

Do not be Intimidated
A Sermon on Luke 13:22-35 by the Rev. Philip Major
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My only complaint with our lectionary, our schedule of scripture readings for Sunday worship services, is that some important passages of scripture are left out. For some reason I will never understand, the first part of the passage I read a few minutes ago, the part about striving to enter through the narrow door, is never included in our schedule of Gospel readings. By my understanding, these verses in the middle of chapter thirteen are in the center, and thus are central to the message of message of Luke. At the very least, we cannot understand the part of the Gospel passage printed in your leaflet, without the verses about striving to enter through the narrow door.

This central message of Luke's Gospel is extremely relevant for you and me, especially today. The foundation for this message was laid at the very beginning of the Gospel, back in chapter one. Mary had just been told by the angel Gabriel that she would give birth to a son who would be called the son of the Most High God, and that his rule would last forever. Mary went to visit her cousin Elizabeth and said, *'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. God's mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.'*

God looks with favor on those who have humility, those who are not proud of themselves. God will cast down the powerful from their positions of power. God will raise up the poor and those who are weak. If we remember Mary's words in chapter one, we have a better chance of understanding Jesus' words in chapter thirteen.

Jesus went through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. Someone asked him, 'Lord, will only a few be saved?' He said to them, 'Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able.'

The important word here is 'strive'. Our work is to strive. God has given us freedom, freedom to choose the right thing or the wrong thing. Our task is to strive to do the right thing.

Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able.' When we read this in the context of what Mary said to Elizabeth, we understand that Jesus is not talking about a game of luck. Many of those who will not be entering through the narrow door will be those who rule over others from positions of power. They won't be entering into God's kingdom, because they haven't been striving to enter into God's kingdom. Those who rule over others have been striving to be king or queen. They've been building their own kingdoms, where might makes right and those who have been dealt a bad hand of cards will be exploited.

This is a story about justice. God offers salvation to all people, but those who have been exploiting and hurting others will not be entering God's kingdom. *When once the owner of the house has got up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, "Lord, open to us", then in reply he will say to you, "I do not know where you come from."*

This is a story about religious hypocrisy. There are some who claim to follow God's way, but the way they are following is not the way of justice and mercy, it's a way of using Holy Scripture to gain power over other people. Perhaps that was true of the Pharisees in Jesus' time. We know it was true in the United States two hundred years ago. Those who enslaved generations of African-Americans claimed to be following Jesus. They were not. We know this story of religious hypocrisy is true today. Those who carried a cross as they assaulted police officers at our nation's capitol four years claim to be following Jesus. They might *knock at the door, saying, "Lord, open to us"*. I wouldn't be surprised if God's response was, *"I do not know where you come from."*

This is a story about people who say loud public prayers and proclaim their allegiance to God, while giving their true allegiance to the rich and the powerful rulers of earth. They are striving for their own gain, not for the gain of God's kingdom. *Then you will begin to say, "We ate and drank with you, we read your scriptures in all our gatherings." But God will say, "I do not know where you come from; go away from me, all you evildoers!"*

This is a story about power and entitlement. *There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrown out.* Some people think they are entitled to a place at the table, because of their heritage, or because of the authority that has been given them, or because of the power they exert over others. Admission into God's kingdom of mercy and love will not be given to us on the basis of these entitlements.

This is a story about God's justice and God's offer of salvation to all people. *Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God. Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.* God will welcome people of all nations through that narrow door.

This is a story laid on the foundation of Mary's words. *God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;*

This story isn't the favorite of many who think of themselves as God's chosen people today, and it wasn't the favorite of many who thought of themselves as God's chosen people two thousand years ago. *At the very hour Jesus said these things, some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you."*

This is a story about the way religious and political authorities use their power to threaten others. Jesus is being threatened with physical violence. We can't tell for sure exactly who is threatening him. We can't tell whether Herod is threatening Jesus or if the Pharisees are trying to scare Jesus away from their towns and villages. Or perhaps both things are true. We know what happens later in the story. The leaders of the religious establishment, represented by the Pharisees in this story, and the leaders of the government, represented by Herod, will work together to arrest Jesus, put him on trial, and crucify him.

This is a story about corruption, and leaders whose behavior doesn't match their job description. Let's notice that the religious and political leaders were threatening Jesus because of what he said, but they were also threatening Jesus with physical violence because of what he was doing. What was Jesus doing? Jesus was healing the sick. Jesus was feeding the poor. Jesus was preaching a message that brought hope and encouragement, not to a small, specially selected group of people, but to large crowds of people, to women as well as men, to the poor and to the sick, to the Jews and to the mixed-race people, the Samaritans.

The religious and political leaders killed Jesus because he was exercising God's power, which is the power to serve, the power to heal, the power to love. The religious and political leaders killed Jesus because the effectiveness of Jesus' ministry made their failure as leaders crystal clear to everyone. Everyone could see their corruption. Everyone could see that they were using their authority to gain more power, not to serve. The great theologian, Cornel West, put it this way, "You can't lead the people if you don't love the people. You can't save the people if you don't serve the people." The leaders of Jesus' time were failing the people.

This is a story about whether or not we will be intimidated. *Jesus said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.'"* It is not a compliment to be compared to a fox. Some people might think it's good to be as sly as a fox. Those of us who are following Jesus will keep in mind that the fox feasts on much smaller, weaker prey. Herod might be a fox, but Jesus is not

intimidated. Jesus is saying this as he is travelling to Jerusalem. Jesus is not trying to escape from Herod's wrath.

The Pharisees warn Jesus that Herod is trying to kill him. They seem to be trying to scare him off; they are trying to get him to shut his mouth. Jesus does the exact opposite. Jesus is not intimidated. During the next five chapters Jesus will continue on his way to Jerusalem. Jesus will heal the sick and proclaims the good news to more and more people, culminating in his triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

This is a story about our need to stay focused on our mission. Jesus' actions and words are not going to be determined, or even influenced by those who have the power to threaten and harass him. Jesus has no concern for the threats of those who would use violence against him and the people he is serving. Jesus is only concerned with doing more of the work God has given him to do, the work of loving and serving God's people.

It must be this way for you and me as well. This is our imperative. Have no concern for the threats of those who have only bad intentions for you and the people you serve. Do not be intimidated. Be strong.

The entry to the kingdom is narrow, but when it comes to getting through the door to the kingdom, you who have been loving and serving God's people are looking downright skinny! Put aside the fear that is in your heart. Do not be distracted by feelings of anger or grief. Give your attention to the task God has given you. Remember where your strength is coming from. God has given you a mission to love and care for God's people. God is giving you everything you need to accomplish this mission.