

Doors

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Our Savior's Way Lutheran Church Pastor David Labuhn

This morning the subject is doors. Have you ever thought about the number of doors you pass through in a day? Do you know how many doors are in your house? I thought about that and didn't know, so I counted the number of doors in my house. I found a lot of doors in my house. There were five in the basement, nine on the ground floor, and nine on the second floor. Then, I looked in the kitchen again and there were 34 cupboard and cabinet doors. Additionally, there are two doors on the refrigerator, two on the oven and one on the dishwasher. And, we have two garage doors. I found 64 doors in my quick look around my house. Doors are made of a variety of materials: wood, metal, plastic, glass, paper, and even fabric. There are interior and exterior doors; animal and people doors, automatic and manual doors, plus real and false doors. Doors come in a variety of forms: single, double, sliding, folding, with glass in them and without, with locks and without.

How many doors do you pass through already today? You had to pass through at least one door to leave your home, one door to enter the vehicle that brought you here. You came through a door entering the narthex and another entering the sanctuary.

All doors usually serve the purpose of keeping something in or keeping something out. Today, in the Gospel reading, Jesus tells about a door that does both.

The event that we read about today is during the last days of Jesus' ministry. He was on his way to Jerusalem – on his way to a cross where he would die for the sins of the world. As He traveled towards Jerusalem, he stopped off at many places along the way. As He went, He performed miracles and taught the people about the Kingdom of God. He cleared up confusion about spiritual things. He answered their questions. He spoke the truth, (hard as it was at times) and he spoke it in love.

In our text today, someone asked Jesus a question that Jewish teachers were often asked, "How many people are going to be saved?" Do you ever wonder about that question? Who will be saved? When people die, OR when this world comes to an end, how many will make it into heaven? How many will end up in hell? And on what basis?

People ask pastors that question all the time. "Pastor, what about people who did the best they could? What about people who never heard the gospel, like in Borneo or Papua New Guinea? Will they get in? People want to decide in their minds if God is being fair. They want to put God on trial. And often, if they don't like the answers to their questions, then they feel they can reject the message, reject the Bible, reject the church. This is their way of keeping the message of repentance and faith at arm's length, so as to not let it get too close to home.

So someone asked Jesus the question: Was it true that only a few people were going to be saved? In Jesus day, Bible scholars tell us the word "save" could have a variety of meanings. 1.) It meant to be preserved from peril; 2.) It meant to be kept alive, protected from want; 3.) It could mean a state of good health; but most importantly, the

word “saved” meant 4) that a person’s “inner being” was preserved from the danger posed by sin. Although Jesus answered the question somewhat obliquely, He taught that only those who entered into the Kingdom of God would be “saved.” In other words, a person who did not sin would be saved. So His answer to the question would only a few be saved was “yes” only a few would be saved. Jesus used the metaphor of a door as the means to enter heaven. When Jesus first described the “door,” the door was open. It was unlocked. People could go through the door. Later, Jesus said the door would be closed. He also said the door to heaven was narrow and not easy to get through. Jesus suggests two reasons that the door is not easy to enter.

Jesus used the word, “narrow” to describe the door. A wide door can accommodate a lot of people. A narrow door can only let in one person at a time. Jesus then challenged his listeners, you and me included, to “strive” to enter through this narrow door. St. Luke used the Greek word “agonizomai.” That Greek word is the root for our English word “agonize.” “Agonizomai” means to strive, to struggle, to exert enormous effort. It’s the word Greeks used to describe athletic contests, like a wrestling match. The wrestlers would “agonizomai” to win the contest and prevail to the end.

St. Paul used the same word several times to describe how an athlete has to exert himself in training and competition for an athletic event, to describe to describe godly living, and also, to describe the intense struggle of military combat. Jesus is describing this same self-discipline and struggle used by athletes or soldiers to prepare for

competition or combat when He says, “Strive,” agonize, “to enter through the narrow door.”

