

The Narrow Way

Matthew 7:13-20 ~ December 11, 2016 ~ Heritage Lutheran Church

Jesus Said, "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, ... (But) the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life..."

Last summer, at our Bible Camp in Idaho, we had an interesting situation arise. On the last full day of camp we had planned a hike up to a mountain lake for the day's activity. When we had scouted out the trail in preparation for this hike, we found a problem. The trail had a well marked starting point and it finished clearly at the lake. However during the previous year a logging operation had obscured one part of the path at a point along its way. What had happened was that a skid road, used for dragging logs out of the forest, had crossed the trail to the lake. For an unwary hiker the skid road seemed wide and easy to follow, but the narrower lake trail was hidden by the branches and dirt berm along the edge of the road. It was easy to be thrown off the right path and out into the forest if they followed the wider road instead of the narrower trail.

Fortunately for our hikers, my brother David, who has spent a fair portion of his life tramping around the woods of Northern Idaho, was available to guide the group past the tempting wider road onto the narrower and more difficult to find lake trail. All our people made it safely to their destination and enjoyed the beauty of the high mountain lake without the distraction of being lost in the woods.

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Our world today is full of wide roads that lead to destruction. Our world's popular opinion wants us to believe that all paths lead to God. And like the muddling of the way along the trail to that North Idaho mountain lake, it is easy to become confused about the true path. It seems so wise and good to be tolerant of the various religious perspectives in the world. It seems kind to give all of them the benefit of the doubt. But when we suggest that other religions have the same truth revealed to Christianity, we fall into a trap set for humanity by the enemies of God. The Bible is very, very clear about this. Jesus is the one and only way to salvation. The exclusive nature of Christ as savior is an extremely important matter for Christians, because it has such great significance for how we go, make, baptize and teach disciples in the name of Jesus. Subject to the Scripture's authority, we must maintain the unique nature of Christian salvation in our proclamation and witness about Jesus.

This is what Jesus is talking about when he speaks of the wide and narrow gate. He alone is the way. Jesus is the narrow gate that leads to life. By this we mean that faith in Jesus Christ is the only way that a person can enter into eternal life with God. This gate is narrow because it does not allow for tolerating a variety of religious perspectives. It is narrow because it refers to one specific historic person. It is narrow because it restricts the creative nature of our sin that wants to invent all kinds of different paths to God. The world jeers at this one way of salvation. It says, "How can God's salvation be restricted to just one man in history? Isn't this a self-serving and harmfully restrictive way of thinking?" As Christians we so desperately want to be kind, gracious, and loving to all. So restricting salvation to Jesus alone seems very narrow minded to us. But that is exactly the point. To enter by the narrow gate we need to be narrow minded. We need to know that the narrower, less obvious way, is the truth. And that truth actually sets us free to follow Jesus.

As the Bible clearly lays it out in Acts 4:

And there is salvation in no one else (besides Jesus), for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.

Any proposal for salvation outside of Jesus is the wrong way. It may be a wide and inviting way, but we have to stop. If someone tries to teach that the wide varieties of religions in the world are all alternative ways to God, then we must recognize that as the wide way that leads to destruction. Scripture negates that approach completely.

So as we follow the narrow way we clearly proclaim Jesus as the only way of salvation for everyone in the world. That is what scripture clearly teaches. When people ask if Christianity is the only true way to God, we should firmly state that we believe it is. It would be completely foolish say anything else. Jesus lived and died to establish the Christian faith. Christianity is the single open path to God for human beings. This is what Jesus means when he says:

I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Now we come to the question of what role the Christian Church has to play in salvation. The Bible teaches us that the Church, in general, is Christ's body on earth. This means that it is his hands, his feet, his mouth, his ears, everything that Jesus needs to communicate with the people he is saving. But this church we are talking about is a church that only God sees. He guides it himself with his Holy Spirit?

