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Pentecost 14

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Mercy that Takes You Through the Door”
Text: Luke 13:22-30; Hebrews 12:4-29; Isaiah 66:18-23

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Strive to enter through the narrow door.

The story is told of a man who died. A good man. An important man. A much accomplished man. In the time that had been given him on earth, he wasted not a moment. He was always busy. There was always more to do. More people he could help. More advice that he could give. More things he could be doing. He was much admired and looked up to. He was going to be missed. The world would be less without him.

He arrived at the door of eternity, and knocked. A voice came from the other side: Who wants to enter? And he answered, confidently: *It is I, John, doer of good, lover of man, generous and kind. Ask those who know me, they will confirm what I say, how many I have helped, how busy I have been for others.* And the voice answered: We don't know you.

He knocked again. Again a voice came from the other side: Who wants to enter? And he answered: *It is I, John, son of the church, regular attender, generous giver, serving in many positions. Ask those who know me, they will confirm what I say, how no one helped as much as I.* And the voice answered: We don't know you.

Again He knocked. And again came the voice: Who wants to enter? And he answered, somewhat perplexed: *It is I, John, confirmed by the church, married in the church, buried from the church. Look it up and you will see.* We don't know you.

Finally he knocked a fourth time. Who wants to enter? *It is I, John, a mortal, sinful man. Lord, have mercy.* The doors were opened and the voice said: Thus let him enter.

That's a story. It's made up. It is not - and let me repeat that - NOT a description of how it's going to be when you die. Because as with Jesus' teaching in the Holy Gospel today, it's really a story **about here and now**. For the door to eternity is not some place far, far away and some time far, far away - that door, that **narrow door**, is here. Because Jesus is here. And wherever Jesus is, time and eternity are brought together in that place. For, the Scriptures tell us, Jesus is the eternal God born in time (John 1), He is *the door for the*

sheep (John 10:7) from time to eternity, and *NOW is the time of God's favor, NOW is the day of salvation* (2 Corinthians 6:2). Or in other words, NOW is the time of God's mercy for you in Jesus. Mercy which is here for you NOW.

For, as the story portrayed, that is the narrow door, the door from time to eternity: **the mercy of Jesus for you.**

You've heard it said that you can't take it with you. There are probably even bumper stickers that say that. And people who say that usually mean our stuff, our possessions. And that's right. As we heard a couple weeks ago, we'll die and leave all that to someone else. *But it means more than that too.* You can't take your accomplishments with you. You can't take your good works with you. You can't take your reputation with you. The narrow door is too narrow for them too.

Now some would object at this point, because doesn't the Bible talk about the good deeds of Christians following them (Revelation 14:13)? And doesn't Jesus point out the good things His sheep have done on the Last Day (Matthew 25:35-36)? Yes indeed. Jesus knows all those things, and treasures them. But you can't bring them. You can't bring them with you, as if they will somehow help you. They won't. They can't. *And you don't need them.* For when you have the mercy of Jesus, when you have His forgiveness, you have all you need. For as we heard, with the mercy of Jesus, the last become first. And without the mercy of Jesus, the first become last.

That's why whenever we hear about the Last Day in the Scriptures, there's always a surprise. The first are last and the last are first. Those who think they're in are cast out. The sheep think they're goats and the goats think they're sheep. The man who sits in the least place gets move up higher (Luke 14:10-11). Poor beggar Lazarus is welcomed into eternity and the rich man who lived in luxury is left begging for a drop of water (Luke 16:19-31). For that's what Jesus' mercy does. It upsets the merit system; the way we think things should be. It turns everything upside down. It always has and it always will.

Now it would take too long to mention all the Scriptures that are examples of that here, of this kind of mercy - but maybe just a few . . .

In mercy, God commutes Adam and Eve's death sentence to His Son.

In mercy, God chooses an idolater, Abraham, to be the ancestor of His Son.

In mercy, God chooses not a princess, but an anonymous maiden named Mary to be the mother of His Son.

In mercy, He chooses not Pharisees and Sadducees to be His apostles, but fishermen, tax collectors, and a persecutor.

