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Luke 13:22-35

48th Message

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THE NARROW DOOR

SERIES: THE NARROW DOOR

A couple of weeks ago a Pacific storm produced large waves on our coastline and as any surfing enthusiast knows the Mavericks surfing contest was held in Half Moon Bay. But these waves also created a dangerous situation and so high surf advisories were posted. Lifeguards and rescue people were stationed up and down the coast watching for anyone who might be at risk. A boogie boarder from Mountain View decided to disregard the warnings and went into the water at Santa Cruz. Spectators on the cliff above the water yelled at him and encouraged him to get out of the water. At one point two lifeguards went out to check on him and to again warn him of the peril. He assured them he was fine. But he wasn't fine. A large wave sent him crashing into the rocks and the man died.

Warnings are good things. We appreciate being alerted to dangers that we can either avoid or prepare for. Smoking might damage your health. Pregnant women should not drink alcohol because of the risk of birth defects. Some material in this movie is not suitable for children. The tap water is not safe to drink in Mexico. Storm warnings, tornado warnings, flood warnings, and hurricane warnings alert us to possible danger. Warnings force us to make a choice. We can either heed the warning or disregard it. Our decisions can have life altering consequences.

We find ourselves in a section of Luke where Jesus has been giving warnings, particularly to the Jews. In chapter 10 he pronounced woes on Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum. In chapter 11 he pronounced woes on the Pharisees and lawyers. In chapter 12 Jesus warned of being an unfaithful servant while waiting for the master's return. A couple of weeks ago, we talked about the parable of the fig tree that left us with the impression that it would soon be cut down. Jesus is playing the role of the prophet in the same manner as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and others. While some passages of Scripture are comforting, some make us squirm, as is the case with the text we encounter today. These passages are not easy to read, nor are they easy to preach. But as we will see there is always the hope for repentance and life. We begin in 13:22:

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?" (Luke 13:22-23 ESV)

Luke provides us with a travel note and reminds us that Jesus is still on the move. He continues to teach in towns

and villages, but is making his journey towards Jerusalem, his ultimate destination.

Someone in the crowd asks a question: "Will those who are saved be few?" This doesn't refer to the day one accepts Christ but rather to a future event, namely blessing in the eschatological age. Most Jews anticipated the resurrection and expected that all of Israel would be blessed. Israel was God's chosen, elected people and identity with the nation insured blessing. But someone had been listening it seems to Jesus' warnings and wonders if distinctions would be made within Israel. Jesus' answer proves to be much more than the man bargained for:

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.' (Luke 13:23-25)

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." (Luke 13:26-30)

Obviously, Jesus is speaking to Israel. He responds to all who are listening with an exhortation and a hard truth. The exhortation is to strive to enter through the narrow door. A door is a metaphor that represents leaving one space and entering into another. We pass through a doorway to enter a house or a building, or to pass from one room to another. Doors are a means of entrance and also a means of blocking an entrance. The word "narrow" implies less assessable, more difficult. Narrow implies fewer than expected will enter. If given the choice of a wide or narrow opening the easier would be preferred.

The door allows entrance into the kingdom of God. The preceding verses give two kingdom parables and again the kingdom of God is mentioned in verse 28. Door is also an image for entering into the messianic banquet and Jesus refers

to this as well when he talks about reclining at table in the kingdom of God, i.e. the messianic banquet. We are reminded of what Jesus says in John 10: “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep” (John 10:7). Jesus is the door, the passage into the kingdom of God.

The exhortation is to “strive,” which implies struggle and difficulty. Striving does not mean *working* your way to God, but listening and accepting that Jesus is the door through which one must enter. The reason effort is required is that many will not be able to accept Jesus as the way. We are reminded of Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount:

Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few. (Matthew 7:13-14)

Not only is the door narrow but it will also be closed very soon. Some might knock and ask the Lord to open, but it will be too late. The master will disavow any knowledge. But the ones locked out will not give up easily.

They will lodge an appeal based on the fact that they knew the master, they walked with the master, they heard the master teach, they shared table fellowship with the master. In this culture table fellowship is an indication of a relationship. The master now is revealed to be Jesus.

But again the master will disavow any knowledge of those who are knocking. He will tell them to depart and labels them as workers of evil, or workers of unrighteousness. The Pharisees were good church-going, law-abiding people but this doesn’t account for anything if they reject Jesus. Instead of being allowed entrance to the banquet table they will be cast out to a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth. Weeping and gnashing is the emotional and physical reaction to traumatic news. The outsiders will be able to see the patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—reclining at table with Jesus in the eschatological age but will be rejected and excluded. For the Jews who anticipated blessing this will indeed be hell.

