

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity, September 6, 2009

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Hymns: 650, 67: 1, 415: 1-5, 398, 429: 3.

Lessons: Isaiah 66:18-24, Hebrews 12:18-24, Matthew 7: 13-23.

Text: Luke 13:22-30

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Make no mistake: Jesus Christ died for all men. The gospel of Jesus Christ is intended for all humans regardless of their race, color, or national origin. It is the mission of every Christian to proclaim, to tell, to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to anyone and everyone: Repent and believe the Gospel. But today Jesus reminds us that the door to eternal life in heaven is a narrow door. There is no chance of sneaking through it. We must end this life and enter eternal life – or eternal death one at a time, alone. Today let's hear from scripture about

THE DOOR TO ETERNAL LIFE

1. **It is a narrow door.**
2. **Once it is closed to you there is no more chance of getting in.**
3. ***“Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last.”***

Jesus' main occupation at this time was teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem for the final visit there before he was to be crucified for the sins of the whole world.

We could easily wonder what led to the question *“Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?”* Was someone wondering just how many people beside himself or herself would be in heaven? I think we all probably know people who pride themselves on the idea that they will be in heaven – and they think that many others will not. But any such debate about the reason for this question would be speculation. Here are the facts: *“Then Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. Someone asked him, ‘Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?’ 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.’”*

The door to eternal life is a narrow door that is hard to get through. One writer gives us this example: If you have lived anywhere except a brand new house, you've probably experienced a problem trying to move something through a doorway. The doorway is too narrow or what you are trying to get through the doorway is too wide. So adjustments had to be made. It is not unheard of to demolish either the doorway or demolish what someone is trying to move through it.

The door to heaven is so narrow that we cannot fit one sin with us through the door. We cannot squeeze our puffed up and proud spirits through the door. We cannot bring any of our selfish actions and hateful thoughts through the door to God's eternal kingdom. If we try to bring even one tiny sin with us through the door, we will be denied admittance. We just can't get through.

Another example is passing through a security gate at an airport or at a prison or even at some court facilities. You are checked carefully and can't bring even a small pocket knife in with you, or even a fingernail clipper. (Hold up pocket knife or fingernail clipper)

But Jesus tells us how we can get through the door to heaven. He makes it possible, and gives us the only way to get through that door. God's Word has the power to cut us down to size and God's law demolishes our proud attitudes and all our sinful words and actions that grow out of our sinful attitudes. Even at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus taught, as we read in Mark 1:15 ***"The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"*** That is the invitation that brings one to faith in Jesus Christ and his atoning work. Repent! Turn from your sins to God! Believe that Jesus Christ paid for all your sins and that you don't have to.

The time will come when the owner of house in our text – and God owns heaven – will lock the door. Some will come knocking demanding entry. Once that door to heaven is closed to you, there is no more chance of getting in. Jesus tells us ***"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.' "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!" "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."***

When and how does that door – the last chance close? It will close in one of two ways: Either you will die, or Jesus will come in judgment – and that will be very suddenly, without warning, when we least expect it. There are many today who teach that everyone who has ever lived will have a share in the world to come. Not only do many pagan religions speak of everyone eventually achieving some kind of happy place after death, such as a “happy hunting ground” or “Nirvana” but even among those religions considered Christian a sort of second chance exists for those who have died. Purgatory is one such false teaching, a teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. Purgatory is a place where souls that are not yet pure go after death. We quote the on-line Catholic Encyclopedia: “This doctrine [states] that many who have died are still in a place of purification and that prayers avail to help the dead.” But there is no second chance after death or when Christ comes in judgment. Jesus answers the question differently than do many religions. First, there is no assurance that you will live to a ripe old age and that you have many days and even years of grace to turn from your sins and believe in Jesus as your Savior. Typically the lessons for the last Sunday of the church year and for the Advent season remind us of judgment and the suddenness of Christ coming to judge the living and the dead, as we confess in the Apostolic Creed.

Jesus speaks of ***“the owner of the house get[ting] up and [closing] the door.”*** When the door is closed and someone is outside, he or she just plain can't get in. God will say ***'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!'*** Just knowing the owner of the house will not cause him to open the door.

