

"Opening the Narrow Door"

Luke 13:22-30

Many years ago in 2003, I was on a guided tour of scenic Europe. I remember an evening in Germany, when our tour bus approached a quaint, medieval town for the night. The town was medieval in that it was from that time, and was walled with arched entrances, entrances that opened or closed with either gates or doors. There was some question whether the tour bus would go under and through the main entrance, but the skilled driver lowered its shocks and squeezed through with inches to spare all around. He was cheered for his skill. I later learned the town with its walls still had a gatekeeper to close the gates or doors at night. Walls, gates, doors, were things I hadn't given much thought to, but in this old medieval setting, I gained new appreciation for their significance.

Gates and doors have a very ancient history. The Roman god Janus was a deity associated with doors, entrances, and exits. Janus is typically depicted with two faces looking in opposite directions. Janus oversaw all who entered or left houses, buildings, and cities. As the protector of beginnings and endings, entrances and exits, Janus was associated with daybreak, with the seasonal solstices of summer and winter, and with the New Year. Janus was the Roman god from which we derived the name "January," a name that designates the month beginning the New Year.

Janus reminds us that people through all ages of history have appreciated the significance of things like doors. Even the Hebrew word for "door" has the same structure as the Hebrew word for "birth." Doors in the Jewish temple had special significance. Grain was brought to the temple at the north door. Animals were brought to the temple at the south door. Incense was burned in the temple at the east door. Christian churches typically had every day entrances at south doors, and ceremonial entrances at west doors.

Doors have always had profound meaning for humans. Think of all the doors we use and pass through in life. There are front doors, back doors, screen doors, storm doors, patio doors, French doors, bedroom doors, basement doors, garage doors, trap doors, pet doors, shop doors, and church doors. Doors set boundaries and protect privacy. We open doors, shut doors, slam doors, knock on doors, tell people to find doors, and decorate doors. The open door or the closed door says a lot about life symbolically.

It shouldn't surprise us that Jesus used the image of door in his teaching. The gospel of Luke tells us that as Jesus went through towns and villages, teaching, healing, welcoming, and eating meals with the down and outs, that people became curious. The kingdom of God was often seen to be like the great feast envisioned in Isaiah 25. It was to be a great banquet, a party, a sharing of God's grace. Many of the people Jesus invited to the great feast were common people, those who didn't make it to the temple or synagogue regularly, those considered by the religious leaders to be impure, even those who were outside the Jewish faith. So the question came. "Jesus, will only a few be saved? Will only a few make it into the kingdom?" And Jesus replied, "Few or many are none of your business. Do your best to go through the door which will be narrow for you. This is because you assume you'll sit down to God's salvation banquet, just because you are hanging around the neighborhood or are better than others. One day, you might find yourself banging on a closed door, wanting to get in but finding you are at the back of the line. Others you assume couldn't possibly be on the guest list, will be sitting down at the great feast with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the prophets. And people who are not Jews, people from the east and west, the north and south, will also be at the table. There will be a great reversal. Those of you who think you are special and first on the guest list will be last, and those of you who think you are last will be first. Do your best to go through narrow door, for many will not be able to enter it. Indeed they will find it closed by the master of the house."

Now typically, we interpret Jesus confirming the questioner's expectation that only a few will be saved. Of course, we almost always count ourselves in that few. These words of Jesus are a little troubling to understand, for most of us assume we are high up on God's guest list. It's popular for people to draw boundaries through family groups, religious groups, community groups, political groups, and national groups. We like to include ourselves, and exclude others. We like to show how good we are by being in a specific group. We are among the less than 20% who go to church regularly. We may even carry Bibles, engage in vigorous Sunday school discussions, stand up for we would call a real version of Christianity, and count ourselves among God's chosen people. We serve in official positions, giving money, going to church school, enduring sermons, participating in various church functions. We live in a so-called Christian nation, God's town, God's neighborhood. We have "In God we trust" on our coins, and pledge allegiance to "one nation under God" while at public events. We post the Ten Commandments on walls, and see ourselves as believing the right things. Years ago I heard that about 62% of Americans say they believe in a final judgment and a supposed everlasting torture called hell, but only 4% think there's any chance they will end up there. Beneath it all, we believe we should be way up there on the guest list, though we often forget that the very people who did the same things in Jesus' day were the people he was hardest on. The religious leaders called scribes and Pharisees thought they were in God's good grace, purer and more faithful than the common people.

But they were in for a surprise, for Jesus chose to associate with and welcome the common people, the last - - sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors as the most hated of all since they confiscated the peasant's land when the loans weren't honored and made the peasants poor tenant farmers on their own land, the last like tax man Matthew, dishonest businessman Zacchaeus, demon-stricken Mary Magdalene, and the thieves hanging at his side on the cross. Jesus seemingly taught the big surprise, the great reversal, with the first being last, and the last being first. Jesus taught that things are not as we expect. The first will be last, and the last will be first. He continually asked

those who thought they were in, "Are you sure you're in?" and those who thought they were out, "Are you sure you're out?"

