

Blessed Insecurity

In the name of him who is the Narrow Door to salvation, dear friends in Christ: In this morning's Gospel we find Jesus on his final journey, making his way progressively toward Jerusalem. He knows he has a mission to complete there – that Jerusalem is the place where his earthly ministry must come to its climactic end as he gives his life to be the once and for all sacrifice that will atone for the sins of the world. He also knows *when* this must take place: at the upcoming Passover celebration now several weeks away. So he's not exactly in a hurry to arrive at his destination. He has allowed himself time to teach in the towns and villages that he passes through on the way. It's in the course of this journey that someone, maybe a villager or one of the larger group of disciples who are traveling with him, proposes a question: "Lord, will those who are saved be few?"

What most likely prompted the question was the typical Jewish mindset of the day, namely that we, the Jews, are the chosen ones and all the others are out. After all it was *our* father Abraham to whom the Lord made the promises. He repeated those promises to the patriarchs, our fathers Isaac and Jacob. It was to our people alone that God gave his Law at Mount Sinai. And we keep that Law: we circumcise our sons, and we don't eat food that the Lord declared unclean, we keep Sabbath, and so forth. The temple, the Lord's dwelling place on earth, is in our capital city. That's where he chose to have it built – among *us*. Obviously we hold a special place in the heart of God. The other nations, not so much.

With this attitude in mind, it's vital to note what Jesus does with the question. He turns it around completely. He essentially tells the guy, "You're not asking the right question." And it's interesting that while only one person asks, the answer that Jesus gives is in the plural. It's like everyone there is leaning forward to hear the answer because they all want to know, and Jesus answers all of them. And what he says is devastating.

"Strive to enter through the narrow door because many, I tell you, are seeking to enter and will not be able to." And to get the right emphasis I have to unpack the grammar here a bit. First, when Jesus says "strive", it's a command cast in a tense that implies ongoing action. He's saying *you all must keep on striving* to enter through the narrow door. It's not a onetime event, but a continuing struggle. And the even word *strive* is a weak translation of the Greek word Jesus uses – which is the word from which we get our word *agony*. So what he's saying is "You all must keep on *agonizing* to enter through the narrow door." It emphasizes that the ongoing struggle is difficult and painful. And to that he adds that many people hoping to enter will fail. They don't have the strength or the ability to achieve it.

But then follow where Jesus goes with this. He says, "When once the Master of the house gets up and closes the door, you will be standing outside knocking. And he will say to you, 'I don't know where you come from.' And you will start sputtering, 'But we ate and drank in your presence. You taught in our streets.' And again, he will say, 'I tell you, I don't know where you come from. Depart from me all you workers of evil.'" And finally, "You will see the patriarchs and prophets seated at the banquet table in the kingdom of God but you yourselves will be cast out where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth." There will be all kinds of people in the kingdom of God coming from the four corners of earth; but not you.

Mind you, when Jesus says these things, he's not speaking to his enemies or those who couldn't care less about who he is; no, he's addressing people who *are* following him. And what

he's doing is challenging the basic assumption. Instead of asking about how many are being saved, what you really ought to be asking is: "*Am I being saved?*" The mistake is to smugly presume that your own salvation is already accomplished while you are still a work in progress. It's like running a race imagining that you've already crossed the finish line. You haven't; you're not there yet. And let me ask you, what kind of performance would a runner who imagines that he's already won put in? Not a very good one, I would guess. A certain fable about a tortoise and a hare comes to mind. The hare was so sure of his victory that he decided that he had time for a nap along the way. The result was that he lost. Big time.

St. Paul said it this way: "If anyone thinks he stands, let him take heed lest he fall". The person who asked the question of Jesus thought he could stand on his pedigree as a Jew and his track record of keeping the ceremonial laws. That won't get anyone through the narrow door. The question is: what are you standing on?

In my work I've come across many people who when questioned about their religious beliefs and their prospects for eternal salvation give an answer that is essentially works based. "I try to be a good person, I contribute to charity, I'm a helpful neighbor" and so on. They think they can stand on that. They can't. No one will get through the narrow door based upon what they have done.

Then there are those who confess faith in Christ but who are still not sure about whether they have done enough. It's like Jesus did his part, but I still have to do mine. They'll say, "I hope God will judge that I've done my part well enough", but there's usually some nagging doubt there – as well there should be. Whenever you add your works to the work of Christ, the assurance of salvation becomes an iffy proposition.

As confessing Lutherans, we understand that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in the accomplished work of Christ. He did all that is needful to save us. We can't add to it. So it's easy for us to see what's wrong with the two views mentioned. My concern is that we might fall off the other side of the horse, so to speak. And there are at least two ways we can do that.

The first is called fideism. It's faith in faith. I know that faith saves. So, when I ask myself, "Am I being saved?" I reply, "Yes, I'm certain of it because I have faith." My assurance of salvation stands on my faith. But notice what's being cut out of the thought process: Jesus who is the object of faith. I'm not relying on him; I'm relying on *my faith* in him. It's back on me again. And then I'm left to wonder whether my faith is good or strong enough, which in turn may lead to doubt and despair.

The second way to fall off the other side is the one that concerns me more. It's where the greater danger to us lies. It's right that we look to Christ alone for our confidence of salvation. The danger is overconfidence. The danger is thinking that I'm already through the narrow door and therefore I can stop striving to enter it. There's no need to struggle against the sin in my life. Jesus already paid the penalty. I'm so confident of it that I can keep on sinning with impunity. There's no need to grow in Christian virtue. My good works can add nothing to my salvation. And just to prove how much I believe that, I won't do any. There's no need to seek to know Jesus better, to gain knowledge of him through the study of God's Word. I've got what I need.

It's true that faith alone saves; but the faith that saves is never alone. By the faith that saves the Holy Spirit works to cause sorrow and shame over sin. By it he gives the strength to

fight against the weakness of the flesh and to resist sin's temptation. By the faith that saves the Spirit produces the fruits of the Spirit: kindness, love, forgiveness, patience, endurance, generosity. By the faith that saves the Spirit instills the desire to know more of Christ and to become more like him. By the faith that saves the Spirit keeps the believer ever striving toward the narrow door because we're not through it yet, not in this life. And you don't want to be left outside when the Master of the house closes the door.

There needs to be some balance, some tension between the extremes. Being secure in Christ is a good thing. Overconfidence is not. The race isn't over yet. Let us push on toward the finish line. And to that end, that we might continue to strive with genuine effort, may the Spirit instill in each of us some blessed insecurity. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!