People will cry out: “We ate and drank with you!” “We spent time with you!” Notice what is missing: faith. Many still “spend time with” Jesus today. There is no assurance that just “spending time”, such as even eating and drinking with Jesus, will get you through the narrow door into heaven. Even St. Paul wrote ***"I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize."*** 1 Corinthians 9:27. Faith is essential. Those who aren't admitted trusted in what they did for Jesus, rather than what Jesus did for them. But many people's faith is based on something other than Jesus' blood and righteousness. Maybe on how much they sacrifice their time, or treasures or talents for the work of the church. Maybe on the fact that they “were brought up in a church”. Maybe on the fact that they've given much money for charities, or that they have tried to be nice to their neighbors. But Jesus will reply: ***'I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!'***

In order to enter heaven, the full price for our sins must be paid or we cannot enter. God allows no exceptions. That's why Jesus' cry on the cross "It is finished" means "The price for sin is paid in full." He paid the entrance fee to heaven by his own sacrificial death. Putting our faith in Jesus, we will never hear the terrifying words "*Away from me, all you evildoers!*" Everyone must enter heaven on God's terms.

The door to eternal life in heaven is narrow, like the entrance to a banquet hall where a ticket is needed to get in. It prevents great crowds of people from entering all at once. People must enter one at a time. That narrow door is a symbol for Jesus himself. And when the door is slammed shut, Jesus says "*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.*" These words were spoken first of all to Jews, descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and maybe even descendants of some of the prophets. Just because they were physical descendants of believers doesn't mean that they would automatically get into heaven. I had an uncle who took great pride in the fact that he had two nephews who were studying to be ministers – in different church bodies. He didn't appreciate it when I told him that their faith wouldn't get him into heaven. No one else's faith gets you into heaven.

The picture Jesus gives is of someone else sitting down at a banquet, when you thought you had a ticket but didn't get in. Just as several verses earlier Jesus had said (Luke 13:9) that the unfruitful tree will be cut down, so also the time will come in each individual's life and in the history of the world when the entrance to salvation will be closed. The message is plain: don't delay but strive to enter now, during your lifetime, during your time of grace.

Finally we read a description of people sitting at tables, the ancestors of Jesus' first hearers of these words. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But then there is a surprise: many of Jesus' contemporaries will find themselves on the outside looking in, weeping and grinding their teeth. They will express their disappointment and shock that they didn't get in. They will see that other people from all over the world will be sitting in the places that they thought were reserved for themselves. Those who first had the opportunity to respond to Christ's preaching will be left out while those at the very ends of the earth who last heard the gospel message will find themselves honored with choice seating at the banquet. We have had the gospel message all our lives and that makes it easy to take it for granted. Be sure that your trust is in Jesus, and not in anything or anyone else.

So we see that Jesus does not really answer the question which he was asked: rather he is saying to all who will listen: Just be sure that you are going to be saved. And how will that be? Faith in Jesus. He is the way, the truth, the life, but more importantly, he is the door. Left to themselves, people choose doors that lead only to hell. There are almost an endless number of choices that do not lead through Jesus. Jesus' words in John 14:6 are critical to the salvation of everyone: "*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*" Because we have come to learn and believe the way of salvation, we want others to learn and by the power of the gospel believe that gospel, too. We want to let everyone know that faith in Jesus is the only way to enter heaven. As we do everything we can to present the gospel to as many people as we can, we must see the wonderful picture Jesus paints for us with these words.

Make no mistake: Jesus Christ died for all men. The gospel of Jesus Christ is intended for all humans regardless of their race, color, or national origin. It is the mission of every Christian to proclaim, to tell, to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to anyone and everyone: Repent and believe the Gospel. There still is room inside the kingdom. The doors will not be finally closed to all men until Jesus comes to judge the living and the dead. Until then, or until we no longer have life and breath, that is our calling: to find more people and to point them to the door so that through faith they may come and take their places at the feast in the kingdom of heaven. Amen.