

Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost - Proper 16, August 26, 2007, Year C

St. Bartholomew's Church in the Town of Tonawanda, N.Y

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ - Associate Rector

Scripture: Luke 13:22-30

"The Narrow Gate"

A Jewish man had a son who did not take his faith seriously, to the extent that he even refused to attend his own Bar Mitzvah. The father warned him that if his attitude did not change, he would send the boy to the Holy Land to learn to become a good Jew. And so, the father sent the son off to the Holy Land. Six months later the son returned, and to his father's dismay, the boy had become a Christian. The father was dumbfounded, so he went to share this with his best friend. His friend replied, "Funny you should mention. I too had trouble with my son. I too sent him to the Holy Land to become a good Jew, and he too came back a Christian. What DO we do?" After discussing it a while, they decided to go seek counsel from the Rabbi. They said, "Rabbi, what do we do? We both have the same problem with our sons. We both sent them to the Holy Land to become good Jews. And they both come back Christians. What do we do?" With an incredulous look, the Rabbi replied, "Funny you should mention. I too have trouble with my son. I too sent him to the Holy Land to become a good Jew, and he too came back a Christian. What DO we do?" After discussing it for a while, they decided to pray. They said, "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, what do we do? We all three have the same problem. We all three have trouble with our sons. We all three sent our sons to the Holy Land to become good Jews. And all three sons came back Christians. What DO we do?" Then lightning flashed, thunder clapped, and a booming voice said, "Funny you should mention . . ."

Today's Gospel from Luke gives us a powerful portrait of God's Only Son, Jesus – Yeshua Ha'Mashiach - telling those who ask Him point blank – who will go to heaven. He surprises many by telling them three things:

- 1. There is only One Way to heaven**
- 2. Not everyone will get there**
- 3. Do not wait too long – it may be too late!**

These are not messages that are feel good gospel – for many. These are messages that are convicting – and thought provoking, unfortunately – many often push these messages under the rug – or customize them to their liking – so that in their minds everyone gets to fit in. Jesus was quite clear in His message:

I. There is only ONE Way!

To me it is heartbreaking when I hear people say that there is more than one way to heaven – or that Jesus is A WAY – but not THE way. I do believe that the words from Proverbs 16:25 are fitting in that ***"Sometimes there is a way that seems to be right, but in the end it is the way to death."*** We are surrounded by people who believe in a whole lot of things – and many who think they believe in Jesus – only **it is a different Jesus**. The Jesus, who is God's Son – spoke plainly and with certainty that **there is only one way to the Father**. Jesus said in **John 14:6** ***"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."*** As I said in my sermon last week – in these words there is no room for interpretation or dissection – **Jesus said it – so you can believe it!** There is no wiggle room – no twisting and contorting of the meaning to fit an agenda. **Jesus is the only way to salvation!** Luke reminds us of this fact in his writing of the Book of Acts 4:12 ***"There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."*** My brothers and sisters in Christ – **Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus is God's Son, Jesus fulfills the Scriptures, Jesus died on the cross, and because of that saved humanity, Jesus rose from the dead – and Jesus is the only way to heaven -and those points are non-negotiable.** Plain and simple - **if you don't believe that – then you are not a Christian!** I don't see how you can call yourself a Christian!

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Saturday morning, my daughter, Theresa and I were having a wonderful conversation, as I drove her home from the Youth Center – after an overnight girls’ bible study about the letter to the Hebrews. We spoke about our faith and our favorite Bible verses –and she summed it all up for me, in the a verse from the Epistle to the Hebrews 13:8 which says it all – short and sweet - **“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”**

In today’s Gospel – Jesus was asked about the way to heaven and he replied *“Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able.”* (Luke 13:24) And you know that this was not the first time that Jesus spoke in these terms. In John 10:9, Jesus unmistakably laid the way for us, saying *“I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.”* **Complete and eternal rest can only be found in Him!** Jesus further explained in Matthew 7:14 saying that the way would not be an easy one: *“the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.”* **Jesus is THE WAY to heaven** – He is not one of many – or an alternative route that complies with political correctness, or the culture of the day (du jour) – which allows one to not make people feel left out. Jesus is however the target of a modern agenda – a politically correct, multicultural agenda, driven by sympathy for the marginalized; an agenda that says diversity is always good, truth is negotiable, and every opinion is equally legitimate. Truly following the Jesus of Scripture – and not a Jesus who has been sculpted by the whims and agendas of society – means that we need to do three things:

1. **Seek Him and Call on Him** - *“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”*(Romans 10:13)
2. **Submit to Him and Surrender your will to Him** - *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that **everyone who believes in him** may not perish but may have eternal life.”* (John 3:16)
3. **Share your faith in Him – Make our faith in Him public** - *“Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven.”* (Matthew 10:32) Remember – the Great Commission – Jesus’ last instructions to us before ascending to the Father - **Matthew 28:19-20** *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”*

Ty Cobb, all-time baseball great and Hall of Famer, played 3,033 straight games, and for twelve years led the American League in batting averages. For four years, he batted over 400. **He was, possibly, the meanest and most unlikable man ever to play the game.** He went so far as to sharpen his spikes so that when he slid into a base – he would leave his mark on the opponent – drawing blood, or worse getting them out of the game. On his deathbed, July 17, 1961, he accepted Jesus Christ as his Savior. He said, "You tell the boys I'm sorry it was the last part of the ninth that I came to know Christ. I wish it had taken place in the first half of the first." What awesome hope – remember the parable of the workers in the vineyard – it didn’t matter if you began at the end of the day – the eleventh hour, or you began at 9 AM – the reward was the same. That’s good news, knowing Jesus Christ means salvation. But... and here’s Jesus’ second point -

II. Not Everyone Will Go To Heaven:

Not everyone that WANTS to go to heaven - WILL – it has to be on God’s terms – and not ours! The evidence is overwhelming:

Luke 13:3 Jesus said *“No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish”* There’s that word again that makes so many people uncomfortable – repent!

