

February 28, 2016

TEXT: Luke 13:22–30

TITLE: Narrow Door, Wide Vision

One of the guiding principles here at East Liberty Presbyterian Church is to be inclusive, to welcome all people with a Christ-inspired spirit of radical hospitality. Another principle is that we are a progressive church that takes scripture seriously. So how do we reconcile a belief that all are welcome with today's reading about entering God's realm through a narrow door? Now, I am tempted to point out that right before this passage Jesus told a parable about a tiny mustard seed that grew into a tree large enough for all the birds to make nests in its branches—and how at the end of today's passage Jesus describes an expansive vision of how people will come from east and west, north and south to eat at the heavenly banquet. Surely the dominant part of Jesus' message is a wide vision of inclusion, not a narrow one of exclusion.

But for years, even centuries, scowling pastors have pounded their pulpits exhorting their nervous flocks to strive to enter by the narrow door, for many will try to enter yet not be able. Then these Puritanical pulpiteers would go beyond what it says in scripture and list off all the categories of sinful humanity whom they are sure will be barred from entering the Kingdom of God, left outside where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. So I need to talk about the narrow door. But the first rule of taking scripture seriously is to let Jesus speak for himself; don't put words in the Son of God's mouth. So let us look carefully at what it truly says in these verses.

Jesus is heading to Jerusalem. He is moving toward a direct confrontation with the leaders of his Jewish faith that will end in his arrest by Roman authorities and death on a cross. Jesus' face is set; he is laser focused on walking this narrow, unswerving path toward what lies ahead. He is also teaching about the ways of this world vs. the glory of the Kingdom of God. Nervously one person asks "*Lord, will only a few be saved?*" Jesus doesn't answer that question. He doesn't say "Yes, only a few will make it" or "No, everyone gets in." Jesus tells the person to nurture the same focused spirit that he has, saying "*Strive to enter through the narrow door.*"

Faith is not a casual thing. Faith is not something that gets our attention only occasionally, like it was a dinner party guest we eat and drink with once in a while, or an acquaintance we bump into on the streets. Faith is not one thing among many; it is the one thing that changes how we see the many—the lens through which we look at all of life. When we hear Jesus' metaphor, we may wonder whether we are skinny enough to fit through his narrow door. We forget that the first word he said was the verb "strive." Jesus' answer to the question was to encourage the type of deep, focused faith we all should have, as opposed to having a distracted spirit flitting from one frivolous goal to another.

The life of composer Franz Joseph Haydn, whose music we are enjoying today, illustrates the distinction Jesus was making. Haydn was born poor, yet by hard work he ended up as a resident composer and conductor for the Esterhazy family in Austria. This sounds glamorous, but it wasn't. In the organizational chart for these aristocrats, Haydn ranked at the same level as the kitchen staff. For 30 years Haydn wrote symphonies, masses, and fanfares, conducting the court musicians for whatever social function needed special music. When the head of the family died, his successor had no interest in music, so he shook Haydn's hand, offered him a pension and sent him on his way. Haydn's workmanlike, narrow focus on producing music on demand did not earn him great wealth and fame. But when he was fired and he stepped out the Esterhazy's door, he discovered a world that knew all about his music and longed to meet him in person. Haydn left for London, received well-paying commissions and met adoring audiences, because he had kept his focus all those years in Austria, striving for the narrow door of musical excellence.

In the litany we read earlier from the Confession of Belhar, it proclaims that the unity of the people of God must be manifested and active in a variety of ways. Unity is not uniformity. Unity is the narrow goal for which we strive, but we achieve that goal in a wide variety of ways—by loving one another, however that is expressed; by practicing and pursuing community, however that is lived out; by being a blessing to one another, in the varied ways that is made real.

