naturally. It is an inevitable result of our faith, and it gives us a sense of assurance that we will be among those described in today's reading who come from east and west, and from north and south, to eat in the kingdom of God. *Amen.*