

ST. BARTHOLOMEW’S CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY

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Scripture: Luke 13:22-30

“Will Only a Few Be Saved?”

A VITALLY IMPORTANT QUESTION

“*Lord, will only a few be saved?*” so asks someone of Jesus. It’s an interesting question. In other words, how many will be saved? Will it be a big number or a small number? I think we’ve all thought about that at one time or another. Who’s in? Whose out? What will happen when we die?

Of course, we can’t forget from what we need to be saved. What’s the assumption here? Eternal death and judgment. The Bible says, “*it is appointed for men to die once and then comes judgment.*” (Heb. 9:27). The person who asked Jesus knew this and he or she wants know how many would escape such a fate.

JESUS’ ANSWER

Now Jesus answers the question. But He doesn’t answer the question with a yes or no answer. Jesus doesn’t say “Yes, only a few will be saved,” or “No, many will be saved.” Rather, Jesus says something else. And notice he directs to all those present. What does it say in our Gospel reading? “And He said to *them*, “**Strive to enter by the narrow door...**”

In other words, “*You strive!*” Don’t worry about other people whether they are lost or saved. But you strive. The Greek word here that is translated “strive” is *agonizesthe* and means “*to make every effort.*” It was often used in regards to an athlete or a soldier. In other words, “give it all you got!” Make it your number one priority to enter by the narrow door. And also notice that Jesus is talking about a certain kind of door – a *narrow* door. If I approach a building and see that the door to get in is wide, I don’t have to pay much attention to get in. However, if the door is narrow, I need to stay focused on that door or else I won’t get through.

THE NARROW DOOR

Now who is the narrow door? *Jesus*. It is only through Jesus that we can enter the Kingdom of God. Recall the first words of Jesus as He began His ministry: “***Repent, for the Kingdom of God is near.***” But how do we know that Jesus is the door? He said so in another context. **Jn. 10:9 “I am the door, (literally the sheep gate); if anyone enters through Me, he shall be saved...”** We all know that a door is a way of entrance. In **Jn. 14:6**, Jesus said, “***I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life no one comes to the Father but by Me.***” In fact, early Christians were known as followers of the Way (Acts 9:2).

I find it sad, indeed scandalous that in this age of political correctness and inclusive tolerance, there are many in the Church of Jesus Christ who no longer believe that Jesus is the only way of salvation. We all probably have heard how our Presiding Bishop Katherine Jefferts Schori stated in an interview with Time magazine this past summer, that she does not believe that Jesus is the only way to heaven. She even said it is simply the way for Christians. Our Episcopal bishop here in Western New York, Michael Garrison, has stated similar views when he said that he wouldn’t want to limit God by saying Jesus was the only way. Limit God?

God is the One who said it, that is if we truly believe Jesus is God. You see the problem with not believing that Jesus is the way into the Kingdom of God is twofold. First, it says that what Jesus did on

the cross is not good enough. That His dying, everything He went through is not sufficient. In essence, it is making a mockery of God’s grace, of His gift to us, if there’s another way. Second, it makes Jesus out to be a liar. Jesus was the One who said, **“I am the way and the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father but through Me.”** Ah, but maybe Jesus didn’t say those words, as so many priests contend. But if we accept that reasoning, then you can’t trust anything Jesus said, can you? And then you can go ahead and pick and choose what you want to believe and then you can create your own religion as so many are doing and have done throughout the ages.

You see Jesus is not a liar. Jesus tells the truth. And Jesus affirmed over and over again that He came to seek and save the lost. He came to give living water to the thirsty, to heal the sick, to forgive the sinner who repents. He came to give us abundant life and life everlasting. Who else has said said? **“Come to Me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give rest for your souls.” (Mt. 11:28)** How can a prophet give me rest if he’s dead? Who has ever had the audacity to claim, **“I am the resurrection and the life, whoever believes in Me will live even though he die.” (Jn. 11:25)** Only Jesus. And yet people are so quick to leave Jesus out of the equation.

LEAVING OUT THE SAVIOR

We probably all remember death of Princess Diana back in 1997. It was one of those tragedies that you remember what you were doing when you heard the news. And I’m sure many of us can recall the elaborate funeral that was given in her honor at Westminster Abbey. Elton John singing his song, the choir, the then Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey giving the homily, but what you may have missed was what happened during one of the readings from Scripture. The second reading was taken from **Romans 8:31-39**. It was read by Prime Minister Tony Blair. It is a great passage. I was listening and agreeing in my heart as the Prime Minister read, but then he stopped. He didn’t finish the appointed reading! He read, **“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thin, shall be able to separate us from the love of God.”** He left out the most important part - **“which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”** I knew why. We wouldn’t want to offend anybody would we? And yet Jesus said, **“Any one who denies Me before men shall be denied before the angels of God.” (Lk. 11:9).**

Now I want us to fast forward to this past fall to the funeral for President Gerald Ford. As many of you know, President Ford was a practicing Episcopalian. The Gospel reading chosen for the service was **Jn. 14:1-6**. But the priest did the same thing Prime Minister Tony Blair did 10 years ago, He left out some very important words. When he quoted Jesus’ statement, **“I am the way, and the truth and the life.”** He stopped! He didn’t finish with, **“no one comes to the Father except through Me.”** Again, leaving out the very Word of God that testifies to Jesus Christ, but it wasn’t just a layman, this time, but a priest!