This is a critical insight. Narrowness is not the same as simplicity. A narrow door is not one that we march through single-file in lockstep uniformity. That approach is the sinful message of fascism, of racism, of all forms of worldly prejudice, especially dangerous when prejudice is justified by bad theology and distorted religion. Jesus knew full well that striving to enter by a narrow door makes your life more complicated, yet more rich. He was focused on journeying to Jerusalem. Yet on the way, he noticed the ill needing to be healed with no one caring for them. He noticed the grieving and worried, whom no one comforted. The narrowness of the road he walked made his life more complicated, yet it also made it infinitely richer and spiritually deeper. The same is true for us.

The noted author Isabel Wilkerson has written about the Great Migration of African Americans from the southern to northern states early in the 20th century. In a recent article¹, she told the story of Millie Lee Wylie, a young widow with three young boys who moved from a tenant shack in Alabama to a home in Cleveland. She worked hard, re-married, and saved up to buy a small two-story house in a neighborhood whose white residents moved out when she moved in. After hard lives of work and want, Millie Wylie, now Mrs. Petty, and her husband both died in their 50s—of cancer and exposure to asbestos. See how already their narrow story touches on issues of poverty, racism, and health care. But the story goes on. Without much family support, Millie's daughter Darlette suffered. Her first marriage failed; then she lived with a man who beat and threatened her until fearing for her life, she killed him. Her daughter Samaria was only 12 when

she had to testify in court about the abuse her mother had endured. Darlette was sent to prison for 15 years. So added to this one family's narrow story are now themes of violence, domestic abuse, and the criminal justice system.

Samaria was sent to foster homes. She dropped out of school, worked odd jobs, and had four children. Trying to turn things around, she got tutors for her kids and was highly protective of them. She got the oldest through high school and took the youngest to swimming and soccer lessons. On November 22, 2014, she let her youngest son go to the park across the street while she made a lasagna for dinner. Soon there was a knock on the door. Two children told her that her boy, Tamir, had been shot. It seems a neighbor boy had let Tamir play with a pellet gun he'd brought to the park. Within seconds of arriving on the scene, a white police officer had shot Tamir Rice. And, as Wilkerson finishes telling the story, when Samaria got to the park, she was not allowed near her son to comfort him as he lay bleeding on the ground.

A narrow focus on just one family's story inevitably expands to include many other things that we cannot ignore as people of faith, as the sad legacy of Tamir Rice's death reminds us. If learning the full story of Millie Lee Wylie is too complicated, there are shorter paths we can travel that will remind us of the same truth. For example, about 100 years ago, at the lowpoint of African American relations here in America, there was a lynching every four days. Last year an unarmed black man or woman was killed by a white police officer in America every 3 ½ days.²

Life is complex—that is why it is beautiful even as it is often tragic. Ask a 1st grade teacher about the complexity involved in helping a classroom of 30 kids achieve the narrow goal of learning to read. Ask a nurse or doctor how often there is a quick fix to a hospital patient's illness. Worried souls, just like that person long ago, still ask Jesus, "Will only a few be saved?" Jesus doesn't give a simple answer. He doesn't name a number or percentage. Jesus instead names a quality of faith—that we strive, that we move through the inevitable complexity of life rejecting easy answers for the deeper, richer vision of how God intends this world to be.

Jesus' narrow-focused journey to Jerusalem caused him to interact with Jews, Gentiles and Samaritans, with lepers, beggars, tax collectors and community leaders, dealing with issues of religious law, political law, places where justice and mercy collided. Through it all he welcomed, taught and healed as generously as he could without ever wavering from his focus. How did he hold all this in tension? By knowing that the end goal for which he was striving is a place of God's grace and mercy, a banquet table where people will come from east and west, north and south, and sit together. A place where the last are finally first.

A narrow door is not designed to allow entry for people who treat its faith goals casually or its faith demands simplistically and prejudicially. Therefore we must

take faith seriously and strive for the narrow door. The good news is that the one who meets us at the door is also alongside us every complicated, messy step of the way leading us to that door. He's promised to be with us even to the end of the age as people come from all over, with their stories and our stories becoming simply one amazing story about God's peaceable kingdom.

¹ "Where Did the Great Migration Get Us?", Isabel Wilkerson, *New York Times*, February 21, 2016.

² Source mappingpoliceviolence.org