

Navigating the Narrows

Matthew 7:1-20 Luke 13:22-30

August 29, 2010 J. S. O'Neill

Matthew 7:1-20 *"Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. ² For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. ³ Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? ⁴ Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye? ⁵ You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye. ⁶ "Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you. ⁷ "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ⁹ Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? ¹⁰ Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? ¹¹ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him! ¹² "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets. ¹³ "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. ¹⁴ For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it. ¹⁵ "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus you will know them by their fruits.*

Luke 13:22-30 ²² *Jesus went through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. ²³ Someone asked him, "Lord, will only a few be saved?" He said to them, ²⁴ "Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able. ²⁵ 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.' ²⁶ Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.' ²⁷ But he will say, 'I do not know where you come from; go away from me, all you evildoers!' ²⁸ 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. ²⁹ Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God. ³⁰ Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last."*

Many years ago my brother's father-in-law built a log cabin in the woods. It was a prodigious task. He harvested balsam logs from his property, dragged them across

his acreage to the building site by block and tackle, notched and shaped them with chain saw and slick, and hoisted them into place.

My brother and sister-in-law own it now. The cabin is still the same handsome and solid structure it was when it was built. There's really only one problem with the house. Though John had a dream as lofty as the towering balsams he cut down, he designed the place to suit his own stature, which barely reached 5'2" in thick-soled hiking boots. He was, as they say, "vertically challenged." To bring the world down to his size, he designed the entrances to the cabin to be about a foot shy of a full door, and several inches narrower.

I don't want to sound critical, and I'm certainly not, if you'll pardon the phrase, "belittling" John's work, but I can't help feeling that his handsome log cabin is just one more indictment of us who, shall we say, have a loftier view of things. It's not just John but the world at large which tends to think small. Thus, the news I got from a salesperson as I was pawing through a rack of casual slacks recently that when you have my waist size, the store doesn't stock inseams longer than 32". I retorted that it was pants I wanted, not Bermudas.

The only good news, I suppose, is that as one ages, one shrinks. But meanwhile there are racks upon racks of clothes that don't fit us taller, stockier folk, low overhangs which scrape us prematurely bald, and chairs that seem to have been mass-produced in the Seven Dwarfs' workshop. We go about with elbows bruised from rapping them on cramped door frames. We suffer dislocated knees from airplane travel. We inspire claustrophobia in shorter folks merely by getting on an elevator with them.

"Dream no small dreams," it is said, but small is a relative term, something that came into special focus for me one day when a much shorter friend asked me to hang some pictures for her. How high do you want them, I asked. Eye level, she said. It was later, after a job well done, that I had to say, "Oh, you meant your eye level!"

So, I take this scripture passage about entering by the narrow door very personally. "Lord, will only a few be saved?" someone asks him. Many will try to enter and will not be able, Jesus says. This worries me; the door to salvation appears to be a John's-log-cabin-in-the-woods kind of door, a head-scraping, shin-barking, elbow-whacking kind of door, a no-one-with-a-longer-inseam-need-apply kind of door.

Actually, we get no schematic from Jesus about what it looks like or what its dimensions might be. Some have read a kind of moral and ethical narrowness into the door metaphor. In the passage Jesus does warn against "evildoers," but no list of the particular evil the doers are doing is given. Of course, since self-righteousness abhors a vacuum, there are always folks around with a ready list of logs to disapprove of in the eyes of those we don't like or who are of a different faith, culture, or political conviction.

Those who were listening to Jesus had their lists ready, and for some of them Jesus was item number one. He didn't have his own list, though. What a good time this would have been for Jesus to publish his list and give a good, air-tight, once-and-for-all description of the narrow door. Genesis practically gives us marine architectural drawings for Noah's ark: *"This is how you are to make it: the length of the ark three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits. Make a roof for the ark, and finish it to a cubit above; and put the door of the ark in its side; make it with lower,*

second, and third decks [Genesis 6:15-16].” Likewise, Second Chronicles devotes two full chapters giving the dimensions of Solomon’s temple. Jesus, however, can’t be troubled to describe a simple door. He only names it and challenges us to strive to enter it. I take from this absence that part of being faithful is the struggle to first of all find the door and stride through it forwards, never backing out again in order to knock on some other. And the nature of this door, I suspect, is as poet Rabindranath Tagore wrote, “He who wants to do good knocks at the gate; he who loves finds the gate open.”

Though Jesus offers no list of evils, he does describe the frustration of those who, protesting their own righteousness, find themselves barred from the door while those whom they judged morally deficient enter freely. It’s like the joke about the Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran, Catholic – take your pick and fill in the blank – arriving in heaven and being warned by St. Peter to tiptoe past a certain room in heaven because the Mormons, Southern Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists (fill in the blank) think they’re the only ones there.

