

Pentecost 13

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Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem in Luke's Gospel when someone approaches him and asks, "Lord, will only a few be saved?" I don't know about you but that question makes me uncomfortable. The whole idea that God would choose a few and damn others does not sit so well with me. I could never get into the "Left Behind" books or buy the belief that God is going to just give up on some people. I always suspected the person who asked, "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" already assumes that she is among those who are saved.

This question, seems to me, to be just another way of separating those who are in from those who are out. We human beings are masters of dividing one another into groups, of finding ways to exclude others by putting ourselves in the "in" group. Moreover, by putting ourselves in the "in" group we are attempting to confirm in our own minds our admittance into heaven. If I am like this and not like that person who I know is bad then obviously I must be among those who are saved.

"Lord, will only a few be saved?" The questioner of Jesus is Jewish, one of God's chosen people. But this person seems to have forgotten that it is God who chooses people not for special favors, but for special responsibilities. The covenant God makes with the Jews promises them many descendants and a prosperous land, not as a special favor but for a reason. The reason is not to lord it over others but to be a blessing to serve others. The reason was not to set themselves apart and exclude others but to bring them into God's banquet so they might spread God's love and blessing to all sorts of people.

Many have heard this warning of Jesus that the entry way into the realm of God is a narrow door and in response have become narrow minded people. They lead very narrow lives that separate them from others. One does not enter through the narrow door by leading a narrow life rather one enters by leading an expansive life committed to spreading God's love to all even those on the margins of society.

Jesus goes on in our Gospel to explain his response to the questioner. He says that those who were born among God's chosen people, even those who heard Jesus teach in the streets, may one day find themselves on the outside looking in while others are enjoying the feast. "People will come from east and west, from north and south

and will eat in the kingdom of God," Jesus said, "and while they eat, those who considered themselves among the elite, the chosen ones, the narrow, will be weeping and gnashing their teeth." "Indeed some we thought never had a chance, some who did not seem to amount to much will be at the table and those who you assumed would be at the table will be missing."

Leslie was an artist, a sculptor, whose hands created beauty wherever they traveled. They moved elegantly and expressively through the air as Leslie talked. The simplest meals from her kitchen resembled a photograph in one of those fancy cookbooks. Her phone pad was filled with whimsical doodles. Her drawing was lifelike and kind. Leslie transformed a dull postage stamp condo garden into a butterfly habitat wonderland. Even the neighbor's cat would let Leslie administer medicine which she refused from anyone else. Leslie was also a highly regarded nurse who through her gentle touch calmed her patients. She was a loyal friend, someone who across the years remembered to send birthday cards, made regular contact by phone calls or a beautifully written letter.

Leslie did not belong to any particular church community. Her weekend work prevented her from attending Sunday services and she often volunteered to work on holy days so others with children could be with their families. Yet, talking to Leslie revealed a spiritual person who appreciated life and cared very deeply about other people.

Leslie died of cancer just one month shy of her fortieth birthday. Before she died she completed her most significant work. She allowed her friends and family to share in her dying process. Together, day after day, she talked about her feelings, her struggles and her hopes. Her friends and family watched as her body gradually disintegrated and her once expressive hands became stiff. Those hands began to experience a stillness that somehow removed the fear and replaced it with hope. Leslie began to talk about knowing God in the stillness and learning to trust as she became more aware that her body was shutting down.

There was a deep sadness when Leslie died. Everyone who shared her last few months described in his or her own words the awesome nature of what had happened. Leslie's dying gave new life to those around her. Some friends took on new volunteer work at their church in her memory. Some found others ways to reach out to care for others as a reminder of how Leslie lived her life. One friend started attending art classes. Another friend gave up his anger at God for taking his Mother when he was just a teenager and wandered back to church. All commented that years later when they encountered a beautifully crafted piece of sculpture, visited a well

tended garden or stopped for a cup of tea with a friend, they could not help but think of Leslie. Leslie taught her friends how to build an open covenant with life. A covenant that included all sorts and conditions of people, animals and plants. A covenant that just accepts things as they are and is willing to see the good that surrounds all of us. Leslie's friends have chosen to be together on the anniversary of her death to just remember and to be renewed by those memories.

"Lord, will those who are saved be few?" Who can say? How narrow is that door really and who can enter? Lord, how are we to know? Do we have to wait for a crisis in our life or the life of someone we love to turn our hearts to God? How much like the questioner do we want to be?

The lesson from Hebrews this morning reminds us that, as Christians, we stand in the light of a new covenant. Following the example of that great cloud of witnesses we know that reconciliation and forgiveness are possible. God does not seek to punish us for our shortcomings or reject us simply because we are not part of the right crowd. God seeks a relationship with all of us.

However, in order to achieve that, God must have our attention. It is up to us. We can continue being so busy we ignore God and others. We can continue to foster divisions spending time deciding who is in and who is out.

Can we be still long enough to hear the wisdom in Jesus' words? Can we accept God's forgiveness and openness? When our answer is "yes" then we are promised that God's kingdom will not be shaken. That is good news for us and this fragile earth our island home. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold. "Be still, be open and know."

Amen