

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 16 – Luke 13:22-30

“**Lord, will those who are saved be few?**” someone in the crowd asks Jesus. And that seems to be a question that bothers a lot of people today. I say this because of the millions of books in the “*Left Behind*” series that have been sold in recent years. The authors, Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, have capitalized on the inner fear of Christians that they will be “left behind” when Jesus returns. These books are based on the concept of “The Rapture”. This concept says that Jesus will return twice: the first time in secret, to “rapture” his church out of this world and up to heaven. He would then return a second time, after seven years of global tribulation, to establish a Jerusalem-based kingdom on earth. You can look into the Bible as much as you want, but you will not find the word or concept of “rapture” anywhere, especially in the Book of Revelation where you would expect it to be.

So where did this “rapture” come from? In 1830, in Port Glasgow, Scotland, 15-year old Margaret MacDonald attended a healing service. There she claimed to have seen a vision of a two-stage return of Jesus Christ. This was quickly adapted and amplified by John Nelson Darby, a British evangelical preacher and founder of the Plymouth Brethren. Darby made many mission trips to America between 1859 and 1877 and won many converts to the “rapture” idea. Darby’s ideas were popularized by the *Scofield Reference Bible*, Chicago’s Moody Bible Institute, and the Dallas Theological Seminary. The followers of this idea are called “Dispensationalists”, based on Darby’s quasi-scientific timetables for events in history, and include many authors, televangelists, and Bible School graduates, among others. But it’s principally through books such as Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth*, and the *Left Behind* series of novels that the “rapture” storyline has become central to so many Americans’ understanding of the Bible and Christian Faith.

So let’s return to the question posed to Jesus in our Gospel story today. “**Lord, will those who are saved be few?**” If you are one of the “rapture” crowd, the answer is “yes.” Because they claim that Jesus will swoop in on his first return and take the “in”

crowd, those who are in on the special knowledge that these fundamentalist people claim to have. In Church history, we call them “Gnostics,” which is the proper term for people with special knowledge. None of the Gnostic writings of early Christianity made it into the New Testament because they invariably separated Christians into two classes: the elite, who were in on the know, and the rest, like us, who weren’t. But people keep trying to resurrect them. Every few months the populist media “discover” another Gnostic Gospel, the latest being *The Gospel of Judas*. And we all know about the *DaVinci Code*.

But Jesus has an answer that throws a twist into what the expected answer was. There is no talk about numbers, how many, or about being Jewish or Gentile, or how much you know about what. No talk about returning twice. What needs to be talked about, as Jesus puts it, is you and me, **us**, as individuals, whether we will be among those saved. We need to talk about our personal responsibility for our own beliefs and actions. **“Strive to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter, and not be able.”** That is a thought that each one of us must pay attention to, especially those of us who believe we are good Christians, just like the “rapture” crowd, the Dispensationalists. The trouble with the narrow door is that if we think of it as narrow, we’re in trouble. But if we recognize that perhaps we’re too big, too inflated with our inner knowledge and accomplishments, and need to become smaller, maybe we can make it.

The trouble with many Christians today is that we’ve formed a very arrogant picture of ourselves as the ones who will “make the cut” when the time comes. The problem is not that the door is too narrow, but that we’re too big for it. What Jesus is asking, and not only asking but insisting, is that we give up the pride and the boasting of our imagined superiority. Give up the idea that we have a worth of our own making. Start over! Become like a new-born baby again, the very least in the Kingdom of God. Only then can we catch the wonder of God’s grace and wisdom – and the honor that God should want us and call us to belong!

For the well-known basis of the Kingdom of God is that it is founded on grace alone. Not on what we claim to know, or how we have separated ourselves out. This is what Jesus knew and lived by, when he says, “**Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the prophets**” knew. We have no rights, no superiority! Everything we have is ours by the underserved love of God alone! Everything we are, and the whole world in which we live, is ours by his creation and gift. We are only the receivers of what God made and called us to be. When we know that simple truth, we have no basis to complain against God. We do not look for rewards or credits. Rather we trust his promise that the Kingdom is already ours and will continue to be ours, and that nothing can take from us either our honor as a child of God, or our hope for the kingdom and the life still to come. So we come to the banquet to which God invites us, and which we share by way of our Baptism, at every celebration of the supper of Jesus’ own body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. But there is no place at this table for the proud, for those who think they are superior, for those who wear garments of their own making and who expect to be applauded and admired. At this feast we celebrate the Grace of God alone. And we celebrate first and above all by willingly receiving what he gives, without imagining that we can somehow maintain our own pride by paying our own way.

This is when we discover that the door that appeared to be so narrow is actually the widest of doors – able to gather into one, all the nations of the world, from the least to the greatest, with nobody excluded. What a difference this is from the small minds of the “rapture” believers, the dispensationalists, who are trying to cram their self-important bloated egos into the Kingdom through their imaginary “rapture,” which they perceive as a narrow door. That is their failure to understand God’s Grace, and their resulting mistaken vision of God the Father and of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us then gather together, one and all, at the Eucharistic table set for us by Jesus, praising God and thanking him for his Grace, which has opened for us the Kingdom of God. Amen.