One of the foremost historical Jesus scholars of our time, John Dominic Crossan once offered this summation of who Jesus was. "I'd say Jesus lived in an occupied land, among peasants who had long existed at a subsistence level and were being pressed harder and harder. It was a world of structured inequality and injustice. In that world, he lived out an alternative vision. And he invited others to share it: a community of free healing and shared eating, a community of equals before God and each other. To women, children, men, lepers, the destitute, the disturbed, he issued the same invitation, 'Come eat with me, and be healed, and take what you experience to others.' That new community is what the kingdom of God looked like, if God not the emperor, was directly in charge. That is what it means for God's will to be done on earth as in heaven."

Way back in the 3rd century, there were 7 deacons in the church at Rome, one named Lawrence, who was the church treasurer and helped distribute charity as he also cared for the church property. But the emperor at that time seized the church property, and forbade gathering for worship. The bishop of Rome and 6 of the deacons were caught having a secret service in a cemetery, leading to their execution and burial in the same cemetery. Only Lawrence was spared because the emperor wanted the church funds. Lawrence was tortured to reveal their location, till he finally agreed to gather the riches together from various locations, if he was given 3 days to do so. The faithful deacon used the time to give away everything to help the poorest of the poor in the city. When the emperor came and demanded the church's treasure, Lawrence opened the door to where these poor and marginalized people were gathered. "Here," he said, "is the treasure of the church!" A mere 33 years old, he was then killed, reflecting Jesus words in Matthew 6:12, "Where your treasure is, there will be your heart also."

We would do well to take a different line from what is commonly read into this passage from Luke. Maybe the narrow door Jesus is talking about is not the door of exclusiveness, specialness, judgmental division, and fewness. Ironically, maybe the narrow door is the way of inclusiveness, God welcoming all, grace, harmony, and the embrace of many. This seems to be hinted at by Jesus' teaching that people will come from the east and west, north and south, to share in the feast of God's kingdom.

One of our state senators, Tim Kaine, recently came out with a book entitled *Walk Ride Paddle: A Life Outside*. The book describes how in 2019, on his 60th birthday and after 25 years of public service, he decided to embark on a three part journey spread out over several years. He hiked the 559 miles of the Appalachian Trail that crosses Virginia from Harpers Ferry to the Tennessee border, then biked the 321 miles of the Blue Ridge Parkway and Skyline Drive on the crest of the Blue Ridge mountains, and finally canoed the 348 miles of the James River from its headwaters in the Allegheny Mountains till its entrance in the Chesapeake Bay. In the book, he describes sleeping on the ground in downpours and burning his foot with scalding coffee, as he blends adventure, reflection, religious and political insights from his life and the world.

But even on his somewhat secluded adventures, Kaine observed that Jesus' "first and last" description was still evident. Narrowness from America's racial past showed itself even in the secluded areas of Virginia's wilderness, for there was little diversity seen among hikers and park visitors beyond white, despite the fact that most area and parks are open to all. In fact, one day after his media post that ended with the words, "Virginia is for nature lovers," he got this response from someone out of state. "Virginia is for WHITE nature lovers. Not too safe for non-whites."

Tim Kaine then reflects that many people of color grew up deprived of the same exposure to the outdoors as many whites, with even outdoor pools closed to prevent integration, leading to not so much fear of nature, but how others will treat them when they are out in nature. Following the Great Depression, Franklin D. Roosevelt helped create the Civilian Conservation Corp to put 3 million men to work at \$30 a month to build scenic roads, parks, camps, forests, irrigation systems, dams, and restored battlefields. But when the CCC built things like the Skyline Drive, only 10% of African Americans were allowed into the program. Land for the Shenandoah National Park was later donated by the state of Virginia in 1950, with the condition that amenities at campgrounds and lodges were to be segregated, leading to Lewis Mountain Campground reserved for African Americans, and other lodges and campgrounds off limits to them. This didn't change until 1957, when National Parks were required to be integrated, though Virginia kept segregated state parks till 1967.

Every age in history, has its "firsts and lasts," guarded by narrow doors, but Jesus reminds us that the door is narrow only to those who think they are first, better, without need, and perfect. For the first will be last, and last will be first. Jesus taught, healed, forgave, and dined with all kinds of people. Jesus tried to get so-called pure ones to see that God wants people from the east and west, north and south, God wants the forgotten ones typically counted out. God's narrow way is the inclusive way, the way of grace and mercy.

