

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost • August 21, 2016

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Luke 13:22-30

“Forewarned”

You can't say that you weren't warned.

Earlier this week, we were going about our work here at the church when we received notice of a severe thunderstorm warning for the area, pointing to a storm that would bring damaging winds. We were pretty surprised: the sky outside was beautifully clear, with the sun shining down. There didn't seem to be any signs of dangerous clouds. Taking another look at the notice, it indicated that the severe weather was expected in the larger region around 4 p.m. or so, but that people in our area should take precautions. It makes sense that weather service didn't want to have people caught unawares when the storm arrived. And that storm did arrive! Flashes of lighting and rolling thunder filled our skies... and took down a number of tree branches, including one right over our playground area here at St. John's. That severe weather warning got it right.

Warnings exist for our protection. They call our attention to the hazards that are out there, even when we might not otherwise see them. The sky might be clear now, but that doesn't mean there's not a storm just over the horizon. So if you're going to ignore a warning – whether it be for severe weather, a fire alarm, or one of those lights on the car dashboard – you're doing so at your own peril. The danger is real, regardless of whether or not you choose to acknowledge and prepare for it.

We heard Jesus speaking about signs in last week's reading from Luke's Gospel, but this week he's giving warnings to his hearers. Luke has already told us that Jesus is heading to Jerusalem. As Christian readers, we already know what's going to happen when he gets there. But Luke's just reminded us again of Jesus' destination. He's getting closer to his goal. His time with his disciples before it all goes down is growing short.

Can you hear the underlying urgency in Jesus' warnings as he responds to someone's question about salvation? *"Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, open to us,' then he will answer you, 'I do not know where you come from.'"* Jesus tells the people that they might miss out on the opportunity to trust in and follow him as Savior, that this door will eventually close. The door will be shut when the time is over, and that'll be a very bad day for those who stayed outside!

People do reject God's grace in Jesus. That rejection might come in the form of disbelief, refusing to allow for the possibility of a restored relationship with God that doesn't depend on human effort. There's another way in which people reject the gospel, though, and it's just as great a danger. It's a rejection of God's grace that even Christians are tempted to make. It's living an unrepentant life.

An unrepentant life is one that rejects God's grace by refusing to acknowledge the need for it. You've sinned. I've sinned. We have each rejected God's design for our lives in our own ways, further contributing to the brokenness of our world in the process. But an unrepentant life refuses to acknowledge its own brokenness. When you or I decide to persist in living in whatever way we might see fit, maybe without giving it a second thought in our complacency, that's dangerous. If you're just thinking of yourself as a “Christian,” but not actually living the new identity you have in Christ, that's deadly.

How are you living? Are you unrepentant? The time is growing short, and that's why Jesus' warning is before you today. Turning away from selfish desires isn't an easy thing. Repentance is a struggle against sin. That's why Jesus calls us all who would follow him to “Strive [literally: struggle] to enter through the narrow door.” Following Jesus through life is an intentional activity, though it's not something that you or I can do on our own. How could you be confident in your own hope of salvation if it depended on you being completely repentant? Here's the good news: it's not.

God's grace is for the unrepentant. He takes unrepentant, self-focused people and gives them faith and new life. In Baptism, God turns you around to follow Jesus through life and the struggle against sin. Jesus is the one who's won the struggle against sin for you by giving up his life, even to death on the cross. (Hebrews 12:3) And now God is working repentance in your heart and your mind each day as His beloved child. The life of the baptized is a life of repentance, following Jesus your Savior, who is the narrow door.

“And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.” As a baptized child of God in Christ, you can be confident about which side of the door you’ll be on when all is said and done. Why’s that? Because God saw fit to give His Son, the first above all, to be last. Jesus knew his Father’s rejection on the cross for you and for me, so that we, who should be last, are made to be first in his mercy. God turns it all around and welcomes us into the feast of His Kingdom. Because of His great reversal, not because we call ourselves “Christians,” you and I get to sit at God’s table!

As people who God has saved in Christ, then, we can respond to God’s grace by doing good for our neighbors in life. “Doing Good” is one of those five mission practices from *Joining Jesus On His Mission*, and there’s nothing particularly complicated about it. “Doing Good” doesn’t have to be a colossal righting of injustice in the world. Even today, you could choose to do good by serving lunch to homeless families this weekend at the Carpenter’s Shelter in Alexandria. You might make a donation to boost the disaster response efforts of the LCMS for those flooded out of their homes in Mississippi and Louisiana. You can help welcome and support the refugee family that our congregation will be assigned in the near future. You may serve as an agent of God’s grace in your home, your school, making Jesus’ love tangible for the people around you from day to day.

Listen to Jesus’ warning today and strive to enter through the narrow door. And look ahead in confidence as a baptized child of God, knowing that the Jesus, the Master of the house, has prepared a place for you at his feast.

Amen.