

"Narrow Door Living"

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 21
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Sunday, August 22, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Luke 13:10-17

If I had only heeded the instructions I would have saved myself much embarrassment, but, hey, I'm a man and "We don't need no stinkin' instructions!" So, there I was winding my way back through a line that seemed to stretch for miles with people gawking and grumbling at me. You see, we had rushed to Epcot so that I could ride one of the purported best rides in Disney, *Mission: Space*. Stella doesn't do those kinds of rides, so I had the advantage in that I could go in the "Single Riders" lane that goes four times faster than the regular line.

It was while I was standing in that line, so, so close to getting in the next car for the ride, that I actually heard the instructive announcement that had been playing all along. It went something like this: "You must be 44 inches tall to ride this ride," (I made that requirement), "and you should not ride this ride if you suffer from back problems, heart problems, motion sickness, or if you are pregnant or suffer from claustrophobic tendencies." Let's see: I was over 44 inches, and I wasn't pregnant, but I was four for four with the other stated conditions. So, I chose shame and disappointment to the panic of claustrophobia, throwing up my breakfast or throwing out my back as I had a heart attack.

You see, confined places give me the willies. I never knew I was claustrophobic until another almost embarrassing moment years ago when Stella and I were on our trip to Israel. We were visiting the historic city of Acco in the northwest corner of the country, on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. There was a Crusader castle from the 12th century A.D. that we were scheduled to visit and we were going to go through the secret vast underground complex that was used as an escape route by the Crusaders during the wars. Well, our guide told us the passage way gets small. What she didn't adequately explain was how small. By the time we walked the almost half-mile underground, we were stooped over and going sideways, and I was sweating like a racehorse and hyperventilating to the point of passing out. If there hadn't been a nurse in our group who happened to be behind me talking me through, they would have had to drag me the last two hundred yards.

And at the end, the door was so narrow, that the tallest and biggest member of our group barely made it through. How do you know when you enter the beginning of the tunnel that you will make it or not? Well, your tour guide better be a pretty good guesser, because it's not until you travel down that passageway that you find it is too low or too narrow and you can't travel any further.

Who gets in? Who gets in – physically, psychologically, emotionally, spiritually? Who must stay outside? Who will experience God's saving grace? Will only a few

be saved? These were the questions Jesus was asked as he traveled from town to town on his way to Jerusalem and a cross.

"Will only a few be saved?" he is asked. And he replies: "Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able." Narrow door living, let's call it. And Jesus had something specific in mind when he said that. Unfortunately, most of the religious folks of his day misinterpreted what he meant. So, let's start by looking at how they understood the concept.

The Pharisees of Jesus' day were the specialists in the field, of course. They promoted narrow door living according to their interpretation of it, preaching the 613 prescriptions of the Mosaic Law as the answer to all life's problems. "Here," they would tell people, "Hold fast to the laws, keep every one of them and keep them religiously, and then you will find favor with God and will be admitted into God's Kingdom." It is a narrow door of rules and regulations and requirements, all intended to mold and shape and conform each of us so that we can make ourselves acceptable to God.

Luke gives us an example of this kind of narrow door living in our Gospel text just read. A woman had walked into the synagogue on the Sabbath Day. The Sabbath is a day of rest. No work is to be done. There were countless laws about this. Why, you couldn't even walk more than a certain distance; to do so would constitute working. And as we know in narrow door living, rules are rules.

Well, this woman who walked in was bent over with an infirmity. She suffered from some sort of crippling condition, which had prevented her from standing straight for 18 years. Now, Luke's description of her physical appearance carries symbolic meaning regarding the social significance attached to her plight. The very words translated "bent over" in verse 11 are sometimes used to describe people who have been put to shame -- like describing someone in English as "laid low" or "crushed." Apparently, this poor woman had literally been looking at the dirt for much of her life; she was unable to stand tall. And by the description in Luke, she became a symbol of those who may be oppressed by any number of circumstances.

