

## *“The Narrow Door”*

*Isaiah 5:1-7; Luke 13:22-30*

August 14, 2022

When I was in seminary, my cohort was the first to start a new paradigm of classes. As such, we ended up with some professors who thought we knew things we didn't yet. One, Dr. Richard Hays, was one of the biggest New Testament scholars in the world at the time. His books were read by seminarians and pastors all over the world. He was and is still to some degree, a very big deal in the world of Biblical scholarship. It was a blessing to be in his class but he was very direct and matter of fact. He told us, “Under no circumstances do I want y'all asking questions during the lecture.” He then instructed us to take our questions to our grad school assistants who would be happy to answer them. Dr. Hays then preceded to go into a lecture about something none of us understood. The reason? We hadn't had the class yet that would teach us such material. I, like everyone in the room, sat silently confused. Caught between his admonition NOT to raise our hands during the lecture. But there was one young woman, and when I say young, I mean it. Little Christian Peele was 15 when she graduated from college and 16 as she got to Duke Divinity School. Of all of us, even us older students like myself, cowered at this professor. Christian Peele thankfully had the fortitude to stand up and ask the question that needed to be asked.

Seminary is a lot like that. Asking questions. And man, when it comes to God, you can ask some really big questions, can't you? And we did. Sometimes to no end and to the wee hours of the morning. It was heady stuff and fun. I was fortunate enough to attend a lectionary group right out of seminary that allowed for this theological inquiry to continue. Every Wednesday we'd meet at Panera bread to discuss the passage we'd be preaching on that coming Sunday. We would take for hours about the most arcane stuff. While we never debated how many angels could dance on the head of a pin, I'm sure some of the stuff we talked about in those lunches was just as pointless.

Theological speculation is fine, to a point, as long as it doesn't obscure some of the more significant parts of our faith. But there's a point at which just thinking things through isn't really that helpful. It can, in fact, be diverting. Diverting our attention away from the one thought that should propel our every day – our salvation in and through Jesus Christ.

In the Gospel of Luke, 9:51, Jesus, “*Sets his face towards Jerusalem.*” It's Luke's way of announcing that Jesus is turning to his final mission, shedding His life on a Roman cross for us and for our salvation. From this point forward, Jesus becomes an itinerant preacher teaching and instructing on His way to His ultimate destiny. And along the way, He gets asked some doozies by the crowd, doesn't He? Here's one as I read from the Gospel of Luke, the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter verses 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.*” This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Before we get started, I just want to note that, when I began this series at the beginning of the summer, I was super excited. The parables, I thought, easy stories to preach during the summer. Wow. MY Biblical knowledge must've been sorely lacking as I've found teaching the parables some of the most difficult work in preaching, I've done. There are lots of difficult subjects brought up by the parables and there is oftentimes no hiding from their obvious truths. In their own way, the parables deal with heaven and hell, life and death, spiritual growth and contamination.

This parable, like the previous weeks, draw our attention uncomfortably to some big truths. We live in a meritocracy. At least. That's what we should be doing for the most part anyway. In a meritocracy, those that deserve the rewards (i.e. the workers) get the rewards. This parable draws our attention to the fact that not

everyone is saved. An uncomfortable awareness to our universally minded sentiments. So, a person with unknown motives asks Jesus a question – “will those who are saved be few?” It’s a good question, isn’t it? I mean, don’t we all wonder sometimes. Who is it, the Jehovah’s witnesses, don’t they believe only 144,000 people will be in heaven or something like that? But don’t we, perhaps under the cover of night, wonder who will be there in the Kingdom of God? Will it be a huge world-wide party or something smaller? We, just like this unnamed questioner of so many years ago wonder, “will those who are saved be few?” But Jesus, perhaps He doesn’t like the question. He doesn’t exactly answer the query. In fact, He poses one of His own, in a way. The crowd wonders, will the saved be few. The thrust of Jesus answer makes everyone wonder a different question – Will the saved include you?

And yes, because this is a parable, this is another difficult sermon. On the one hand, we want to say, everyone can come to Jesus Christ, and they can. But Jesus here seems to be saying, not everyone who wants to come can come. That’s a difficult awareness to hold but one that’s deeply Biblical. It isn’t to puff us with pride, either. Like we had something to do with our own salvation. What the awareness of our election in Christ is supposed to do is foster deep and abiding gratitude. Because this parable should focus our attention on Jesus Christ and Him alone as being the only door through which salvation is even possible. This parable works to bring three very important awarenesses before our eyes. First, that there is only one door, and it is a narrow one. Secondly, that door is now open but one day will be closed. And, finally, our duty as Christians is to enter that door. There is only one door.

