

August 26, 2007

Thirteen Sunday after Pentecost

“Strive”

Luke 13:22-30

*He went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem. And someone said to him, "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" And he said to them, "Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, open to us,' then he will answer you, 'I do not know where you come from.' Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.' But he will say, 'I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil!' In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God but you yourselves cast out. And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God. And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last."*

Sermon

Football season has arrived. Well, almost. We're in the preseason and the games don't really count. We root for our favorite team, but if they don't do well we don't despair. Even Kansas City Chiefs fans know things will be different when the season begins, or at least they hope so after the spanking the Saints gave them Thursday. The coaches aren't playing their first-string players for much of the game. It's possible the first-stringers aren't always giving their full effort. I mean, why should a receiver lay himself out to catch a pass knowing the defender is going to level him in a game that doesn't mean anything? For Sean Payton and his coaching staff, the preseason is a time of examination of prospects and speculation about which athletes will best fit the needs of the team. They are asking themselves a lot of theoretical questions and making decisions about what they think the future season will be like. They're concerned with the planning, conjecture and overall strategy, not anything personal.

But despite it being preseason, there is an intense competition taking place on the football field. Some players are playing with every bit of intensity they can muster—maybe with more intensity than they've ever played in their life. They are willing to lay themselves out for a pass and take the most devastating hits—in fact they're looking for a chance to do just that. They're looking for a chance to perform. They're striving to show what kind of player they are. They're struggling to be the best they can be. They're desperately trying to make the team. They know that not everybody playing in this game will be there when the season starts. Many dream of playing in the NFL. Few ever make it. This is a personal battle for each of them. These guys are fighting with everything they've got to make the cut.

In today's Gospel lesson Jesus is traveling along toward Jerusalem. We know from chapter nine that the day of His crucifixion is drawing near and He has set His face toward Jerusalem for this task. We're not told who asks this question, but I'm pretty sure it wasn't one of the disciples. Given Jesus answer, I'm betting it was a Jewish man who asks, "*Lord, will those who are saved be few?*"

This is a coach's question. It's not personal. It's a speculative question looking off in the distance to the future. It's theoretical, looking at the possibilities that are out there so that one might be able to develop a strategy for gaining a goal. Jesus doesn't let the question stand that way. He makes it personal. He makes it not a generality about all people, but makes it each individual's personal struggle.

"*Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.*" Jesus uses an imperative, "strive!" The Greek word "*angohnidsomai*" means to fight, to struggle, to engage in a contest, to exert oneself. Jesus makes it very clear that those seeking to be saved can't do so lackadaisically. Entrance to the kingdom isn't something one can take for granted. Jesus warns that

the way into the kingdom isn't easy and wide. It's a narrow and difficult entrance, and many are going to miss it.

What Jesus says next makes me think the guy asking may have been a Jew who was pretty confident that he would be saved simply by virtue of his race. As a Jew, he may have thought he had a right to the kingdom because he was of God's "chosen people." Such thinking is at odds with reality.

*"When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, open to us,' then he will answer you, 'I do not know where you come from.' Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.' But he will say, 'I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil!' In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God but you yourselves cast out."*

Simply being a creature created by God, simply going through the motions of temple worship as many in Israel did, simply being somewhere in the proximity of Jesus; none of this guarantees admittance to the kingdom. Many "good Jews" who took for granted that they were approved of by God and didn't live it out in their lives were in for a rude awakening. Jesus paints a scary picture of a bunch of people who thought they were "in," but realize too late that they aren't. They were kind of like a football player at training camp who was the star player in high school, the star player in college and figures he's so good that he's going to breeze onto the pro team. So he doesn't give it his all. He doesn't listen to the coaches. He doesn't strive to be on the team. He figures he's made it to training camp and already has the right to be on the team and can sit back and wait for his reward. When his name appears on the cut list, it's too late to change things. He's out. That's it.

One doesn't get into the kingdom of heaven because one deserves it. God, the master of the house, lets you in. Those who think they have an "in" will be found lacking at the judgment. The door will be closed and they will be standing outside the kingdom in agony, finally realizing that they didn't merit a seat at the table.

The Jews thought they had the "in." But when the kingdom of God came near, they rejected it. They rejected Him. They trusted in their good works and keeping of the law to merit God's grace and they trusted that they were "God's chosen race." When Jesus came preaching repentance and belief in God's plan of salvation, they rejected Him because they thought they new better. Then the message went out to those the Jews thought were lesser people, the unclean Gentiles. Those who repented and believed, those who strove after God in faith, received the kingdom. *"And people will come from the east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God. And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last."*

Strive after the kingdom. Struggle to follow He who embodies the kingdom. Christ died and rose again to pay for all sin so that those who believe and are baptized will be saved. But the door is still narrow and difficult. If you find yourself rationalizing sin with thoughts like, "Oh well, I'm baptized and Jesus will forgive me," you have reason to worry. You're dabbling with following the ways of the world but depending on your "in" with God to save you. If you trust in the fact that you regularly attend worship and volunteer at church functions to mean that you're a generally good person and warrant acceptance to the kingdom of God, you may be in for a shock come eternity. If you look down on the "less desirable elements" in society and think of yourself as a cut above, think again. A man steeped in sin but striving after Christ in repentance may find the door open while the "good" man who thinks he has nothing to repent of finds it closed.

Christ is God made man who embodies all that we need be to access God's kingdom. Christ is God made man who sacrificed Himself, suffered and died to pay for you and I constantly rebelling against God and yielding to sinful temptations. Christ is God made man that rose again on Easter morning to defeat the death that seeks to cling to you and I every day. Christ is God made man which every evil thing in this world tries to overshadow and entice us away.

That's the striving. That's the struggle. That's the fight. That's the narrow door—to continue looking to Christ as our salvation, despite all of the things with which the world tries to distract us. The wide door world says that if we do enough good things or are a “generally good person” that we should be OK, our little foibles and sins shouldn't be a problem. Striving after Christ in the narrow door makes every sin stand out and drives us to repent and receive the free forgiveness Christ offers. The wide door world says if we obey the law and treat our neighbor fairly, then we're a pretty righteous person. Striving after Christ in the narrow door is to realize we have no righteousness of our own, but totally depend on the righteousness which Christ gives to us of Himself. The wide door world twists Bible phrases like “God is love” to their own ends and ignores hard truths of Scripture so that a person can be comfortable in their sins because a loving God wouldn't send people to hell. Striving after Christ in the narrow door is to seek Him in Scripture and look for the truths, even the hard ones, that are in the Bible.

Striving after Christ is realizing the awesome truth of what He has done for you in buying you back from sin and giving you His kingdom; eternal life at God's side. The narrow door is having Christ's Holy Spirit dwell in you and genuinely desiring to do His will out of love and appreciation for His sacrifice on your behalf. Struggling after Christ is seeking to do His will even when the wide-door world derides and ridicules you as a fool for doing so. The narrow door is not accommodating sin, but lamenting it in sorrow and continually running to Christ for forgiveness. Striving after Christ is to engage in a contest with the desires of your sinful self, knowing all the while that it is only through Christ that you are already victorious. Unlike training camp, everybody who struggles and strives after Christ makes the cut, because Christ enables them to do so.

Strive with all you've got to follow Christ. Struggle to belong to Him alone. Make this battle personal. The prince of this fallen world and even the inclinations of your own flesh are working against you. But Christ stands at the narrow door. He has defeated your foes. Sin and death are powerless before Him. Struggle to follow Him and through Him you have already prevailed.