

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI

“Cheap and Easy Cultural Christianity”

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“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.” (Lk. 13:25-29).

Jacklyn and I went down to St. Louis a couple of weeks ago for training. On the long stretch of I-55 South, they’re doing a lot of work on overpasses. Every now and then we were alerted that two lanes would merge into one; arrows pointed us into the left lane. Most of us would do that right away, slowing down, sometimes to a crawl. But that left the right lane wide open for as much as a half mile or more before the barrels forced the merge. For some, this proved to be too much of a temptation. They pulled into the right lane and take off, and then, at the last possible moment, try to elbow their way back into the slow traffic. Jackie and I concluded this could actually be a quick and easy measure of narcissism - for those who think they are superior to the rest of us, and more important, and therefore not really obligated to wait in line. Maybe they could even put traffic signs above the right lane, pointing out it was reserved for narcissists. Or, maybe, they were on their phones, oblivious to their environment, and just happy for their good fortune. In any event, those who would try to fly by in the right lane were sometimes thwarted. They weren’t easily allowed back into the line. Or, someone would pull over into the right lane and choose to go no faster than those in the left. Either way, it surprised and angered those who were thwarted.

In our text some are surprised that their admittance into the house is blocked. They were fully expecting to be admitted. They presumed to have priority, but, in no uncertain terms, they were told “I don’t know you. Away from me.” The heavy, narrow doors were shut and locked, and they were not able to elbow, beg, demand, or argue their way in.

What triggered this little story is a question asked of Jesus: “Lord, will those who are saved be few?” Jesus redirects the question, in essence saying, “Let’s not talk about others. Let’s talk about you. Instead of discussing whether only a few will be saved, let’s talk about whether **you** will be saved. “Strive to enter through the narrow door, for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.”

That’s not the language most Americans would use, is it? As far as we’re concerned the way to heaven is wide and straight and easy, and the door is also wide, (and wide open) to all regardless of what we believe and how we have lived. We have also mostly decided hell doesn’t exist anymore either, which is all very nice and convenient but not what Jesus teaches.

So, if we are to understand this text, the first thing we must do is sweep away all our assumptions and notions about who will be saved, and who won’t, and really listen to the words of Jesus. In Matthew 7, Jesus says, “Narrow is the path that leads to life, and only a few find it.” So the path is narrow and hard, and here Jesus says *the door* is also narrow. He says, “many will seek to enter through it and will **not** be able.” He says the master of the house will shut the door even though there are people still demanding to get in. (Apparently, he has that right. It’s his house.) And in spite of all the knocking, in spite of all the demands of “Lord, open to us!”, the Master will say “I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me!”

“Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets.’”

Have you ever noticed how strange that sounds? “You taught in our streets.” Not, “we sat at your feet and learned from you and believed in you and followed you as disciples and suffered with you.” No, none of that. Only, “You taught in our streets.” They were merely spectators, observers, bystanders, critics even, but not followers. They have no skin in the game and are far from having suffered or sacrificed at all for the faith. Their logic, too, is faulty. “You taught in our streets” they say. “Therefore, the decent thing to do is let us in to your house!”

Notice, also, how entitled they feel. “*Lord, open to us!*” It’s a command.

Soren Kierkegaard was an early 19th century Danish theologian and philosopher and raging critic of those he saw “playing” at Christianity, dabbling with it. The greatest enemy of Christianity, he argued, was the cultured and “easy Christianity” he saw all around him, with neither cost nor pain nor sacrifice. It was no longer an adventure or constant risk

in the presence of God, no discomfort, no guilt, no feelings of dread in the life of faith. Kierkegaard fumes against a casual, cultural Christianity. Frankly, that's what scares me about American Christianity, and what I see in Wisconsin, even in Watertown, a growing take it or leave it attitude, and a casual indifference paired with a sense of entitlement. Meanwhile, Jesus warns, "Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able."

In Revelation 3, Jesus says, "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm, I will spit you out of my mouth." (vv. 15.). Do you know what that means? "Spew" is the old translation, because they didn't want to say "vomit" which would be the more literal translation. Can the Lord say it any more clearly? "A narrow, difficult way. A narrow door. And yet, lukewarm." It all makes Him want to hurl. Based on His Word, I fear many who presume right now to have priority access into heaven. They feel entitled, but will be thwarted. They will be surprised and angered, but unable to elbow, argue, beg, or force their way in.

"But Lord . . . we heard you teach in our streets." "But Lord, I went to a Lutheran school; I know all about that stuff!" "Away from me. I never knew you." There's a difference between knowledge of Him, and clinging to Him for dear life, trusting Him for eternal life.

"But Lord, look at all the steeples in our city! And look at all the good things we do for others, and how hard working we are. "Open to us!"

"Away from me. I never knew you." Paul wrote, "Without faith, it is impossible to please God" (Eph. 4:15). Without faith, all our "righteous acts are as filthy rags" (Is. 64).

I say these things because I fear some may be cruising along in fast moving traffic of the right lane, happy for their good fortune, oblivious to their environment, unaware that there's an impasse just ahead. I don't want any from Good Shepherd to be thwarted on the Last Day.

"Strive to enter through the narrow door". In the Greek, the word strive here is *agonithsesthe*. We get our word "agony" from it. That is, the struggle to enter through the narrow door is not a casual business. It's intense, painful even. "Strive!" Jesus says. Word and Sacrament is not a matter of convenience. "Strive!" The Christian life is not supposed to be easy and comfortable. "Strive!"

"Will those who are saved be few?" It's a question we have probably all wondered about. We ask it as we pray ourselves to sleep worrying about our children who have drifted from the Christian faith and life. We ask it as we notice the decay in our culture. We ask it while wondering if the Lord could possibly forgive us again. Will those who are saved be few? It's a common question, but not really a good one. It sounds like a guy who's trying to figure out his odds of making the cut. But it's not about probabilities or prospects; it's about the Lord and His promises. A better question would be, "Lord, do you wish to save me?"

Now we're talking: In John 5, Jesus said, "I say these things to you *so that* you may be saved." 1 Tim 2:4, "God wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth." 2 Peter 3, "The Lord is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance".

"Will those who are saved be few?" Not a good question. A better question is "What will you do to save me?" John 10, "I lay down my life for the sheep." 2 Corinthians 5, "He who knew no sin became sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." Ps. 103, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us".

"Will those who are saved be few?" Not a good question. A better question is, "How, Lord, can I be saved." Acts 16, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved." John 3, "Whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Romans 10, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

In our text, the master says, "Away from me. I never knew you." Worst words ever. Does he know you? Jeremiah 1, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you." Luke 12, "The very hairs of your head are all numbered." Through Holy Baptism, He knows and loves you as a parent! 1 John 3, "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are." Romans 8, "And if we are children, then we are heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ".

"Lord, will those who are saved be few?" Not a good question. It sounds like it's a matter of chance, a roll of the dice. But it's not about gambling. It's about the Lord Jesus Christ and the gift of salvation He has already won for us by His Passion, death and resurrection. He says, "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Lk. 12).

When salvation is a gift, it's not a matter of chance. It's not something to worry about. It's also not something to receive lightly or regard casually. When salvation is a gift from God through the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, it's ours to receive and respond with thanks and praise forever and ever. Amen.