

Epworth Chapel on the Green
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 22, 2010
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 28:14-22
Psalm 46
Hebrews 12:18-29
Luke 13:22-30

On prior occasions when preaching from Luke's gospel, I've noted how that chapter 9, verse 51, forms a pivotal transition in the gospel. That is the place in Luke's gospel where Jesus "sets his face toward Jerusalem," and resolutely begins moving there.

That reality is so important to Luke that he begins this text from chapter 13 by referring to it again. Jesus teaches and preaches, but he is "always pressing on toward Jerusalem."

There is definitely a journey taking place, but for Luke the journey is not merely geographical. It is more a *theological* journey. Luke is preparing his readers (that's us) for the events that occur in Jerusalem, and for what happens after those events.

The occasion of someone from the crowd asking Jesus a question is a device that Luke uses many times in his gospel. Luke seems to use it here in order to have Jesus gather up into summary fashion his teaching about the Kingdom of God. If

so, Jesus does a great job, because the parallel teachings from Matthew are scattered in six different places in his gospel.

Using Jesus' image of a door here, there are three basic things we can learn about God's kingdom and about what God is doing in the world. *First*, we learn that the door to God's Kingdom is narrow. *Second*, we learn that the door to the Kingdom will not remain open indefinitely. *Third*, we discover to our great surprise who actually travels through the door.

In response to the question, "Lord, will only a few be saved?" Jesus responds in verse 24 by saying: "The door to heaven is narrow. Work hard to get in, because many will try to enter, but when the head of the house has locked the door, it will be too late."

Many have wondered if Jesus is speaking here about some sort of "works righteousness," or teaching that you gain entrance into God's kingdom based on merit or works. Such a teaching would contradict much of what we find in the New Testament, including much of Jesus' own teaching.

So what is Jesus saying when he says "work hard to get in?"

The answer, I believe, comes in the chapters prior to this, and in Jesus' words here as he continues the conversation. His answer is related closely to the fact that the door to God's kingdom will not always be open.

When the door of opportunity to the Kingdom finally closes, many will plead with Jesus to let them in. "Hey Jesus, open the door; we ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets."

But he will say, "I do not know you."

And herein lies the answer as to what Jesus means when he says, "work hard to enter the kingdom." Jesus is not saying that you get access to God by your works. He's saying what he's been saying since chapter nine. He's saying that true religion is not about legalistically following rules, but involves a relationship with God that demands complete trust and obedience.

In other words, the kingdom of God is not for those with just a superficial interest. These people to whom Jesus speaks are not going to get into the kingdom just because Jesus came through their town one day and preached to them and taught them. They're not going to make it in just because their brother was present one day when Jesus fed a huge crowd on a hillside. Access into the kingdom of God is through a narrow opening, and you don't just "fall into" something like that by accident. *You must choose. You must decide. You must want it.*

The door to the kingdom of God is narrow in the sense that you cannot become a disciple of Jesus by being a casual onlooker. You cannot stand at the fence and peek through the little slivers of light between the boards. You've got to

step through the gate. Casual onlookers don't have much interest in going to Jerusalem.

Second, Jesus says that the door to the kingdom will not remain open indefinitely. We're on a journey, and every journey has a destination. God is up to something. God is working on a plan. God is in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.

When I was young, I remember traveling to Hastings, NE, from our little farm town of Superior. Hastings had the MALL, and lots of other wonderful stores not available to us in our little town.

In the days before Walmart there was K-Mart. I remember being in K-Mart and hearing a lady's voice over the loudspeaker: "Attention, K-Mart shoppers, may we direct your attention to the men's department, where our blue light special is now running. Save 50% on all men's casual slacks and dress shirts. Hurry, though, this offer is only for the next 15 minutes. After that, our blue light special ends."

God's great history is moving toward its goal, toward the fulfillment of all things in Jesus. God has opened the window of opportunity for all people. But the window will not remain open forever.

Finally, says Jesus, we may be shocked and surprised at who enters the door of the kingdom.

The reference in verse 30 ("some who are despised now will be greatly honored then") is clearly a reference here to the Gentiles. Those who are considered outsiders. Those with no chance to get in on what God is doing in the world, at least that's what many listening to Jesus here would have thought.

I overheard an interesting conversation several weeks ago. A gentleman was having a conversation with a person nearby, and I could hear the conversation even as I was listening to someone who was speaking to me. I heard the gentleman describing someone he knew. He said: "this person is part of such and such a church, but has no relationship with Jesus." The conversation continued, where it became clear that a person's spiritual destiny revolved around what "label" that person wears, and the group to which one belongs.

In that moment I saw myself clearly. The Spirit reminded me of my own capacity to judge others, and my hidden desire to be in control of who may or may not enter through the door to the kingdom.

But the truth is that I am not God's gatekeeper. Neither are you. And the fact of the matter is that when God finally does close the door and lock the house, I may be greatly surprised to find out who is on the inside looking out, and who is on the outside looking in!

So, says Jesus: The door to the kingdom is narrow. It will not remain open forever. And you might be surprised to know who goes in and out.

As we come to the Lord's table this morning, the Good News afforded to all of us is that these words of Jesus provide us an opportunity for reflection. They allow us a chance to decide once again that our relationship with Jesus is important to us, that we desire to be more than casual onlookers peeking through the fence and wondering what everyone on the other side is doing.

We get the opportunity to see again this morning that time as we know it is moving toward a goal, toward its end. Our time here matters. Our life on this earth is not a dress rehearsal. Our journey with Jesus will take us to Jerusalem.

But the bread and wine this morning remind us that while the door may be narrow, it is easily accessible. Not because of what we have done, but because of what Jesus has done.

So come with faith to his table. Reach out to him and receive the grace he offers. Choose again this day to place your hand in his, and to walk with him to Jerusalem. For that is the path that will lead you home.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.