

No Carry-ons, Please!

14th Sunday after Pentecost; Series C

Luke 13:22-30

It started out as an ordinary baptism, as ordinary as any baptism could be. After all, the Bible teaches and we believe and confess that God attaches his name and Gospel promise to the waters of Holy Baptism. So through the power of God ordinary water becomes extraordinary. The ordinary water becomes an extraordinary means by which the Spirit enters and creates faith, claiming you and me and all Christians as his Holy children. So this extraordinary Baptism began in as ordinary way as it could. The Pastor took Ryan, the infant child, in his arms and was preparing to baptize him.

At this point just prior to the Baptism Ryan was still, calm, and peaceful, maybe even sleeping! All of that changed in an instant. Holding Ryan with his left arm like one would if he were trying to prevent a football from fumbling onto the ground, the pastor started to reach down into the water with his right arm. The pastor had not yet touched the water and yet the “water works” started. Ryan started kicking and screaming in the Pastor’s arms, really putting to the test this Pastor’s ability to prevent a fumble! With his arms flailing furiously, Ryan’s right hand caught something and clenched it in his fist. It was the metal cross draped around the Pastor’s neck. So kicking and screaming and with one hand flailing and the other hand nearly choking the Pastor, Ryan was baptized. Clinging to the cross of Christ while kicking and screaming, Ryan entered the Kingdom of God.

I don’t know where Ryan is now. I don’t know if he is trusting in his Baptismal promise now and living as a Baptized Child of God. I don’t know for certain if the parents, godparents, and the whole congregation took seriously their responsibility to train and nurture this newborn, Spirit-filled, child of God in the way of the faith. It is my prayer that Ryan is still a repentant child of God who is growing in his faith and trust in God through God’s Word and the Sacraments. Regardless, I do know that on that day God claimed Ryan as his own child—“God’s own child I gladly say it!” as the hymn declares. I do know that Ryan demonstrated for us all a profound truth about Baptism and salvation—through the waters of Holy Baptism the old-self is drowned and dies and the new-self rises, recreated in Christ—but the old self dies hard! Like Ryan clinging to the cross of Christ, we enter the kingdom of God, sometimes kicking and screaming, we enter through Christ and his death and resurrection for us.

Christ—the narrow door. This is the image Jesus uses in the Gospel lesson as he addresses the way to eternal life and the kingdom of God. As Jesus travels through towns and villages on his way to Jerusalem, someone asks him a question. It is a salvation question. It is a question that comes from a concern you and I have probably had at times. We might have expressed our concern in a Bible Study or to a Pastor or to a fellow Christian in the form of this question: Why are some saved and not others? It is a concern and question that God’s people have always been asking. It is on our minds and has been on the minds of Christians for centuries, most likely because it is a question that the message of the Bible raises. As we learn in our Gospel reading, it is a question that the very teaching of Jesus raises.

One man hears Jesus teaching and preaching. This man sees Jesus performing miracles and engaging in his Ministry to usher the Kingdom of God into this world and he makes a logical deduction based upon what he sees and hears. He puts

two and two together much like many of you do when you press the Pastor in Bible Studies here at Atonement. This man asks, "Lord, will those who are saved be few" (Lk 13:23)? In other words, why are some saved and not others?

At the end of July I attended the Synodical Convention of the LCMS in St. Louis, MO. I arrived on a Saturday afternoon around 4pm. Most of you know that if you are outside at 4pm at the end of July in St. Louis, you want to go inside as quickly as possible, especially if you are walking the streets dragging luggage with you. I arrived at the hotel and had two options for entry, the standard door with hinges and the revolving door that functioned automatically. After seeing a few people ahead of me struggle to fit themselves and their luggage through the slim opening in the not-too-slowly-moving revolving door, I decided to go the more traditional route. Yet, the revolving door does give us a visual image that helps us understand a little bit more Jesus' words about entrance to the kingdom of God in the Gospel reading.

Jesus responds to the man's question in the Gospel reading and tells him that the way to the kingdom of God is narrow, a narrow passage, like that of a revolving door. It is narrow in the sense that there is only one road in and one road out of the kingdom. Indeed, Jesus says "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (Jn 14:6). The flipside is also true. The one who rejects the King and his Kingdom takes the reverse route, exiting by his or her own will and rejection. As little Ryan demonstrated for us, only by clinging to the cross in faith and being splashed with the Water and the Word of God does one enter into fellowship with the King and gain entrance as a loyal subject of his heavenly, eternal Kingdom.

Jesus can also say to the man in the Gospel reading that many will seek to enter and will not be able. Many will attempt to seek the kingdom of God but will find themselves seeking an altogether different kingdom with a different king, a different god. Moreover, many will try to enter the Kingdom of God by another way, or by taking certain baggage or luggage with them. Like those hotel guests in front of me trying to squeeze through the narrow passage in the revolving door with carry-ons and checked baggage at their side. It often did not work and the individuals either had to go through another door with their luggage or leave their luggage behind and come back for it.

The only way into the kingdom of God is through faith *alone* by God's grace *alone*. That is, through Christ *alone*. This was the emphasis of the Martin Luther and the work of the Reformation. He is the master who *alone* lets people come in even though the door is narrow. Any way other than through faith in Christ alone is a false entrance. This is the sobering truth. Faith plus a trust in our own works, efforts, feelings, or decisions will not cut it. A simple knowledge and understanding of Jesus that is not saving faith does not work. Being near Jesus, being around Jesus, seeing Jesus, or just hearing of him is not enough. Only trust and dependence in the one who is the way, the truth, and the life is sufficient.

So let go of whatever else you might be clinging to and holding onto. You don't need it. No carry-ons are allowed in the Kingdom of God. Only child-like trust in your Heavenly Father as his baptized, redeemed child. And you are baptized. The Holy Spirit has created saving faith in you. You may even find that those works, efforts, feelings, or decisions that you are trusting in will in fact get in the way of entering through the narrow door. Like little Ryan may we continue faithfully to cling to the cross remembering always that we are God's splashed, forgiven, redeemed children. Amen.