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Matthew 18:3 Jesus told His disciples: *“Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”* Another uncomfortable word for some people – change! “Well, I don’t want to change!”

In **Matthew 19:23-24** Jesus once again addressed His disciples: *“Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”* Riches don’t mean the coin in your pocket – but about who and what you put first.

The Apostle John warned us about non-believers and skeptics who would try to stack the deck with false evidence against Jesus. Isn’t it true with what is all around us today? **Remember the DaVinci Code, and all of the false, Gnostic gospels that have surfaced?** In 1 John 5:10-12 John said that *“Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts. Those who do not believe in God have made him a liar by not believing in the testimony that God has given concerning his Son. And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.”* Just try watching some of the documentaries on the History channel about Christ and you will hear dozens of authorities, many of whom, in my estimation – are clueless – as to who Jesus of Nazareth really is.

A 1991 Gallup Poll showed that 78 percent of Americans expect to go to heaven.

- Many of whom never pray
- Never read the Bible
- Or hardly ever attend church

The people who answered this poll admitted that they like to please themselves rather than God. So, tell me, my brothers and sisters in Christ, how do they think they are going to heaven - Osmosis? It is the same fantasy that many have when they claim that have “lived a good life” – but, without Jesus in their life – the Jesus of Scripture, and not some new and improved invention of interpretation either, - I am afraid that once again the evidence is overwhelming. People think they are going to heaven – but have not admitted that they are sinners. They either don’t believe that there is such a thing as sin – or they don’t believe in the consequences of their actions. **Romans 6:23 is so clear:** Everyone who has attended a Confirmation class in this parish has learned to memorize this important verse. *“The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* I am afraid that unless one admits that they are a sinner, turning away from that sin in repentance, oh, there’s that word again, and trusting in Jesus alone for salvation - then the wages of that sin is indeed eternal death – without Jesus; without God. You see:

- Sin is high treason against a Holy God;
- Sin is a clenched fist in God’s face;
- Sin is a closed heart.
- Is that how you feel about God?
- Is that how you want God to see you?

It is difficult to think that there might be someone in your family, someone you work with, maybe even someone you are sitting next to - that might be just going through the motions – saying that they believe, but are living a life that says just the opposite. Today is the day, and now is the time for each one of us to pray that their eyes and hearts would be opened, that they would freely give themselves in submission to our Lord Jesus Christ; *“To the pure all things are pure, but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure. Their very minds and consciences are corrupted. They profess to know God, but they deny him by their actions.”*(Titus 1:15-16)

Jesus' third point is:

III. Do not wait too long – it may be too late!

Going to church is not enough; being sincere is not enough; being a good person is not enough; being religious is not enough! **Following is not submitting.** Look at Jesus' words from today's Gospel **Luke 13:25-27** "*When once the owner of the house has got up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, open to us,' then in reply he will say to you, 'I do not know where you come from.' Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.' But he will say, 'I do not know where you come from; go away from me, all you evildoers!'*" Here were people who had been following Jesus, ate with Him, listened to Him, but may not have really heard what He said – or it had no impact on them. Another reason might have been that it was just the popular thing to do – to follow the one who claimed to be the Messiah – and they thought they would be covered by association. Sadly, I believe we find that attitude in many churches and youth groups today!

Jesus told us that a lackadaisical attitude would never cut it – that we need to be alert and be ready. In His parable of Ten Bridesmaids Jesus told of these women – they were unprepared – they wanted to borrow oil from others – they didn't take it seriously - and they had to leave to buy oil for their lamps. When the bridegroom arrived – they were not there – and when they came later to the banquet the door was closed. They begged to get in – but they were told "*Truly, I tell you, I do not know you.*" (Matthew 25:12) Sound familiar?

My brothers and sisters in Christ – if you have not fully committed your life to Jesus Christ – and have not accepted Him as Lord of your life – and you want a truly remarkable relationship with Him – for all eternity – **make today the day – and now the hour** – that you repent of your sins – turn away from them forever and turn to Jesus Christ as Lord of your life - before the door is closed. "*But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.*" (Mark 13:32-33)

Jesus is holding open the gate of the Kingdom of God – and urging people to enter. The door isn't very wide – and it will take commitment to get in. One day – and not very long from now – that door will shut and then, it will be too late.

Keep in mind that to truly know Jesus Christ – and to enter through the narrow gate – you must:

- 1) Seek Him – Call on Him** – as Lord –today and every day for the rest of your life.
- 2) Submit to Him – Surrender your will to Him** – stop living for your pleasure – and begin living for Him. I can promise you that making Jesus first in your life – you will not be the same person. The transforming love of Jesus Christ cleans you up to be the person He wants you to be.
- 3) Share your faith in Him – Make your faith in Him public** – He is life – and we need to plant the seeds by telling others about our best friend and Savior. We cannot save people – we can only introduce them to Him – the Holy Spirit does the rest. In grateful obedience – if you know Him – you will follow Him and want to share the best thing to happen to your life with others.

Jesus, the narrow gate – is the entrance to the pasture of the Good Shepherd – and it is my prayer that the words of Psalm 95:7 lift your hearts and lead you today: "*For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. O that today you would listen to his voice!*"