Well, here she is in the synagogue on the Sabbath. And Jesus notices her, but note, not a word is spoken by her. She obviously didn't come to the synagogue expecting any of what was to happen, and not a word is said about her faith or her worth. Jesus simply sees her, calls her over, declares she is set free from her ailment, touches her as a sign of the healing, and she immediately stands straight up and begins to offer praise to God.

But before any of us can join the shouts of "hosanna" and "let's go celebrate with beer and pizza," here comes the keeper of the narrow door -- the leader of the synagogue -- and he's about to shut this old party down quicker than a TV Evangelist at a Saturday night Frat party. "There are six days for work," he shouts indignantly, "come on those days and be cured, but not on the Sabbath." From a door burst open with joy and praise, we now have the narrow doorkeeper slamming it shut. For him, the Sabbath was a big "not": "not on the Sabbath."

But fortunately, there was Jesus. And for him, the Sabbath is a "for", not a "not": "for" releasing those in bondage, and what better object than this woman who has been in bondage for 18 long years, and who is, after all, one of the daughters of Abraham. Jesus challenges his accuser with a question about untying his ox or donkey on the Sabbath so that they can be led to water. The same word used to untie is the word to "set free from bondage." Jesus says rhetorically, "You would set free one of your animals before this child of God?"

Narrow door living. It still exists. It exists whenever rules and regulations are more important than people. The Associated Press a few years ago reported a modern equivalent to our narrow door living example from scripture. Greyhound bus lines have a rule: no pets on their buses. And so late one night at a rural truck stop in Florida, a Greyhound driver kicked an 80 year old woman off his bus. Her crime? She was returning home from her birthday party, that her family and friends had thrown for her, with her present: a tiny puppy named Cookie. Remember hearing about this story?

Dogs aren't allowed on Greyhound buses and the driver refused to make an exception, leaving this poor elderly woman over 80 miles from home at three in the morning. And we can hear his explanation, can't we: "Rules are rules. We have a rule."

Narrow door living -- then and now. And we all know that narrow doors, like the one at Acco, restrict, repress and block the flow of life.

But as the Gospel story shows, it is Jesus who rises and shuts the door on narrow living. In his Resurrection he closed the door on all human efforts to restrict and control the mercy of God. He flung wide open the door of life by proclaiming a God of mercy and love and forgiveness, not a God of laws and rules and demands. He set an example for us that people matter more than rules. He tells us that oppression, that which stoops us over and hinders our walk on this earth, he tells us that the oppressed are to be set free, no matter when and where.

You see, this is a very telling story. If the Sabbath is a symbol of God's ownership of the world, of the exercise of God's power for delivering from bondage, then honoring the Sabbath is connected with all those things that have to do with easing the yoke around ours and our neighbors necks, it is connected to feeding the hungry, speaking words of kindness, and flinging wide the door of love and embrace for all to enter and find new life.

But I think there is a double and a deeper meaning here in this image of the narrow door. Certainly Jesus rejected the narrow door living of those who would put rules above the needs of neighbor. We've seen that in this story today. And his saying, just a few short verses after this story, that we should strive to enter the narrow door, could be heard with all the sarcasm of one who knows no one will be able to get through if we have to make ourselves worthy of God's love and acceptance.

But remember the other words of Jesus in scripture where he says: "I am and way and the truth and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me" (John 14: 6). Remember that admonition? What if the narrow door Jesus really means is himself? "If you want to be acceptable to God, if you want to find favor with God, if you want to be ushered into God's Kingdom, if you want to experience God's love, walk with me," he is saying, "for that is the only way you will be able to enter. The law will convict you every time. You can't live up to its expectations. You simply can't follow all the rules. And some of them are dumb anyway."

"Come to me," urges Jesus. "I am the narrow door that opens wide unto God's mercy and grace for you. Walk with me and let me show you how to live without the narrow doors that block and restrict and kill life. Walk with me and let me show you how to live with one another, for I am the way, the truth and the life," says Jesus who healed the bent-over, dirt-seeing woman of long ago and who offers us the same life-freeing, life-saving invitation today.

I don't know about you, but I'll take door number 2, Alex, the one with Jesus leading the way.

Amen.