



ST. PAUL'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

DELRAY BEACH, FLORIDA

16 Pentecost – Proper 16 - Year C

August 25/26, 2007

Isaiah 28:14-22 Hebrews 12:18-19, 22-29; Luke 13:22-30

Preacher: The Reverend Kathleen P. Gannon

NRS Luke 13:23 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.

I'm a fan of country music. Is anyone here familiar with Kathy Matea?
She sings a song that goes like this:

Said a friend to a friend one day
Was a man who passed away
St. Peter met him at the gate.
Pete said, walk with me if you will
I'll take you to the house you built,
Man said I can't wait.

Passed a mansion made of stone
But with each new house he's shown
They get smaller by degree.

Stopped in front of a two room shack,
Pete said, I hope you're happy with that
Man said, how can this be?

Pete said, that's all the lumber
That's all the lumber
That's all the lumber you sent
Looks like the builder
Man he's got your number
That's all the lumber you sent.

Now, I love country music, but it is predictable, the man asks for and gets another chance – another chance to strive to do good, to do the opposite of the evil that got him in trouble in the first place.

This song by Kathy Mattea appears to have been inspired by biblical commentator William Barclay – in his version of the story the main character is a wealthy, demanding woman who gets to heaven expecting a mansion, but instead gets a surprise, “a little more than a hut” . The first in this life, Barclay says, will not necessarily be first in the next life.

Now we must be a little cautious with songs and stories – and biblical commentaries for that matter. Let me dispel any idea the goal of this life is to earn rewards and mansions in the next life. That imagery swings a little too far on the works side of the works vs grace argument. But then, don't we all at times swing to the side of over work? Here is the question: Is it my work that matters in the eternal scheme of things? Or is it all on God's grace that I will be saved? Jesus seems to settle that by saying – strive.

It is not the only criteria, but we are called to strive, to be contenders...to respond to the love of God and the teaching and healing of Jesus.

- I think that Jesus is giving his hearers another chance, to strive to do the good of the kingdom of God here and now.

And in the multi-layered nature of our gospels...

- I think that Luke is giving his hearers a chance to widen their world view as well.
- And that of course will lead to the question for us... what are we building? What are we striving for in this time and place?

This gospel from Luke hits like a stone into a pond...forming concentric circles of waves through time. Jesus' time, Luke's time, our time.

In Jesus' time, I think that Jesus is giving his hearers another chance to strive to do the good of the kingdom of God in their present tense and time.

Jesus is teaching and healing on his way toward Jerusalem:
Jesus has turned from the 'everyday' – well it's hard to call Jesus' mission in Galilee an 'everyday mission' – but he has clearly turned and “set his face toward Jerusalem, toward the passion and resurrection.

Jesus is questioned: Lord, will only a few be saved? Strive – to enter through the narrow door. For many I tell you will try to enter and not be able...

There is urgency in Jesus' message.
There is frustration in Jesus' language.

There is urgency conveyed in the images – the door is narrow, crowded and likely to close...Remember, Jesus is moving from the north to the south, just as the image of Jesus moving from the north in Galilee to the south, converging on Jerusalem. People will come from east and west, north and south.

In the tone of voice used here – we can imagine Jesus as feeling the sense of urgency to move forward on his mission to get to Jerusalem, yet trying to cram as much healing and teaching into the journey as possible.

“Bruce Chilton argues forcibly that Jesus believed the kingdom of God had come in power through his own teaching and activity and that he urged anyone who would fully accept it to enter its reality.” (*Quote from David B. Batstone*)

The word that Jesus uses is strive: to contend with adversaries, to endeavor with strenuous zeal...

There is urgency...and there is frustration in Jesus' language. *Pay attention*, he might say...In verse 30, “Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.” The King James Version translates *indeed* - as lo, or behold. Barclay paraphrases: “And - *look you* - there are those who are last that will be first, and there are those first who will be last.”

There is a frustration in Jesus voice, in several places in this sequence, in last week's gospel from Luke - 12:56 - Jesus charges his listeners, “You hypocrites!” Saying one thing, and doing quite another.

Last week we heard - it as Jesus ended the gospel - you know how to interpret the weather - yet you do not get it: The kingdom of God is here. Look at me, Jesus said. Look at each other.

In this teaching of Jesus: Strive to enter the narrow door...Jesus gives the image of a narrow door, closed door. Now as a universalist - one who believes that ultimately everyone will fall into the arms of our loving God - these images of narrow, shut doors disturb me. I think Jesus wanted to disturb the hearers on the journey to Jerusalem...

I think that Luke is giving his hearers a chance to widen their world view as well.

Luke was writing, in about the year 85, with no personal witness to Jesus and Biblical scholar Raymond Brown portrays Luke as a well educated Greek, who “knew the Jewish scriptures in Greek and that Luke likely converted to Judaism before becoming a Christian.” (*Brown, p 226*) Luke is reminding his hearers that others are indeed welcomed into the kingdom of God. Perhaps his own journey is referenced - perhaps Luke sees himself as one coming from the north and south, east and west... Luke likely traveled with Paul, and both drew on eyewitness accounts for their theological treatises.

Luke's intent also seems to be to warn the complacent, chosen Jewish people...followers of Christ. From the world view of gentiles...that might be us...this can seem anti-Semitic. But remember, the assumption is that everyone hearing as Jesus was saying this - was Jewish, including Jesus. This admonition is more like a family squabble, a call to action in a close knit group, more of a call to arms than a condemnation.

And that of course will lead to the question for us...

What kind of striving are we called to do today?

What are we building?

What kind of a splash are you making in your pond?

We get the negatives in this lesson – we know what the disciples think they did:
Lord but we ate and drank with you, you taught in our streets.
But Jesus has their numbers – you evil doers...he says.

It is not enough to eat and drink with Jesus and friends, it is not enough to simply listen to Jesus, the Word of God, but rather as Jesus puts it, strive....

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. NRS Luke 13:23.24.

With 'chosen-ness' comes responsibility, challenges and obvious advantages. The world views the United States as a chosen people...

One of my youth group members listened to a sermon describing the incredible poverty in Haiti and this 13 year old recognized her chosen-ness and said - I can't ever say 'I'm starving' in this country...

One of my seminary classmates returned from a trip to Myanmar and said she felt guilty knowing that she could take a shower in drinking quality water any time she chose.

Yes, people are hungry here.
Yes, people are homeless here.
We have challenges – no doubt.
Hardships, suffering, illness.

But we have the resources with which to strive.
We have the resources of our Christian faith and we strive along side our Muslim and Jewish brothers and sisters.

Jesus followers may have felt chosen, too.
After all they knew Jesus personally,
Listened to his teaching,
Had dinner with him,
Walked the same streets.

But did they listen to Jesus teaching?
Did they follow his example of healing and teaching?
Luke's Gospel calls for the world to change, for the first to be last and the last first, for justice and a reversal fortunes for those oppressed.

So, what are you building?
What are you striving for?
How much lumber have you stacked up for the kingdom?