

STS 2009 General Retreat Wednesday Evening Prayer

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Enter by the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few. This evening's text comes from the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount. It is a familiar text, of course—though most of us think there really ought to be three ways—the broad way for sinners, the narrow way for the real saints, and the not-so-broad and not-so-narrow way for the rest of us! But that is not what Jesus says. Blessed Martin Luther nails it, I think, when he says that in these words Jesus gives us "several warnings, to arm us against all kinds of hindrances and offenses of both doctrine and life that we confront in the world."

We do, of course, confront hindrances of both doctrine and life—and that is just where we get into trouble with this text. It is a perennial favorite for those who think that right doctrine or right living is the key to salvation. Or maybe, especially if they're Lutherans, they don't really think that way. They just act like it.

Take, for instance, those who emphasize the importance of right doctrine. They may well view the "narrow gate" as theological and doctrinal purity. This approach is well-described by Garrison Keillor when he discusses the Sanctified Brethren, that fictionalized church of his childhood. Here is what he says:

*"We were 'exclusive' Brethren, a branch that believed in keeping itself pure of false doctrine by avoiding association with the impure. Some Brethren assemblies, mostly in larger cities, were not so strict and broke bread with strangers—we referred to them as the 'so-called Open Brethren,' the 'so-called' implying the shakiness of their position—whereas we made sure that any who fellowshiped with us were straight on all the details of the Faith, as set forth by the first Brethren who left the Anglican Church in 1865 to worship on the basis of correct principles. . . . Unfortunately, once free of the worldly Anglicans, these firebrands were not content to worship in peace but turned their guns on each other. Scholarly to the core and perfect literalists every one, they got to arguing over points that, to any outsider, would have seemed very minor indeed but which to them were crucial to the Faith, including the question: If Believer A is associated with Believer B who has somehow associated himself with C who holds a False Doctrine, must D break off association with A, even though A does not hold the Doctrine, to avoid the taint? The correct answer is: Yes. Some Brethren, however, felt that D should only speak with A and urge him to break off with B. The Brethren who felt otherwise promptly broke off with them. This was the Bedford Question, one of several controversies that, inside of two years, split the Brethren into three branches. Once having tasted the pleasure of being Correct and defending True Doctrine, they kept right on and broke up at every opportunity." [Garrison Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*, Viking, 1985]*

In Lake Wobegon, of course, the Sanctified Brethren walked the narrow way, while it was the Lutherans and Catholics who were ambling through the wide gate. But Lutherans, to be sure, have certainly had a tendency at times to make this gospel gate into a matter of correct doctrine.

On the other hand, some have seen this distinction between the broad and narrow way as a matter of behavior, rather than doctrine. Those who follow the narrow way are those who live the right way—and of course it had to do in the old days with smoking or drinking or dancing or card playing, but today has sometimes progressed on to other issues. A good example of this approach comes in Anne Tyler's delightful novel *Saint Maybe*. Young Ian has become involved with the somewhat offbeat Church of the Second Chance, and has decided that God wants him to drop out of college and assume responsibility for the orphaned children of his brother—a plan which doesn't sit well with his parents:

"Ian, have you fallen into the hands of some sect?" his father asked.

"No, I haven't," Ian said. "I have merely discovered a church that makes sense to me, the same as Dober Street Presbyterian makes sense to you and Mom."

"Dober Street didn't ask us to abandon our education," his mother told him. "Of course we have nothing against religion; we raised all of you children to be Christians. But our church never asked us to abandon our entire way of life."

"Well," Ian said, "maybe it should have!" [Anne Tyler, *St. Maybe*, Knopf, 1991]

But this understanding, too—that Jesus requires us to adhere to certain strict standards of behavior—misses the mark. There is some truth to it, to be sure—just as there is truth to the importance of believing correct doctrine. But neither is what Jesus really is after here. Here in this text he means something quite different.

One clue is to pay attention to the word he uses when he says "the road is hard." It isn't the ordinary Greek word that means "difficult." Rather this word means something like "constricted" or "obstructed." To me, it presents this image: The gate is narrow, and the road is difficult, because there is some obstacle in the way. You know that feeling, don't you? It's the feeling you have when you find yourself on the freeway behind a car going 40 miles per hour. He's in the way!