That inclusive way has been ignored by many church groups -- Catholic, Protestant, and in more recent years, even the evangelical community, where as many as 25% have now left the church, most of them ages 18 to 30. NPR journalist Sarah McCannon in a recent book *The Exvangelicals: Loving, Living, and Leaving the White Evangelical Church*, describes this struggle and exodus, her own included, much of it over the issue of narrowness, extremism, and the lack of inclusion. This dechurching extends beyond evangelicals, for in the last 25 years, 40 million Americans have dropped out

of churches, after moving or dealing with the Covid 19 pandemic. But the narrow door of exclusion seems to have a lot to do with it, and many people, especially young people, aren't having it any more.

Recently the Hanover County Board of Supervisors issued a recognition letter heralding the proclamation of a Girl Scout Gold Award, given to a young woman named Katie Lindley. Katie, in response to a Hanover School Board ban last year of books deemed too explicit for libraries, created a "Free to Read" project of book nooks, small libraries at several local businesses, libraries that included 438 of the banned book titles. But Hanover County Board of Supervisors censured the proclamation by omitting the words "banned" and "censorship," along with the refusal to disclose any book nook location. Katie responded that it was an honor to have her proclamation censured, greater than any proclamation. She stood for opening the narrow door.

In a world where most people are deeming themselves better than others - better than persons of the opposite or same sex, better than those of a different ethnicity, better than those of a certain religion or nationality or political party, God's opened narrow door is often missed. We thrive on competition, beating out others, being winners while others are losers. God is to bless us, and damn all the rest. Right now in our religious communities there are many who want to practice the narrow door of exclusion, not inclusion. Right now in our nation, there is a battle on who should be in and who should be out.

Much of our nation was built on a false narrow door of exclusion, on the backs of Indigenous peoples whose land was taken from them unjustly, on the backs of African Americans enslaved to build our economy. Now some want to close the borders so that we can have our economic way of life supposedly secured, even though much of our labor is now done by those coming from other places, the last, the least, the lost. In reality, our nation was built by the narrow door, not of exclusion, but of inclusion, built by

immigrants seeking a new life, even religious freedom. And Jesus simply says, “Do your best to enter the narrow door of God’s inclusive kingdom, a kingdom of grace, a kingdom of mercy.

Well known preacher Fred Craddock tells of the time he was a student preacher at a little church in the eastern Tennessee hills. The nearby town of Oak Ridge began to boom with the nuclear energy business. Every hill and valley and shady grove became full of recreational vehicles, trucks, trailer parks for the hard hat workers and their families. The little church was close by, a beautiful white framed church that was 112 years old. The church had a pump organ in the corner played by Ms. Lois. She played songs slow, oh so slow, slower than anybody else. The church had a beautifully decorated chimney, kerosene lamps all around the walls, and pews that were hand hewn from a giant popular tree.

After church one Sunday Fred Craddock called together the leaders and said, “We need to go visit all those people in the trailer parks and invite them to church.” “Oh, I don’t know,” some said. “They won’t fit in here. They’re just construction workers and will be leaving soon.” “Well, I think we ought to invite them and try to make them feel at home.”

The argument continued for a while, until time ran out. It was agreed that next Sunday they would vote on the matter. The next Sunday the leaders came back together. Somebody made a motion. “I move that in order to be a member of this church, you must own property in the county.” It was seconded and passed. Fred Craddock voted against it, but was reminded that he was just a young, inexperienced preacher. He moved out of the community not long after.

Many years later, Fred and his wife moved back to eastern Tennessee, and decided to look up the little church. They found the state road that used to be a gravel road. There stood the church, still shining white. But things were different. The parking lot was full, full of motorcycles, trucks, and cars. Out

front hung a big sign, “Barbecue, all you can eat.” The little church had become a restaurant. Fred Craddock and his wife went inside. The pews were against the wall. The place now had electric lights. The organ was pushed in a corner. Aluminum and plastic tables seated all kinds of people eating barbecued pork and chicken and ribs. The people there were like those listed in Acts 2, from all over the world, including sinners and outcasts. Fred Craddock turned to his wife, “It’s a good thing this is not still a church; otherwise these people wouldn’t be here.”

And Jesus still says to us, “Go in through the narrow door. People will come from the east and west, from the north and south.” Everyone of us today probably has a door that needs to be opened. What is that door for you and me.

There is a prayer that someday I wish I could learn to pray with some integrity, a prayer that points to the open door of inclusiveness a prayer for the so called worst of people, even our enemies. It was found on a piece of wrapping paper at the Ravensbruck concentration camp in Germany. "Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will, but all those of ill will. Do not only remember all the suffering they have subjected us to. Remember the fruits we brought forth thanks to this suffering – our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart that all this inspired. And when they come to judgment, let all these fruits we have born be their reward and forgiveness."