Much like our first century brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, we live in a polytheistic world. That is to say in our day to day lives, we exist in world that isn’t exclusively Christian and is influenced by a great many of the world’s religions and philosophies. As such, it’s easy to miss the exclusivity of salvation as it relates to Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ makes it clear in John 14 that HE ALONE is the way, and the truth and the life and that NO ONE comes to the Father, except by Him. In the Gospel of John, the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter, we hear Jesus say this, *“So, Jesus again said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.”*

The particularity of Jesus Christ lies in the fact that HE HIMSELF is our door to salvation. It isn’t in what we do, it’s found in who we have faith in. Jesus is a Savior unlike any other. Other world religions ultimately say that there are these universal truths about God and, if you follow them, all will turn out well. Jesus is different. Jesus doesn’t say, do this and live. He instead says, believe in me and live. For Jesus Christ we believe took upon himself our sins to His body so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. Jesus isn’t some pathway to a solution, Jesus himself is our solution. The Prince of Heaven willingly took flesh in order to be our shepherd. I can’t imagine squeezing into a pair of 32-inch waist skinny jeans let alone imagine the fullness of Jesus Christ, son of God, squeezing into human flesh but that’s what he did. He did it because we humans needed salvation. Ever since we got the first shot at that apple, we took it and had been creatures of sin ever since. As such, we were alienated from our Father. Jesus stepped into the chasm between us and filled it with His eternal faithfulness. Jesus Christ took flesh in order to atone for our sin. His precious blood spilled in the place of ours. That is how we know of God’s mercy, that is how we know of salvation. Salvation is found in Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone.

One of the things you hear a lot as a pastor is what people are doing on Sunday, instead of going to church. I mean, when I’m out and about and people find out that I’m a pastor, there seems to be some need to justify why they aren’t in church on Sunday morning. That ought to tell us something, right? That our natural inclination is to know that we should be somewhere on Sunday morning. But, yeah, a lot of what you get is, I find God in nature. And that’s great, I’m sure that God can be countered in nature but, I’m sorry, God is found in Jesus Christ and Him alone. Paul talks about this in Romans. Nature should be enough to convince us of God but it isn’t. God is only known by those to whom He reveals Himself to. There is only one door to salvation and that is Jesus Christ. That’s what makes it narrow. But because it is Jesus Christ, it is also wide. Wide open, that is. All may come. The sad truth is that not all that want to get in, will. That’s the striving part.

*“Strive to enter by the narrow door.”* That’s what Jesus says, the door is open but it will take some work to get in. The word here is a real clue. In the Greek, the strive is “Agonize”. The root word from which we get agonize. It’s an athletic term designed to convey the meaning of the effort top-notch athletes put into their training regimen. They AGONIZE to win the prize so to speak. Hey, I’m a poet and didn’t even know it! LOL. Even though it isn’t the work that gets us into heaven, this parable reminds us that there is work to being a Christian. There is sacrifice, there is self-denial, there is fasting and praying at times we’d rather be eating and drinking and being merry, so to speak.

The Door is narrow, but it is open. How are you doing on your spiritual disciplines? How is your prayer life? How is your Scripture reading? How’s your giving? Are you agonizing? Are you working? And, remember, it isn’t our work that gets us into heaven. Rather it is our work that demonstrates our preparedness for it.

Natalie and most of the men here at the church can tell you, I’m not exactly an outdoorsman. I could no sooner start a fire without a match than I could run a 4-minute mile. But I love me some outdoorsman shows. I watch a lot of them. Most recently, I’ve been fascinated by a show called, ‘Alone.’ In Alone they take you out with minimal equipment into some wilderness area and, well, they leave you alone to fend for yourself.

I love those shows, the current one I’m watching has grizzly bears all around it’s thrilling. It’s safe to say that I admire those people on those shows. But would I do everything, heck, anything, to be like them? NO probably not.

Jesus doesn’t want admirers, that’s what this passage convinces me of. He doesn’t want the casual observer that things, oh, isn’t that interesting. No, this door is narrow and it sure is going to feel like it’ll take some work, in fact, it might feel just like agony at times. But it’s worth it. I know it head of time because I know my Savior, Jesus Christ.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.