

Sermon: Year C, Proper 16  
Texts: Isaiah 28:14-22  
Hebrews 12:18-19, 22-29  
Luke 13:22-30

“Strive to enter through the narrow door,” said Jesus. Though no statistics have been kept across the long sweep of Christian history, I think it’s probably safe to assume that this single line has been one of the most quoted of all those in the Gospels. It has a certain immediacy that is hard to ignore, precariously balanced as it is between being a prompt to concerted effort and sounding an ominous threat. Either way, it announces that Christian faith urges us to something, something that does not simply appear or arise if we choose to be passive or largely indifferent in the practice of our faith.

Jesus, however, never did us the favor of telling us exactly what the narrow door is or where precisely it can be found. And in like manner, it’s all the more difficult to discern, then, how we should strive: after what? Our inclination, and much Christian tradition, suggests that striving naturally means working hard to achieve a goal. And the goal of faith is often presumed to be our own salvation, earning for ourselves the favor of God by proving ourselves ardent disciples, doing what is right, especially when so many others have no trouble doing wrong. Even now, you might be expecting, or quietly dreading, one more sermon in a dreary line of diatribes demanding more effort and more commitment, as if God were endlessly needy, an infinite taskmaster.

But I can’t carry this line. It seems to me neither good news nor true to the intent of the text itself. The striving we are asked to undertake is quite different, and the narrow door is located in a place quite other, a place far removed from all the injury that our own bickering about right and wrong causes between us. This other opening is what I’d like to try to find and perceive more clearly this morning.

In the pivotal scene of William Styron’s famous novel, *Sophie’s Choice*, Sophie, who is Polish, arrives by train at Auschwitz, one of the notorious Nazi death camps. She has in her arms her young son and her daughter. As the new prisoners are disembarking onto the long ramp that leads into the camp, a Nazi officer steps up to Sophie, and he tells her that she may bring only one child with her. She may not take both. Standing there, as hundreds of fellow travelers file past, she is not allowed to move until she makes the decision which of her children she will keep and which one she will leave behind. She protests that to choose is impossible. She knows that her choice will mean the death of the one not chosen. She pleads for mercy from the officer, but he will not relent. Rather, he threatens her, stating that if she does not choose he will take both of her children. Around her guard dogs are barking, her children are crying, the officer is sneering, the gray march of prisoners continues unabated. She alone seems to be the one still point, paralyzed by the evil being pushed upon her, until finally, in a moment of utterly consuming anguish she gives up her daughter, and the young girl, wailing the name of her mother, is hustled away... by Sophie’s choice.

I watched this scene in the theater more than twenty years ago, when Styron’s book was made into a movie. I had to turn away. I remember looking instead at the audience around me. They couldn’t watch either. This was a movie. These were actors. This was a story. But all of us responded viscerally and physically. It was too horrific, beyond the pale. This wasn’t the violence of special effects, a blaze of blood and guts or spectacular gore made graphic for our entertainment. This was the agony of personal agency, of being wholly responsible for someone else and, by naming that one, condemning her. This was the very depiction of hell itself, when words do not create and bless, but destroy... and murder one’s very own child.

I have never forgotten the trauma of hearing this interaction, wincing against the darkness, unable to bear witness. The wound was too vast. This was brutality beyond comprehension, but its enormity didn't make it any less sharp. At the time, I was a teenager, out on a Friday night, with hardly a care, but this one scene profoundly unsettled all of us who sat munching our popcorn. It revealed a depth to our humanity that can't be plumbed: a depth of hatred that obliterates all personhood, a depth of grief that can't be answered by anyone or any passing of time, and the depth of love that never slips into mere sentimentality but suffers the choices that the world imposes. In these things, within our finite lives, the infinite itself shows itself – in experiences that have no bottom.

After the war, however, when the full extent of the actual holocaust came to light, the immensity and facelessness of this genocide caused another and opposite reaction. Rather than exposing what is infinite in us, even if in tragedy, the sheer efficiency of the camps – their technological brilliance and perfected cruelty – led many to proclaim that here, at the very apex of our skills, lay the proof that God is dead and, along with God, any plausibility of belief in immortality. The infinite was conclusively closed off. It was too painful to contemplate, too challenging to imagine, pictured against the remaining bodies stacked like cord wood in the liberated camps. In order to be bearable, life had to be smaller. Brutality had to have limits. Thus, it has been broadly announced, our own feats of extermination have extinguished the last glowing embers of divine goodness, and we are left to ourselves. Some in the world will be lucky enough to thrive. Many will simply survive. A portion will endure misery. Some will falter and fail. But this is merely a matter of fact, the testimony of statistics and quantifiable. Life comes. Life goes. The only real hope we have is enjoying the time we are granted. Thinking beyond these natural limits is pure fantasy and, more importantly, it can be terribly unproductive. We need – and by rights we have – borders on both our responsibilities and on our aspirations. To love too much is dubious. To suffer grief beyond the appointed seven steps traversed in recovery is unnecessary. To ponder any life beyond death is merely idle speculation. And worst of all, contemplating the infinite within us detracts us from the real and honest tasks of pragmatic business.

If this seems abstract, look at how singularly focused we have become in our work and in our play, in squeezing as much as we can into our lives, because, ultimately, time is short. Soon enough, it's done. We can afford, therefore, to wait for very little.

One of the great therapeutic terms of our times is "closure." It signifies our ability to wrap up some event, tying together its varied loose ends. It implies that whatever we share between us in life may be significant, but, at length, we can take comfort in the conviction that our experiences are never more than finite. They come to conclusion, and thus, when we choose, we may move on, perhaps not unscathed, but unscarred. This is the dominant wisdom of our age. For us especially, it feels safe and relatively pleasant. We are nicely left to ourselves – free to be untroubled. But this is not a form of hope; it's actually a habit of deep resignation, continually closing ourselves into ourselves.

When Jesus spoke of the narrow door, he was addressing the very people who believed that their lives were in their own hands and that they could choose and achieve their own destiny. The narrow door, however, did not represent our singular effort to be particularly good or moral or law-abiding. It signified, rather, those small, difficult places, where life suddenly proves boundless, and not strictly our own, where it is possessed of an infinite weight and opened, then, to an eternal glory. The narrow door is that space in our own lives that only God can fathom, where only God can redeem, only God can comfort, and only God can comprehend the full measure of our joy, our thanksgiving, our love for someone else, for the gift of creation, for the day itself.

“Strive” said Jesus, but not for accomplishment. “Strive” he said for limitless humility, laced with gratitude. Strive for the grace to live your life always conscious of what in us is eternal, and therefore of God.

The last verse of the text, the one that is most important, is probably the one least heard, for it tells of an openness without bounds, where people are gathered from the broadest reaches of East and West and North and South to feast. They are gathered without cause, without named pedigree. They were considered the least, but by the strength of God’s eternity, all of them arrive as first together, in perfect reconciliation – regardless of all the choices they have made and all the choices made against them, no matter how devastating.

As Christians we dare to look at one life, one ancient individual, and declare him God, who, having been condemned by all, forgives all. Infinite goodness repairs infinite evil and bottomless grief. This is the good news. This is the testimony of God himself, in finite and infinite form. To strive to enter by the narrow door is to see all individuals in the light of this limitless openness and the transformation of everything earthly into heaven.

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