Now look at the our Gospel lesson appointed for today (on back of bulletin). Notice the brackets around the first part of the lesson. Do you know why they are there? Our Episcopal Church has put them there to let us know that we don’t have to include them in our reading this morning. We can skip **Luke 13:22-30** and instead just read **Luke 13:31-35**. And do you know why? Because such words might upset some people. Well, better to upset someone so they see that they need help, then to say nothing because you don’t want to hurt their feelings. Could you imagine going to your doctor and when he finds that there’s something wrong with you, he doesn’t tell you because he doesn’t want to hurt your feelings? Would you want a doctor like that?

But the Church doesn't want to offend. How sad? Jesus told us *“the world would hate him because He testifies that its works are evil.”* (Jn. 7:7) Jesus said, *“If the world hates you, know that it hated Me before it hated you.”* (Jn. 15:18) And yet, the very Church of Jesus Christ shrinks back from this responsibility of proclaiming the truth that Jesus is the only way of salvation. And the Episcopal Church thinks it will escape God's judgment?

A DIRE WARNING

Jesus warns the people then, just as He warns us today, indeed all who would hear and listen. *“For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.”* Why? Because they were trying to get in by some other way. You cannot get into the Kingdom of God by some other way. And wouldn't that be disingenuous of our Lord to have some other way to get in and not tell us?

Jesus said in Mt. 7:13-14: *“Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide, and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it.”* Do you know what Jesus then says in the next verse (v. 15)? *“Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits.”*

It is not by some religion, it is not by some philosophy, it is not by some secret ritual, it is not by a certain amount of good works, but it is by going through the door provided by God Himself. It is through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. When Jesus calls on us to “strive” to enter the narrow door, He doesn't mean that we need to work our way into His Kingdom. Rather, He wants us to make knowing Him our number one priority in life. Jesus is calling on us to make sure that we are right with the Lord and that we are living up to the gift God has given us.

The truth is there's coming a time when it will be too late to choose. Jesus said, *“Once the head of the house gets up and shuts the door, and you being to stand outside and knock on the door saying, “Lord open to us! Then He will answer and say to you, “I do not know where you are from.”* (Luke 13:25).

And in the context of this passage Jesus is first talking about Jews who saw Jesus face to face yet rejected Him. Note the words, *“Then you will begin to say, “We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets,” and He will say, “I tell you, I do not know where you are from; depart from Me, all you evildoers.” There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth there when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves being cast out.”* (Luke 13:26-28). You see devout Jews expected that they would sit at table with the patriarchs and they would partake in the great heavenly banquet with the Messiah at the end of the age. The Gentiles would be the ones on the outside.

IT'S ALL ABOUT FAITH IN JESUS

But Jesus corrects this faulty assumption. It's not about being a Jew. It's about faith in Jesus Christ. Whether you are a Jew or a Gentile if you reject Christ, you are rejecting the way of salvation God has provided for all people.

But what of those who do enter by the narrow door? Jesus says, *“And they will come from east and west, and from north and south, and will recline at the table in the Kingdom of God.”*

Jesus first came to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. But then He came for all people. For although the Jews were the first to receive the blessings of God, for the most part they rejected the Lord. But now all people can receive the same blessing through Jesus Christ; the Gentiles, too! That’s why Jesus says, “***Some are last*** (the Gentiles) ***who will be first and some are first*** (the Jews) ***who will be last.***” (Luke 13:29). So it’s no longer about following the Law of Moses, it’s about faith in the one who gave the Law to Moses, Jesus Christ.

Can many be saved? Yes, many can be saved, if they put their faith in Jesus Christ. What about the people who have never heard? God knows their hearts. It is not up to us to judge. But they will only be allowed into the Kingdom because of Jesus Christ. He is the only means of salvation for this world of ours. And we, as God’s people, as followers of Jesus Christ, are commanded to uncompromisingly tell the whole world that truth: the truth about sin, the truth about grace, the truth about judgment and salvation - until Christ returns. So my brothers and sisters, may we never shrink back from this responsibility but may we always keep Jesus first in our lives. Jesus said, “***Strive to enter by the narrow door.***”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!