Jesus uses the metaphor of a door throughout the New Testament to describe the entrance to the Kingdom of God. In John 10: 9, Jesus said, “I am the door. If anyone enter by me, he will be saved...” In Matthew 7:13-14, Jesus contrasts the narrow door to the wide door. He said, “Enter by the narrow gate (door). For the wide gate is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life and those who find it are few.”

Jesus tells us he is the door, it is narrow and it requires struggle to enter through it. Like physical conditioning, spiritual conditioning requires discipline, and many people are unwilling to pay the price.

Each of us feels that agonizing aspect of the Christian life. It's not easy. Added to that, there are forces pulling against us, trying to keep us from entering through the narrow door. First among them is the devil who entices us with the wide gate. The gate that is easy and so tempting because it is so easy. The discipline of faith and commitment to the ways of Jesus by comparison are hard. We live in a time when many people believe that all roads lead to God—that all beliefs are equally valid that it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are sincere. Jesus teaches the exact opposite. And, for us, the devil doesn't need to convince us to commit murder or some other heinous crime as long as he can persuade us that our beliefs don't matter—or that there is no urgency to the spiritual life. Once convinced, we will find ourselves on the path to the wide door.

Not only that, but the devil has allies. The world offers us its ease and extravagance to cause us to get out of shape in our spiritual life. Just as we cannot eat super-sized portions at the local fast food establishment and expect to fit into last year's clothing, we cannot expect to be spiritually undisciplined and fit through the narrow door. The world does not build faith. It draws us away from faith.

Finally, in this wrestling match, in which we must strive and struggle to pass through the narrow door, we have our own sinful flesh which entices us to take it easy and relax regarding our spiritual life and faith. Our sinful flesh tells us, we can ignore the need to be spiritually strong and lithe. It can wait another day or another month or another year. Relax. We'll get around to it sooner or later. We'll get around to reading the Bible regularly. We'll attend a Bible study the next time one is offered. We'll pray at the table today, but we'll pray more next week. Maybe we'll practice forgiveness sometime this year. If we see an opportunity, we'll get around to sharing the Gospel with someone.

But, that brings us to the next point that Jesus makes. God has set a time clock for His grace for all each us. The clock is ticking away for each of us like that stop watch on "Sixty Minutes." Tick, tick, tick, tick. And we don't know the day or the hour when it will stop and God will say time is up. At that time, the clock has expired and so have you. At that time, the door will be shut.

It is the same for the whole world. God has set his stop watch for the end of His creation. No one knows the day or the hour of that event either. The period of grace for all humans, some of whom are close to us as friends and relatives, is time limited too. And, when the timer stops,

the time of grace has expired and the door is shut. Whoever has passed through the door is in, whoever has not is out. Forever.

The struggle goes on, during this time of grace.

Our striving continues against the lure of the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh. Each of these are doing their best to keep us from getting to the door and eventually passing through it. The devil assaults us and assails us. He tries to lure us to take the wide and glamorous Door #1 or Door #2, or Door #3, with the temptation that we will be BIG WINNERS. He tries to charm us into rejecting the Jesus and the narrow door. He whispers in our ears that he will trade what we have in Jesus for anything and everything we need behind his doors. He tries to convince us that the narrow door is just like God. He is narrow and tight. The devil says, "Look how hard you are struggling in this world. God doesn't love you. Look at what's happening to you! Give up. I can give you everything you want and need."

It is like that game show, "Let's Make a Deal." The host tries to persuade the contestant to give up a valuable prize by offering them a chance behind a door for something more valuable. Money, cars, power, jewels, travel, or whatever else is a worldly prize. Problem is there is often a "booby" prize behind a door. A prize that isn't really a prize at all but some ridicules, worthless object that is useless and makes the winner a loser for selecting that door. (In fact, all of those worldly things are worthless in leading to the Kingdom of God.) And, isn't that just like the devil (the host of the program), the world (all those "prizes" of this world) and the contestants (each of us and our sinful flesh)?