However we can see that the church we experience is a mixture of God's will and the will of sinful people. The church we see is filled with different histories, interpretations, traditions, and religious practices. It is so easy for us church folk to get all puffed up about our particular perspective on Christianity that we get to thinking of ourselves as the only true body of Christ. We get to thinking that Jesus would be so much better off if he just cut off all the other branches of the church and stick strictly with those who think like we do. You see where this is going don't you? And you see why it is leading us into a dangerous kind of confusion. It won't be long before we are saying that only those who think like us are saved by Jesus alone. Lots and lots of Christians have gone down that road. It is a wrong path. Yes the gate is narrow. But it is only as narrow as Jesus makes it. It is not narrow the way we sometimes think it should be.

But we need some practical guidance on this matter don't we? How do we tell the difference in the real world between being overly restrictive and pouring our hopes through the wide gate that will only lead to our destruction? Well God's word gives us an answer for this. The true church of Jesus are ***those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours*** as Paul says in 1st Corinthians 1. And John instructs us in the 3rd chapter of his first letter, that Christians are those ***who we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded...*** That's it. That is the practical definition. That is all there is to the narrow gate of the true Church of Jesus Christ. It is centered in the name of Jesus that we share.

We must never make the differences between Christians more important than the NAME we share. If we make a particular way of baptizing or a unique interpretation of the final day of Christ into what it means to be Christian, then we have departed from how Jesus defines His Church. We have tried to shape the exclusive salvation in Jesus to our own design. That is very wrong and we will not be blessed by that. We will hurt God's church. We will confuse those whom Christ is calling to himself through us. We must stop those tendencies any way we can.

But the call to go, make, baptize and teach is a part of entering by the narrow way, isn't it? It is the call to go beyond ourselves and share the name of Jesus with others. It is a call to go humbly with full awareness of our weakness. It is also a call to go with complete confidence in Jesus. It is confidence in his name. Jesus is way out ahead of us. We are merely tagging along. We must understand that no religion or lack of religion can stop him from saving his people. ***For God so loved the WORLD that he sent his only begotten son...*** He is out there in the world, in every synagogue, mosque, university

lab, philosophy seminar, free thinkers' club, and place of worship, no matter the religion. Through the Holy Spirit, loose in the world, he is calling his own to himself. They know their shepherd's voice. They may still be Hindu's, Moslems, Agnostics, Atheists, and nonbelievers of all kinds. But they hear their Lord calling them, they just don't know his name yet. That's where we come in. That is what go-make-baptize-and-teach is all about. Please don't misunderstand what is being said. No one will be saved apart from the name of Jesus. But, God's Holy Spirit is not hindered by the religious beliefs of anyone. He can work on the hearts of anyone he chooses. History is full of examples of the Holy Spirit's proclivity to do just that. But we must be ready to do our part. It is our witness to Jesus that may supply the NAME they so desperately need to know. It is the NAME that opens the narrow gate to life.

So now we come to the very nature of the narrow way. This is our lord's great commission. Our job is to humbly follow Jesus out into the world to find the people who have fallen in love with him. They are the ones who have a growing faith in him, even though they aren't fully aware. As we enter by the narrow gate we get to tell them his name. His name is Jesus. His NAME is the source of all salvation. Knowing his name will be a great relief and wonder to those whom he has called to faith. This means that we are not called to argue or pressure or intimidate or bamboozle or anything like that. Forget the canned evangelism. We are not called to pester people. Sharing the name of Jesus should never be forced into conversations. We are called to find where Jesus is already at work in others. This means that we need to enter into modest conversation with our neighbors. We are called by Jesus to take genuine interest in their lives, to enter into friendship with them, to endeavor to serve them. We need to learn about their beliefs to discover the presence of Jesus in their lives so that we can help them name Him. And when they join us in naming Jesus as the name above all names we are truly united with them in the body of Jesus Christ. Together we will enter by the narrow way. It is the way that the Holy Spirit is leading us even now. The only joy beyond knowing that you are saved by the Name of Jesus Christ is knowing that a sister or brother in Christ is joining you also in eternity. That is the narrow way you are taking even now as you believe in the name of Jesus. It is your way to life that has no end!

The cross is full. The tomb is empty. Jesus is alive and leading us out to go, make, baptize and teach disciples. Let us take up our cross and follow him.