

In our Gospel today Jerusalem, is Jesus' objective as he moves through the towns and villages of the Judean hills. But on the way, there is a question: "Someone asked him, 'Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?' " (13:23) We hear the same question debated in our own day. Some groups are so narrow that they actually think that other Christian denominations won't get to heaven. Others see God's love as so forgiving that they can't imagine how anyone can be ultimately be lost. For them, hell isn't possible.

A Vicar and a minister stood near a sharp curve on a busy road holding signs. "The end is near!" read the priest's sign, while the minister's warned, "Turn around before it's too late!" As he passed by, a jerk in a sports car yelled "Idiots!" and shook his head. Then he blasted his horn, raised one finger and stomped on the accelerator. Moments later the clerics heard the sound of screeching tyres, followed by a big splash. The Vicar turned to the minister and said, "Maybe we should change our signs to 'Bridge Out'."

Actually, none of us really knows the answer to the question, "How many?" or "How few?" The best we can do on our own is theological speculation. But we'll learn the gist if we listen in on Jesus' response. Jesus does give us an authoritative answer, though it's not a direct one. Instead of answering Yes or No, characteristically he tells a story.

"He said to them, 'Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, "Sir, open the door for us." (13:24-25a)

The Parable of the Narrow Door seems to involve a homeowner holding a banquet (if we can include elements in the parable from verse 28). There is a narrow door at which guests are supposed to enter, but the time comes - perhaps when the banquet is ready to begin - that the host gets up and ultimately closes the door. Eventually, there is knocking and pleading from outside the door from would-be attenders who arrived late. But the host simply says, "I don't know you. Get away..." It's not quite that simple, since the parable proper only seems to extend from verses 24 to 25; then it merges into a prophetic portrayal of the heavenly banquet. Let's look at some of the elements.

Jesus tells the questioners, "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door..." (13:24). The phrase "strive" (NRSV) is Greek *agonizomai*, which originally meant "engage in an athletic contest" and then "to fight, struggle." The word is used of wrestling in prayer (Colossians 4:12), and "fighting the good fight" (1 Timothy 6:12; 2 Timothy 4:7). This is no casual entry, whenever we're ready. We HAVE to be on time! That's the sense here. We must run whatever stop signs necessary and break the road rules, if need be, but we CANNOT fail to get to this appointment in time. It is urgent! It is pressing! It is critical!

The goal is the door, Greek *thura*, 'door,' a passage for entering a structure, entrance, doorway or gate. In this case it is probably the door to a house or courtyard that is in mind. There's no indication that the latecomers can see the host, but are probably talking through a solid door.

The next third word I want to examine is translated "narrow" (NRSV) The Greek *stenos*, in reference to dimension, 'narrow.' In Greek literature it is used of gates, doors, prison cells, and pathways. A related verb, *stenochoreo*, means to crowd, cramp, confine, restrict.

In my mind's eye I see the grand house where the banquet will take place, but people are only entering through a small door at the side. The grand front doors are closed, and entry is only through the side door. Jesus tells his hearers that they must strain to get through that door. Whatever the cause, getting in won't be easy, but we are to make every effort, strain, struggle to get in.

Two other places in Jesus' teaching I see the same kind of straining and difficulty to get into the Kingdom of God. First is Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount: "Enter through the narrow gate (Greek *pule*). For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it." (Matthew 7:13-14)

This is a different parable told in a different setting, for it is speaking of gateways to roads rather than doorways to houses, but the idea is similar. In our passage, Jesus says, "Many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to" (13:24). Why can't they get in? Is the way barred? No, but we know from Jesus' other teaching that entry into the Kingdom of God requires repentance and change. And many, many want the goal - the inheritance of the Kingdom, heaven - so long as it costs them nothing, especially their allegiance, commitment and obedience. And so they try to enter, but do not succeed when they learn the cost.

In Jesus' parable, finally the host "gets up and closes the door..." (13:24). Apparently the host is seated or reclining at the banquet table, but it is time to begin and he deliberately gets up and shuts the door. No more guests can enter. The banquet will begin. Now those who had tried the first time but failed to enter, come again, see the door closed, and begin pounding on it. They knock and plead to no avail.

"But he will answer, 'I don't know you or where you come from.' Then you will say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.' But he will reply, 'I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!' " (13:25b-27) Through the closed door, the homeowner denies that he knows those outside, shouting to get inside."I don't know you or where you come from."

That seems a bit harsh. But I see these people as name-droppers trying to crash a party. They may have met the host once, or worked in the building next door, or have a cousin who was friends with the host's son, but they don't have any real relationship themselves. They try to create a bogus relationship: "We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets," (13:26) but the host denies any relationship that obligates him to open the door, and shoos them away. "Away from me, all you evildoers" (13:27). We see similar ideas in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:21-23) and Jesus' Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1-18). It sounds like a person who is totally fed up with the excuses of party-crashers and tells them to "get lost." Then the host leaves the door where the latecomers are clamouring, and returns to his guests.

Now Jesus shifts from the Parable of the Narrow Door to the familiar scene of the heavenly banquet."There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out. People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last." (13:28-30)

Notice that it is a banquet "for all peoples" - that is, not just Jews, but also the Gentiles. It is finally referred to in the Book of Revelation as "The Marriage Supper of the Lamb" (Revelation 19:20). One of the paradoxes of this banquet is that the guests are honoured inside at the same time as outside sinners suffer judgment and anguish. The Gentiles, whom the Jews considered "last," may well be given first place in this banquet, while the Jews, who considered themselves "first" in God's estimation, may find themselves last - perhaps even outside the Kingdom, unless they repent and respond to Jesus' call.

In the the Parable of the Narrow Door the door was open, and they COULD have entered, but didn't care to enough. They weren't diligent to press in.

What are the "take home" lessons for disciples from this Gospel passage? There are many minor themes here, but the main one is: Repent and enter the Kingdom of God while you can, because there will come a time when it is too late to respond. This is a time-critical decision. Paul says, "I tell you, now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2). Jesus says that we must try VERY HARD to enter now; there is no guarantee of another opportunity.

I'm assuming that if you're hearing this that you have more than just a casual interest in Jesus. Perhaps you are a disciple, but perhaps not - I don't know. But I do know this: God is speaking to your heart right now. And there is a door of salvation before you - a narrow door - but it is still open to you. And Jesus calls you - no, commands you - "Strive, struggle to enter through the narrow door." Do it now, don't wait. It is a time-sensitive command. For the day will come when the door which I believe will be left open to the very last minute will eventually be abruptly shut, and unless you are inside God's household, it will be forever too late. Is that too strong,? No. It is exactly what Jesus is saying to us today in our Gospel. Amen.

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