We are enticed to take the easy way and shun the narrow door. To give up the valuable faith and trust in Jesus for some worldly thing of little or no spiritual value.

We have a great example of this in the Old Testament. Noah was called by God to build an outrageously massive ship in the middle of the dry land. He had to struggle physically to build that ship. He had to struggle each day and strive to continue his hard work in faith and obedience to the Word of God. At the same time, all around him people had chosen corruption and violence, the easy way. No doubt, his obedience to God brought him criticism and mockery. It was a struggle for Noah and probably for his family to strive forward. I can image that many people simply ignored “crazy Noah” and that monster ship. They ignored God as well. They were like a lot of the people of our day. They chose the easy doors. But then, the stopwatch stopped ticking. The door to the ark of salvation was closed. People started to see water collect around their ankles. They suddenly realized to their terror that they needed to be inside the ark, but it was too late. The door was closed. They had allowed the devil, their world, and their sinful flesh to lead them astray and ignore that door that could have been their salvation. We can see them pounding on the door in terror, but God has shut the door. They cannot get in. Their fate is sealed. They watched in terror as the water rose. The ark of salvation rose in the water and remained buoyant. They floated in the water helpless and drown in the ever-deepening waters that swept them away to oblivion.

Jesus paints a similar picture for us. The door is open now. The timer is ticking now. Like physical conditioning, spiritual conditioning requires discipline, and many people

are unwilling to pay the price. But the end is coming. We can be like Noah and struggle in obedience and faith passing through the narrow door to salvation. Or we can enjoy the allure of the devil, this world and our sinful selves and be left standing at a door that is about to be closed and sealed for eternity.

Now, if this picture is not enough, Jesus adds another more terrifying dimension to his parable. After the door is closed, there is a great banquet inside. Jesus tells how some outside will come knocking on the door pleading with the owner to let them in. It may have been like that with the people of Noah's day who tried to get into the ark. In Jesus story, the owner of the house, says, "I don't know you." Who would let a complete stranger into your house for a sumptuous banquet? A banquet has been prepared for the family of the owner not for uninvited guests especially if they are total strangers. The door is shut and the owner doesn't recognize these "party crashers." They plead with him saying, "We spent time with you and we saw you teaching among us." The owner doesn't accept this casual awareness. They claim they know the owner of the house, Jesus. "Jesus, let us in." Jesus says, "I don't know you." He rejects their sudden, artificial claim of close relationship.

The verb "to know" has a special meaning here. It means more than "knowing about" someone. I may know a lot about someone like the Mayor of Leesburg but that doesn't mean I have a close relationship with them. I may know about them and even recognize them, but I don't know him in the Biblical sense of the word – in other words, I don't have a relationship with them.

In the Bible, the verb “to know” implies a relationship between people – a closeness, a mutuality. So when the owner of the house – that is, when Jesus – says that he doesn’t know the people knocking on his door, it means that he doesn’t have a relationship with them. It means that those knocking at his door aren’t connected to him in any way. They know who he is, but they don’t have faith in who is to them and what He did for them. In the Scriptural sense they are not “saved.”

What is even harder to head in Jesus’ parable is His description what happens to those who are not allowed into the banquet through that narrow door. For those who are begging to be admitted, once they see what this banquet, they begin to weep full of the kind of sorrow expressed when someone dies. They are full of regret that they had a chance for this festive occasion but ignored the host and instead opted for a “booby prize” of this world. They see others who are there enjoying the fruits of their striving to enter the narrow door and they turn away into the night of darkness alienated and isolated from the love of God and his generous mercy.

Don’t let Jesus say to you, “I don’t know you.” The Jewish religious leaders thought they had an “in” with God because they were descendants of Abraham. They thought they were going to be saved by virtue of their religious and national “pedigree.” They thought they were going to be saved by what they did for God – that is, by their keeping of the Law. The thought that they might be excluded from his blessings never crossed their minds. That’s why Jesus’ words that day were so shocking. His words were so hard. Hard for them and hard for us.