In the opinion of some of the people listening to Jesus, he was an evildoer. When he healed that bent-over woman we read about last week, he did so on the Sabbath. Such a thing was forbidden by the Law. Would Jesus’ narrow door filter out Sabbath-breakers? Presumably not. Jesus said he came to fulfill the Law, not destroy it, but he and his disciples frequently incurred the wrath of the religious establishment by flouting religious laws. Others thought he drank too much; they called him a wine-bibber. His following included adulterers, tax collectors, lepers, Gentiles, and the poorest of the poor. Jesus dealt with women in ways that was a scandal to the traditionalists. He spoke with Samaritans, too, and generally everyone else the religious leaders termed “sinners” were part of his entourage. But Jesus wasn’t into screening people out. He was devoted to gathering people in. That was how “evil” he was. That’s how wide his narrow door must be.

Our attempts to moralize the metaphor of the narrow door in petty ways fail in the examples of Jesus’ own life, and each of our attempts to make Jesus the defender and protector of our prejudices quickly evaporates. Jesus did not come to make us good but to show us God. “Good teacher,” someone called him once, and he shot back, “No one but God is good!” “My goodness,” exclaimed an admirer of a diamond ring Mae West was wearing. “Goodness,” Mae West is said to have replied, “had nothing to do with it.”

The deeper I go into my career in ministry the more I am convinced that Jesus cared little for the social conventions we care so much about, and cared most deeply about the sacredness of all persons, a vision we all have trouble wrapping our hearts around. I am convinced that Jesus was proclaiming a kingdom that could only be received by faith, and that is precisely why he cared so little about custom, convention, civil or religious power, or social structure. All these Jesus saw as mere idolatries invented by humankind to make the door flexible enough to accommodate our self-righteousness, our armor, our wealth and possessions – all that baggage we carry that we think make us look good – but narrow enough to keep others out. Some would standardize the door to fit their views of national or racial exceptionalism, defining the good in terms of pride, prejudice, and power. They would set the design standard to fit

the shape of their fears so there would be no unsettling variance in this matter of moral rectitude, no adventure of faith, and no struggle to love. But God doesn't play that way. It is no more up to us to define the door than it would have been for me to take a chainsaw to John's cabin and reshape it fit my preferences.

All attempts to define it interferes with our ability to distill a simple truth from the story of Jesus, that God loves the high and the lowly, the rich and the poor, men and women, the strange and the familiar, sinners and saints. Is there such a thing as evil? Of course. Whatever obscures your sense of the holy. Whatever obstructs the call of God. Whatever weans the heart from love to hate, and from compassion to apathy. Whatever exalts itself as god but cannot save. Whatever defaces beauty. Whatever harms instead of heals, burdens rather than lightens. Whatever kills the spirit.

Of all the door metaphors in scripture, it is the passage from Luke 11 (and in Matthew 7) that rings most true with the Jesus of hope and life, of love and resurrection: "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." What is the narrow door? It is the door of faith, it is the door of trust, it is the door through which Christ graciously beckons saying, "Follow me."

If the door is faith, upon which one only needs to knock, then those left outside are those who thought they could enter God's kingdom by virtue of their virtue, or by dint of their position or wealth, or by means of their self-proclaimed goodness or well-connectedness or intelligence or ideology. The door is narrow because it allows only one password – the love for God in response to the love of God.

Each of us struggles with questions of worthiness. Each of us wonders at painful moments whether our knock will be answered or will we be among those left standing outside, the voice on the other inside saying, "Go away! I don't know you!" There are hard decisions each of us makes in life that leave us wondering whether we had slammed the door on ourselves. There are things we have done that, we fear, have made the door impossible to find. At the last, each of us must work out our salvation with fear and trembling, as the apostle Paul writes. We must "sin bravely," as Martin Luther said, knowing that even at our best all we have to offer to God is our sinful selves which God promises to redeem in love and grace, to hear in our need, to lift up when we are fallen, and to bless when in faith we strive to serve God's son.

At the heart of God is not a cold judgement nor a blind justice, but grace that builds up what is broken and salves what is wounded and welcomes back the prodigal and lost. At the heart of heaven is not a what but a who, and his name is Jesus Christ, the Lord of life and prince of peace and compassion. God is ever so much more ready to love us than we are ourselves. Someone wise in the conflicted, confused ways of life once observed that God draws straight lines with crooked sticks. We – you and I -- are those crooked sticks. There is no one in this room whose heart does not harbor secrets we desperately hope no one ever discovers for fear that a narrow moralistic door will slam shut on our fingers. What Jesus showed in his life and teaching is that there is no one whom God does not love and no one whom God is not eager to forgive. It may be a narrow door, but it is amply sufficient for the soul who trusts that faith is the key to a

grand entrance. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.” That is the door’s shape and breadth, and it opens upon God’s spacious welcome.