But in the text we are discussing, the one in the way is Jesus. The gate is narrow, and he's standing in front of it. There's no room to get past him. There's no other way in. If we would enter, there is only one choice, and that is to deal with him. But that is what many people don't want to do. Often we don't want to do it either.

You see, dealing with Jesus is a bit threatening. We can understand and appreciate Christianity for what it teaches and how it guides us. After all, if everyone would confess the creeds and follow the Golden Rule, the world would be a better place. Our society would be better off if we all promoted Christian values.

But Christianity is not about Christian values, it is about Jesus Christ. He is the one who stands there in the narrow gate, blocking the constricted road, and he does not let us by unless we deal with him. I love the story in John 6, where Jesus has been talking about himself as the Living Bread, and saying that those who eat his flesh and drink his blood will have eternal life. There are lots of different themes in that story, but it seems to me that the very physicality of the image is another demand that his disciples deal with *him*—not just his teachings, but his person, his reality, his flesh and blood. And many are offended. "Because of this," John says, "many of his disciples turned back

and no longer went about with him." They were really interested in his teachings, and they wanted to learn how to be better people; but when they realized that they had to come to terms with Jesus himself, then they weren't so sure. "Do you also wish to go away?" he asked the twelve, and Peter replied, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." They have come to know, in other words, that they must deal with him. He is standing in the gate, and they cannot go through without dealing with him.

Have you come up to the gate, to the place in the path where Jesus stands? Have you stood there and had to deal with him? That is the point, you see, when you at last realize that all your cleverness and all your righteousness and all your well-meaning effort, your theological insight and passion, isn't enough to get you through that door. When you stand there before Jesus, you know that all these things that fill the Sermon on the Mount—the forgiving, the not judging, the unconditional loving—these things are beyond us. We can't do them ourselves.

I remember a time in my own life when someone hurt me quite badly, and then had the audacity to ask me to forgive him. No way! I was not interested in forgiving. I wrestled with it for weeks. I remember saying in my own heart, "I'm not going to forgive him—take that, Jesus!" You see, even in my refusal to forgive, my inability to forgive, I had this sense that what I do, what I feel, who I am, always has to come to terms with Jesus Christ. We make up our minds how we're going to be, and then, if the gospel has had any effect in us, we run right into Jesus who says, "Now wait a minute . . . I'm the one who gets to say how you're going to be. You don't get through this gate without going through me." And it's not just the gate—it's the way. He expands the metaphor, seems to me, to make it clear that we don't deal with Jesus just at the onset, the beginning—but all along the way, the narrow way, at every turn he stands there blocking where the Old Adam wants to go.

Tonight's passage, as I said, comes near the end of the Sermon on the Mount. That is no accident. All through these chapters we've been reading the last few weeks you wonder: who could ever do any of these things? And the answer is: nobody! At least nobody who hasn't confronted Jesus Christ, the man in the gate. But when we wrestle with him, when we come up against him and deal with him, then . . . well, maybe. Maybe we really can forgive. Maybe we really can learn to judge not, to be not anxious. We can't do it ourselves, at least I can't. But maybe, when I've come up against him, when I've realized my own weakness and my own need, my own dependence on him, then maybe things can change. Maybe I can be free. At least that's what he seems to promise.

Luther is so very direct here. Jesus, he says, means to say this: "I have taught you this to make you see how very few people are on your side and how many will teach and live in opposition to you. This will give you a headache, but hold tight, and do not let it get you angry. . . . This is how it should and must be, and you should remember that I told you beforehand: 'The gate to life is narrow, and the way is hard.'" And so, Luther adds, "Think about this, and guide yourself accordingly. If you want to be a Christian, then be one. It will never be any different."

It is a tremendous paradox. Jesus says, "Take my yoke upon you, and you will find rest." Or he might have said it like this: "Go down this narrow, constricted way, through this narrow gate, and you will find freedom, room to be free, spaciousness." The Psalmist sometimes talks about salvation as being given space to move, to live. "He brought me out into an open place." That is what this narrow door means—through the narrow door, there is plenty of room! And the narrow door, you

see, is Christ himself. Read it through the lens of John 10: "Enter through the narrow gate . . . For the gate is narrow and road is hard that leads to life. . . But I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture." And "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me." It will never be any different.

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