The Jewish leaders' self-deception still exists today when we hear people say:

- “Well, this is a Christian nation, so I must be a Christian, too. I don't believe in all this talk about Jesus and the cross, but I'm sure that God will take me in.”
- Some others might say, “Well, my wife or dad or mom (or uncle or aunt or grandfather or grandmother, you can fill in the blank) was a pastor (or church worker or elder or usher or taught Sunday school or served God in some way all their life). So, I'm sure that God will have a place for me in heaven.”
- Still another might say, “Well, I'm not much of a churchgoer, but I am a good person. I'm certainly better than all those hypocrites in the church. And I know that God loves everyone. How could a loving God deny a place for me in heaven? I'm sure I'm OK with God.”

This can happen to churchgoers too. We can go through the motions but never truly know Jesus. That is because we human beings have an amazing ability to deceive ourselves – especially when it comes to matters of faith. According to Jesus, self-deception in spiritual matters has the potential to exclude people from God's Kingdom.

The most important thing is that having a relationship with Jesus in faith and obedience to His Word is the way. It comes with costs and means we have to struggle but what is more important? Working out and striving for a strong relationship in faith with Jesus or giving up and facing a closed door for being lazy and lethargic in our faith.

The Word of God is crystal clear. Entrance into the Kingdom of God is by faith, by grace, through God's Holy Word and the blessed Sacraments. We can take comfort in the fact that God doesn't want anyone to miss out on his blessings. We can take comfort in knowing that God has gone out of his way to bring salvation to everyone. He sent his Son to die on a cross as payment for all human sin. He raised his son from the dead to show that his son's sacrifice was sufficient for everyone. God sends his Holy Spirit to spark faith in every human heart. And He has established His church as the place where word and sacrament ministry takes place. However, His grace has its time limits. The stopwatch is ticking.

Our text asks a question. And Jesus gave His answer. Was it true that only a few people were going to be saved? Jesus' answer was "Yes!"

Fortunately, the answer to that question does not depend on us. How blessed we are that Jesus Christ saved humanity in all times and in all places. For as Christ's saving work extends back in time to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the prophets, it also extends forward to include all of us. Just as God's word and his sacraments spread from Jerusalem to east and west, and north and south, so also people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at that banquet table in the kingdom of God. And, some of these people will come from Virginia.

"Strive to enter through the narrow door." It is open. Jesus was opening it from the manger when He, the God of the universe was born as a frail human being. Jesus was opening it from the road as He taught about the kingdom of God. Jesus was opening it from the cross as he traded

His perfect life for the death of our sin. Jesus was opening it on that Sunday morning when He declared victory over sin, death, and the devil and rose from the dead. The door of the tomb was open, and He opened the door to Heaven and everlasting life.

“Strive to enter through the narrow door.” But you may say to me, “I cannot strive. I don’t have the strength.” And you are right. We cannot strive in our own power, but the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son will work in each of us through God’s word.

Remember all the people Jesus healed during His ministry here on earth? None of them had the strength to heal themselves, but through the power of Jesus’ word, they became whole. When Jesus said, “Rise, take up your bed, and walk.” A lame man rose, took up his bed, and walked. That man didn’t have the power to do that himself, but by his command, Jesus healed him and gave him the power to obey. When Jesus said, “Lazarus, come forth.” A dead man walked out of a tomb. We know he didn’t have the power to do that. But by the command of Jesus, he did.

Jesus is the door. Obedience to His commands and faith in what He did and what He has promised opens the door to us. There are many doors in life, but there is only one to the Kingdom of Heaven and the clock is ticking.

Thanks be to the Father who gives us the kingdom. Thanks be to Jesus who strove for us on the cross and opened the door through which we enter the kingdom. Thanks be to the Holy Spirit who enlightens and sanctifies us so we can “Strive to enter through the narrow door.” Amen.