And in mercy, He chose you too.

Or as St. Paul would later explain it: *God chose the foolish things of the world to shame*

the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. . . . Therefore, as it is written: “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 1:27-29, 31). That’s mercy.

And that brings us back to the story. You can’t take it with you. You can’t even take Jesus with you . . . *cuz He’s already there.* But that’s the good news. **You can’t take Him with you, but He does take you with Him.**

And as I said before, that’s already happening. *Strive to enter through the narrow door,* Jesus said. Be striving here and now. *For mercy.*

Now I should mention the Olympics here, because for the past two weeks we’ve been watching people striving - striving to be the fastest, striving to be the strongest, striving to be the best, striving to be perfect. And most - if not all - have given up a great deal, have given their blood, sweat, and tears, to be so.

But most fail. Most don’t even come close. We usually don’t see them or hear their stories. But what’s the percentage - 90, 95, 99 percent of the athletes never make it to the medal platforms? They’re not good enough. And since that’s how things are in this world and life, we wonder, as those in Jesus’ day wondered: ***Lord, will those who are saved be few?***

Few indeed, if it’s up to us. *Only one*, in fact would be - Jesus - *if* it’s up to us and what we can accomplish. That’s a pretty narrow door.

But Jesus, in mercy, takes us through that door **with Him**. It is His blood, sweat, and tears, that, as we heard in Hebrews, ***speaks a better word than the blood of Abel*** - or any of our blood, for that matter. His blood that speaks a merciful forgiveness. His blood poured out on the cross and now sprinkled on you here in Holy Baptism, given to you here in His Supper, and lavished upon you in Absolution. His blood powerful enough to bring down satan and the powers of hell, and strong enough to lift up sinners and raise the dead.

So that’s how we ***strive to enter through the narrow door*** that we cannot possibly get through on our own. We cry out to the One who can get us through: *Lord, have mercy.* Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner. Lord, have mercy on me who has failed in so many ways again this week. Lord, have mercy on me who thinks more highly of myself than I ought. Lord, have mercy on me who thinks I actually deserve something from you. Lord, have mercy on me who deserves nothing but death and condemnation. Lord, have mercy.

Is that really striving? It is. It is striving against ourselves and our sinful human nature. For by nature we don’t want to be low, we don’t want to be least, we don’t want to admit

defeat, we don't want to deserve nothing, we don't want to be wholly dependent on God and His mercy. And we'll never even do that good enough! We can't even be nothing good enough! *Lord, have mercy!*

But when you cry that out, you've come to the right place. Or to put it in the way Hebrews did today: you've come not to Mt. Sinai, or Mt. Olympus, which demands from you, but to Mt. Zion, which gives to you. Which gives to you the mercy, the forgiveness, the life, you need. Which gives you Jesus. Jesus mercifully here in the Word. Jesus mercifully here in water. Jesus mercifully here in bread and wine. Jesus mercifully here for you. *Lord, have mercy* is always answered with mercy.

And sometimes, as Hebrews said, *the mercy of discipline*. When we need to be knocked down more than a few pegs. And our loving Father does that. Because He wants only to save you. To make a new you, for the new heavens and the new earth that are coming.

And that is His glory: *His mercy*. That is what He wants all the earth, all people, to know about Him. That the door that is as narrow as Jesus **is also wide enough for all the world to enter**. For that's how wide Jesus' mercy is. He died for all to save all. None excepted. *And so you know it is for you*. So that not when you go knocking on eternity's door, but when eternity comes knocking for you - sometimes expected and sometimes unexpected - you who have received the Lord's mercy now will receive it then as well. And as Jesus has taken hold of you now, so He will not let go then. **He will take you to be with Him**. He is the first who became last, that you who are last might be first. That you never hear those dreadful words: *I don't know you*. And that in Him and His mercy, you join those coming from the east and west and north and south, to the table, the feast, in His kingdom. In His kingdom, where there is no time, only eternity. In His kingdom, where there is no more striving, only rest. And only joy, in Him who gave all for you.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.