Jesus is dispelling the notion that Israel has a special and favored position with God and would be saved universally. He is giving Israel a warning, one last chance. Things are going to change and the door of opportunity is closing. The fig tree that represented Israel is about to be cut down. The time is short. And it wasn’t long before 70,000 Roman soldiers laid siege to Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

On the other hand there will be others who are included at the table in the kingdom. God will gather together people from the four corners of the earth. This is a reference to Isaiah 43:

**Fear not, for I am with you;
I will bring your offspring from the east,
and from the west I will gather you.
I will say to the north, Give up,**

**and to the south, Do not withhold;
bring my sons from afar
and my daughters from the end of the earth,
everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made. (Is. 43:5-7)**

While exiled in Babylon, these words might have given Jews the hope of returning to the land. However, Jesus extends this gathering to include all the nations, something that the Jews would not have imagined in a million years. Even the disciples had a hard time grasping this. The insiders become outsiders and the outsiders become insiders. Some, not necessarily all, who are last will be first. Some who are first will be last. There is a dramatic reversal of fortunes in the kingdom of God. Things are going to change. One door is closing and another is opening.

Now, even though Jesus is talking to the Jews I think that he speaks to us as well. When Jesus calls the Pharisees hypocrites, it gives me pause to examine my own life. The same thing happens when Jesus talks about being an unfaithful servant or an unfruitful fig tree. And when Jesus gives a warning about a narrow and soon-to-be shut door, it has a sobering effect as well.

We can see Jesus’ warning as harsh and judgmental (I am going to slam the door in your face) or we can receive the warning as an opportunity (there is a storm coming, so take action). I like teachers who tell you the day of the exam in advance instead of always giving pop quizzes. I like a God who cares enough to give us advance notice so that we can enter through the door into the kingdom of God. A harsh God would simply pull a surprise twist at the end of time like Batman’s archenemy, the Joker.

It was a warning such as Jesus gave that sealed the deal for me in 1972. My friend had been sharing Jesus’ message with me for several months and I had begun reading the gospels. One weekend I visited my brother who lived in Des Moines. I happened to mention the name of a girl that I used to know who lived in Des Moines and was thinking of trying to get in touch with. My brother told me that the girl went to their church but that there were some very strange and weird things reported about her that people in the church thought were demonic in nature. Well, I didn’t give her a call, but the very night when I got back to Lincoln, I did call my Christian friend. I asked him about these strange happenings and supposedly demonic events. I’ll never forget his response. He said, “John, Satan is real and hell is real. You have been reading the Bible and God is opening your eyes to truth. But your eternal destiny is not secure and you don’t know how long the window of opportunity is going to be open.” I told my friend to come right now and that was the very night I closed the deal. I did not want the door to shut and lock me out. In other words I took the warning seriously. Better to be scared into the kingdom than not enter at all.

A new Harris poll this last fall found that 74% of Americans believe in God, but only 58% believe in the devil and hell. We watch movies where someone says, “I’m going to send you to hell” right before they shoot somebody. Or we make flippant comments like: “I’ll probably go to hell.” But we don’t want to talk about hell or a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

We don’t want to talk about a God who might close the door. We are used to stores staying open 24/7. We are used to not believing the advertisement telling us that there is only one more day for the big sale because we know that there will be another sale the very next week or next holiday. But God doesn’t run a 7-Eleven. Many people do not like or accept this notion of God because it feels so limiting. People want to keep their options open, run their own lives, and not be told what to do.

What if a doctor said that you had a very serious illness, but that if you had surgery within a week you had a 100% chance of cure? We wouldn’t think twice. So why do we hesitate when the physician of our souls gives us similar advice to take action?

Jesus puts all people on the same footing; there are no passports to the kingdom except repentance and submission to God. One has to enter on God’s terms. It is not familiarity with Jesus that is important but response to him, not outward contact but inner reception. God has to open the door to the kingdom but we can refuse to enter. And that is why the door is narrow and hard to enter. “A man asks the question ‘Will those who are saved be few.’ Jesus turns the question on the crowd and asks: ‘Will you be among the saved?’”¹

We also might have a negative reaction to the word “strive” that might not fit with our picture of God. But again, Jesus isn’t talking about working our way into the kingdom. We strive in many areas of our lives—strive for success, achievements, excellence, career, and sports. In fact Paul uses this word in 1 Corinthians to describe an athlete—he is one who strives. But we strive for an eternal rather than earthly reward as Paul says: “Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable (1 Cor. 9:25).

Paul urges us in 1 Timothy:

“Fight the good fight [struggle the good struggle] of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses” (1 Timothy 6:12).

Striving in our faith journey is not a bad thing as long as we continue to rely and trust in the Lord rather than our own strength. Martin Luther understood this well:

Did we in our own strength confide,
our striving would be losing;
Were not the right Man on our side,
the Man of God’s own choosing.²

We strive by walking on the narrow path instead of the wide, even though we find ourselves in the minority or even

standing alone. We continue to die to ourselves, surrender our lives, and accept what God has for us. We never think that we have some favored status with God because of our church-going, rule-keeping, or constant servitude. We continue to be humble and repentant. We pay attention to the Word and live intentionally. Striving is a contrast to strolling; an awareness and a willingness to follow Jesus.

