



**Second Sunday in Lent  
February 28, 2010  
The Rev. Charles E. Connelly**

In Saint Paul's letter to the Christians in Philippi he says, "But our citizenship is in heaven..." St. Luke tells a story in today's gospel that offers multilayered and complex messages to be sure, but it makes three main points about that citizenship.

Someone asks Jesus, "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" The assumption underlying this question was that heaven, the kingdom of God, is for Jews; not for Gentiles. Jesus's answer was a shocking one. He says that entry into the kingdom is not automatic. "Strive to enter by the narrow door..." he tells them.

This is Jesus's first point – that we must strive to enter and that it won't be easy. The door is narrow. Striving is something we continue to do. It is not something we complete. It is easy for us to fall into the trap of thinking that once we commit ourselves and our lives to Christ that we have achieved our goal. We have not. While we are on earth there is no finality in this continuing struggle.

The response to Jesus's statement is defensive: "We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets." These are people who have been with Jesus; people whom he knows. But Jesus says, "...I don't know where you come from: depart from me." This is Jesus's second point: just living in a Christian community doesn't make someone a Christian. Just going to church doesn't make someone a Christian. There will be no favoritism. The question we will have to answer is, "What have you done; how have you lived your life?"

The third point Jesus makes is that there are going to be surprises in heaven. "...some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last." The things that are important in heaven are not the same things that are important on earth. As Christians, we are to strive to bring the kingdom of God to fruition here on earth. That means that the things Jesus says are important have to be the things that are at the very center of our lives.

Elsewhere in Scripture he tells us precisely and succinctly what those things are. Love God. Love God's people. That's it.

Saint Paul warns us that "many live as enemies of the cross of Christ." The real enemies of the cross of Christ are those who have never learned how to love the God they worship or to love the people of God whom they are called to serve. As Paul says, "their minds are set on earthly things." Their minds are overwhelmingly focused on their own self-interest.

We see that mindset today, and quite frankly we have seen it throughout Christian history, in Christ's Church. The Church is a messy place. We are always facing disagreements on doctrine and practice. I think Saint Paul is trying to tell us that we live more fully into the cross when we embrace, rather than hate, those with whom we disagree. We will continue to disagree, to be sure, but I think intolerance and self-righteousness are enormous obstacles on the path to unity in Christ's love.

Today's readings seem daunting – dire – impossible – maybe even terrifying. That's characteristic of the lectionary readings during Lent. St. Luke's gospel concludes with good news though. In what I think is one of the most poignant passages in all of the gospels Jesus paints a stunning picture of his divine love for us: "How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" In this statement the power of Christ's love is as real and as palpable as the mournful pain of his heartbreak.

It is our faith in that love that gives us the strength we need to continue to strive to lead an authentic Christian life, loving God and loving God's people. That is a life that may seem utterly unattainable, but it is not. With a faith in the Lord that abides deep within us, a faith in the Lord that we extend to those around us, and the support of the body of Christ of which we are a part, all things are possible.

The good news is that Christ loves us. We can accept Christ into our lives and experience his brooding love, or we can deny Christ and break his heart. The choice is a simple one, and it is entirely ours to make.

*This sermon was preached by the Reverend Charles E. Connelly in Saint John's Church, Tampa, Florida, on the Second Sunday in Lent, February 28, 2010.*