

## ***The Elephant In The Room***

Luke 13:22-30

March 4, 2007

### **I.**

Imagine rushing to an airport departure gate because you're late. You get there and see the door has closed and you tell the attendant, "wait, wait, I have a ticket and a seat assignment!" But the attendant says, "I'm sorry, but once we close the door it cannot be reopened."

How would you feel? You thought you were all set, and you still can look out the window at the airplane and see the passengers in their seats. Perhaps someone is sitting in the seat you thought had been assigned to you.

If we could move this airport scene back two thousand years, we might capture the message in today's Gospel. I realize the analogy is imperfect because today you could catch a later flight. But if we put that possibility aside, we are not far from the setting in the reading. Some people believed they had a ticket and seat assignment, but Jesus said otherwise.

### **II.**

All four Gospels show the theological tension between Jews and Gentiles. Many Jews thought their entrance into God's kingdom was assured because they were descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Gentiles had little going for them except their faith.

Jesus, however, turned some of these Jewish presumptions upside down. He said the first will be last and the last will be first. He proclaimed that people would not have automatic access to the kingdom merely because they belonged to the historic chosen people. Access to the kingdom would be offered to those who followed Jesus' teachings, and they might be outsiders.

And as Jesus traveled through the towns and villages he encountered many Jews who believed the old ideas. These would be people to whom Jesus' message might seem radical and difficult to accept. This probably prompted the rhetorical question in today's reading, "Lord, will only a few be saved?"

### **III.**

With that background, let's look at today's reading. Jesus began by saying "Enter through the narrow door." Enter what? What does he want us to enter? Is it a store, or a garden, or a restaurant, or a church, or something else? What is it we are concerned about entering?

As might be expected, theologians and scholars are not in agreement. The prevailing view, however, holds that Jesus was talking about entering heaven, and claiming the Christian promise of eternal life.

But if we accept this view then other theological consequences flow from it. I have said before that doing theology is a little bit like playing Whack-A-Mole at the arcade. If you push down on an idea in one place it will cause another idea to pop up in a different place.

And if we accept the notion that the narrow door is the door to heaven, then it's something that we won't even see in this life. It's the door to the next life. Is this what Jesus meant?

There are two possibilities. One is that Jesus indeed was talking about the door to the next life, and we are called to live our faith now so that we can get through that narrow door later. The other view is that the narrow door is something we go through now when we become Christian believers, and it shapes us for the rest of our lives.

And what about that door? Is there just one narrow door for everyone, or do each of us have our own narrow door that could eventually be closed for us if we have not been faithful?

Most of us probably have seen apocalyptic end times portraits where billions of people are massed before the judgment throne. Is that the image of today's Gospel? Or will each of us be greeted by our own doorkeeper who has been holding that door open for us to accept Jesus Christ until the very last moment when, if we have not done so, we will be left outside?

And finally, what about this messianic banquet? Today's reading gives an image of some people looking in to see Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the prophets while they are stuck outside. And what is this messianic banquet anyway? Is it a one time event like a huge dinner at the country club, or is it an ongoing thing from which we can partake forever? Or is it something else?

Well, these all are interesting questions, and we will not know the answers until the next world. In this world, however, the important question is what we believe about Jesus. In this world we are called by Scripture to a life of faith that promises eternity in our Lord's presence, and we are called to a life of service that naturally flows from a sincere faith.

#### **IV.**

Today's Gospel makes that clear, but it does so by pointing out the terrible consequences of not living a life of faith instead of proclaiming the glorious promises of doing so. It's the bad news that is the mirror image of the good news. It's the other side of the salvation coin.

Some people in today's church do not talk about God's wrath. Instead they preach God's love and Christ's salvation given through the cross. And this generally is a good idea. Accentuate the positive. You will create more believers by telling them what is good about God rather than what is wrong with them. You catch more flies with honey than vinegar.

But today, Jesus gave us some vinegar. Perhaps he was talking to some people who needed a strong message. Even though we embrace the good news of salvation, the bad news of separation from God on the flip side always is there, like the elephant in the room that no one wants to mention. That is today's Gospel.

#### **V.**

The Gospel is not always easy, and Jesus made it clear that discipleship is not always easy. In some ways it's countercultural. Jesus does not call us to do what comes naturally. Jesus does not ask us to do things that we would do anyway. We are called by our faith to put things at the top of our lists that, in the absence of our faith, probably would be closer to the bottom.

That's why the gate is narrow, and many will not be able to enter. It's why, according to today's reading, people who thought they knew Jesus will stand outside and be told he does not know them. They will say, "We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets," but to no avail.

And what about the church today? We eat and drink with Jesus in the Eucharist, and he teaches us through Scripture. But Scripture tells us that those things, in and of themselves, are not sufficient. How are we to understand this Gospel in our own lives?

We all have heard the saying about how if it looks like a duck, acts like a duck, and sounds like a duck, it must be a duck. Can we say the same thing about Christians? If people look like Christians, act like Christians, and sound like Christians, does it mean they are Christians?

The answer, according to today's Gospel, appears to be "not necessarily." Just going through the motions is not going to get the job done. It wasn't enough two thousand years ago and it is not enough now. This is serious business, and it can affect a lot of people we know.

Most of us probably have friends or neighbors who we think are dear people, but we're not sure whether they will be able to go through that narrow door when the time comes. And perhaps there are people with whom we work, or even members of our own families, who we fear might be on the outside looking in at that heavenly banquet.

What do we do about those situations? It's only natural to put our concerns about them on the back burner. It's only natural to wait for a more opportune time that never seems to come. And so the elephant in the room remains in the room in sad obscurity because it is just not natural to say anything. But remember, Jesus calls us to do what does not come naturally.

## V.

Most of us remember Woody Allen. He was an actor and comedian, and sometimes displayed a dark and cynical sense of humor.

I might have mentioned that several years ago he gave a commencement address and, in his typical fashion, he said to the graduates, "More than at any time in history, humanity faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness. The other leads to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly."

We can thank God that we have better choices than that. We can thank God that he sent his Son to offer us the path to salvation. And we can thank God that we have accepted him as the way through the narrow door.

But what about those people who we think have not yet grasped the meaning of the gift we will celebrate on Easter? On that inevitable day when we all must account for the content of our lives will they be left with Woody Allen's choices? Perhaps we can ask if this time of Lent is an especially good time to reach out to others with our faith?

I am reminded of a tragic poem; anonymous as far as I know. It's written from a fellow, now deceased, to his neighbor, who is still alive, and it's called *A Letter from Hell*. You might have heard it. In any event I pray that we all will take it to heart. It goes like this,

You lived next door to me for years  
We shared our dreams, our joys and tears.  
A friend to me you were indeed;  
A friend who helped in every need.

What sadness then for me to find  
That after all you weren't so kind!  
The day my life on earth did end  
I learned you weren't a faithful friend!

For all those years we spent on earth  
You never talked of "second birth."  
You never spoke of my lost soul  
And of the Christ who'd make me whole!

Eternity here I'm forced to bear  
But you can help all those still there;  
Plead with them now quite earnestly  
Lest they be cast in hell with me! *Amen.*