The million-dollar question is, “How does Jesus feel about shutting the door?” Is he happy or uncaring about it? The following verses make it clear that it grieves him greatly.

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” And he said to them, “Go and tell that fox, ‘Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course. Nevertheless, I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following, for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem.’” (Luke 13:31-33)

Following Jesus’ warning some Pharisees come and urge Jesus to run away because Herod is gunning for him. This account is unique to Luke. We have no idea what motivated these Pharisees—genuine concern, a desire to insult, or perhaps they just wanted to get Jesus out of the area to avoid any violence.

Herod ruled over the regions of Galilee and Perea. He was prominent in the death of John the Baptist and he will show up later in the gospel at the trial of Jesus. Herod’s interest is the removal of any agitation.

Jesus’ response is one of confident, undeterred assertion. He shows no respect to Herod when he addresses him as a fox. The term “fox” refers either to a person of cunning (the normal Greek view) or a destroyer (Ezek. 13:4; Lam. 5:18).

Rather Jesus shows resolve and commitment to his mission. He will not be diverted from going to Jerusalem. He will continue to do what he has been doing, casting out demons and healing, and he will complete what he has started, he will finish the work he came to do.

The three days primarily refers to a quick succession of events but might also be an allusion to the both the beginning and end of the gospel of Luke—Jesus being lost for three days from his parents when he was twelve and then three days in the tomb.

Jesus sees himself as a prophet and is headed to Jerusalem since it is a fitting place for a prophet to die. Once again Jesus gives a prediction of his death (9:21-22, 44; 12:50). Jesus’ commitment to die for the salvation of his people tells us that he is anything but happy about the door shutting soon. But now he states how he feels much more explicitly.

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! Behold,

your house is forsaken. And I tell you, you will not see me until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!' (Luke 13:34-35)

Jerusalem represents the nation as a whole. The double vocative, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem" is reminiscent of David mourning over the death of his son, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom!" (2 Samuel 18:33). Jesus is expressing deep anguish and grief as he did to Saul when he asked, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9:4).

Rather than shutting the door Jesus would prefer to gather his children together like a hen gathering her brood under her wings. This is a powerful metaphor and refers to the reactions of a hen to protect her young during danger. There are known incidences of finding a mother hen who saved her young during a grass fire by hiding them under her wings. The mother is burned but the baby chicks live. This is what Jesus wants to do. He wants to sacrifice his life in order to save his people. The image reveals God's heart to protect, nurture, care, and save.

But the painful reality is that the Jews will not repent. The house of Israel will be forsaken, meaning neglected or abandoned. One thinks that it is all over for Israel at this point. But here we get a strange twist. The word "forsaken" can be translated "left alone" and is often translated "forgiven." This is the same word we saw a couple of weeks ago in the parable of the fig tree: "And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone (forgive) this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure'" (Luke 13:8).

And then Jesus quotes Psalm 118:26: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

Originally this Psalm referred to the priest's blessing of those who came to worship in the temple and was one of the psalms (Psalm 113-118) sung on feast days. Jesus indicates that there will be a change among the Jews before he comes again, before they see him again. The Jews will be able to respond with delight—"blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." Jesus is not referring to the triumphal entry, since the Jews rejected him soon after. The implication is positive and looks to a day of acceptance. Even though the house of Israel is neglected and judged for a time, and even though the door is closing to national Israel as the people of God, there is still a future hope for the Jews. When the time of the Gentiles has been fulfilled Israel will respond, which is exactly what Paul talks about in Romans 9-11. The early church continued to reach out to the Jews, to preach the gospel, and hope for them to repent. And we are to do the same today.

What seems to be a harsh, painful, sorrowful warning ends in hope for both Jews and Greeks, for people from the four corners of the world, for everyone who will enter the kingdom of God through the narrow door of repentance and submission to God. This is what God longs for. God is a mother hen longing for her brood. He is a forgiving, pardoning God.

Perhaps you have not yet walked through the door that leads to the kingdom of God. Something has been holding you back. But perhaps you are sobered by Jesus' warning. Or perhaps you are drawn to God's love and his willingness to die for you. In either case I urge you to walk through the door. Today is the day of salvation.

For most of us we continue to walk on the narrow path, the way less travelled, motivated by the God who gave his life for us. We live honestly, humbly, willingly, embracing people from all corners of the world and seeking to invite them into God's kingdom. We follow our Lord Jesus who was not distracted from his mission and was willing to give his life for others. The narrow way is not the popular way or the easy way, but it is way that leads to life.

"Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it." (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24)

1. Darrell Bock, *Luke Volume 2*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994), 1241.

2. *The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration*, (Word Music, Waco Texas, 1986), Hymn 26.