

Pentecost 13, 2010C

915 "Today Your Mercy Calls Us"

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"Strive to Enter"

<sup>22</sup>[Jesus] went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem. <sup>23</sup>And someone said to him, "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" And he said to them, <sup>24</sup>"Strive (ἀγωνίζεσθε) to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. <sup>25</sup>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.' <sup>26</sup>Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.' <sup>27</sup>But he will say, 'I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil!' <sup>28</sup>In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God but you yourselves cast out. <sup>29</sup>And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God. <sup>30</sup>And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last." (Luke 13:22–30)

These words of our Lord 'to strive' echo those of St. Paul where He says, **Fight (ἀγωνίζου) the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses** (1 Timothy 6:12).

Similarly, St. Jude writes, **Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly (ἐπαγωνίζεσθαι) for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints** (Jude 1:3).

The words of the 'narrow door' echo Jesus' Words in St. Matthew's gospel, **Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it** (Matthew 7:13-14).

Jesus' words of not being able to enter echo the words of our Lord in another place where He says, **'How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.'** And those who heard it said, **'Who then can be saved? ' But He said, 'The things which are impossible with men are possible with God'** (Luke 18:24-27). With men, salvation is impossible. Salvation is only possible with God, through Christ.

All this is to say that few will be saved, only those who strive to enter through the narrow door. This is not because God does not desire the salvation of all people. It is for God's love of the world that Jesus entered into human flesh, bore our sin, and suffered God's punishment for our transgressions.

To God's prophet Ezekiel He declares, **As I live, says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live** (Ezekiel 33:11).

To Ezekiel God also says, **I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies** (Ezekiel 18:32).

To St. Paul, our Lord says that He **desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time** (1 Timothy 2:4-6).

**This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners** (1 Timothy 1:15). For this reason Jesus was conceived, was born, was baptized, lived, died, rose again, and ascended into heaven. He came to deliver us from our sin and its consequences, even eternal death.

Hell is not 'on earth' as so many are fond of saying. Hell is where there will be **weeping and gnashing of teeth**. It is the place of complete separation from God. Whatever suffering one might endure in this life, this cannot compare to the hopelessness and continual grief and despair one will encounter where there is no 'second chance'. This no one can know while still living, for there is no hopelessness here and now because of Christ, even if things seem so. Christ *is* hope—the hope of all people. But after death, there will be none.

Therefore, today is day of hope. **Now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation** (2 Corinthians 6:2).

Christ is today your savior from sin, death, and the power of the devil. He has defeated Satan already with His victory on the cross. Christ's death means your life, as St. Paul the apostle says, **He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins** (Colossians 1:13-14).

This deliverance and redemption Christ has purchased for all people, not just for those who believe in Him, but even for those who don't. It's not faith that makes it so. Nor is it the lack of faith that doesn't make it so. Believing or disbelieving doesn't change what God has already done. Nor does faith or lack of faith change God's promise.

Whether I believe or don't doesn't change God's Word or His love for you. This would make His Word and promise and love dependent upon you, on whether or not you accept it, or what you do with it. But this is not the case. God always has His Word and His eye on you for good. The Lord's promise, His favor, and His peace is not based on you or you, but on Him who gives it.

This is what makes the Christian faith so difficult, so contrary to human nature. Our flesh says that it's by what we do that we get to heaven. But the Lord says differently.

There is that striving that we do. But that striving is not 'doing enough' to get into heaven. Nor is it 'doing more' to get a greater reward. That striving has to do with leaving everything behind

and grasping only Christ for salvation. It has to do with denying yourself, taking up your cross, and following the good shepherd who leads to heavenly pasture, who feeds you with His eternal Word from heaven, and who sustains you with His own body and blood.

It has to do with not only hearing the Word of the Lord, but believing it, taking it as your very own, trusting in Him, even as that means trusting in Him against everything else, even yourself.

The striving that Jesus is talking about has to do with abandoning your own goodness and treasuring only Christ's, for He alone is your goodness and your everything before God.

In other words, it's about trusting, not in your own righteousness or goodness, but solely Christ's righteousness, His merit, and His goodness (i.e. 1 Corinthians 1:30).

This is why the door is narrow and many will not be able to enter. It's not what you bring through the door that saves. It's what God gives that does—His only begotten Son. Not all take Christ as their own and believe in Him. Many want to carry their own works with them to heaven and will not be able.

**Godliness with contentment is great gain. We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out** (1 Timothy 6:6-7).

Christ alone is sufficient. He's all that you need. You need no more clothing to enter into the heavenly banquet than the white robe which Christ gives to all who believe in Him. All who seek more or less than this God will cast out. And all who continue to ignore His call will not be welcome. Christ says as much in the parable of the wedding feast, where He says:

**The kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who arranged a marriage for his son, and sent out his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding; and they were not willing to come. Again, he sent out other servants, saying, 'Tell those who are invited, See, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and fatted cattle are killed, and all things are ready. Come to the wedding.' But they made light of it and went their ways, one to his own farm, another to his business. And the rest seized his servants, treated them spitefully, and killed them. But when the king heard about it, he was furious. And he sent out his armies, destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city. Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. 'Therefore go into the highways, and as many as you find, invite to the wedding.' So those servants went out into the highways and gathered together all whom they found, both bad and good. And the wedding hall was filled with guests. "But when the king came in to see the guests, he saw a man there who did not have on a wedding garment. So he said to him, 'Friend, how did you come in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen. (Matthew 22:2-14; Also see Luke 14:15-24).**

Christ, with His Word, invites you to the marriage feast of the Lamb. He calls you to believe His Word and trust His promises. He clothes you with the wedding garment of Christ's

righteousness and nothing else, for nothing else is called for. Few are chosen, not because they are not called, but because they don't believe. They hear God's good news of forgiveness, but take it for granted. They hear God's promise of peace, but they believe it not. They are given new life, but they do not give up their old way of life. They hang on to their sin and do not instead hang on to the Lord.

God grant you repentant hearts, that you not take the Lord's mercy for granted, that you contend for the faith and fight the good fight, and that you continue striving to enter through the narrow door and the difficult way.

The way of faith is not easy. Never on this side of heaven will we cease struggling with sin and temptation. Nor will your burdens and crosses become lighter. And they will come. But to them that '**labor and are heavy laden**', the Lord Jesus says, '**Come, and I will give you rest.**' He says, '**Take My yoke upon you and learn from, for I am gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls** (Matthew 11:28-30).

God says, **Call upon me in the day of trouble and I will deliver you** (Psalm 50:15).

**To all who call upon Him in truth, the LORD is near** (Psalm 145:18).

That truth is Jesus Christ. He is the One who strove to the cross for your salvation. He set His face toward Jerusalem, bore all of your sin, and there, won for you eternal life. He alone is your Savior, and He alone will save you. Do not trust in anything or anyone else—but Him, Christ alone.

Therefore does St. Paul speak this way, **For God made Jesus who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. We then, as workers together with Him also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For He says: 'In an acceptable time I have heard you, And in the day of salvation I have helped you.**

And again, '**Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation** (2 Corinthians 5:21-6:2). Amen.