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Strive to Enter Luke 13.22-35

Fr. William Klock

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My wife is fond of reminding me that being wrong feels just like being. Even when a knowledgeable person confronts us, our ignorant certainty and our pride often get in the way of correction. Even when presented with facts, it can be hard to let go of the certainty that we're right—because being wrong feels just like being right. The danger lies in the fact that sometimes being wrong has serious consequences.

I took a year off between University and graduate school so that I could earn some money for tuition. I was planning to be a professor of Hebrew or Old Testament and for that year I decided to get a jump on things by taking first year Hebrew and Greek at local Baptist seminary. I did very well there and when I got to Regent I enrolled in second year Hebrew. I was surprised to find it more challenging than I expected, but when the first exam came I did very well—or so I thought. I left the exam very confident that I'd done well and I felt good about it, so it came as a complete shock when I got the exam back with a big red "F" at the top. I went to the professor, who didn't know me well at that point, and he suggested it might be wise for me to drop out of the programme—he didn't think I was cut out for it. I went home in actual tears. I had done so well in first year. What happened?

After a few days I calmed down and asked my professor if he'd be willing to walk through my mistakes with me. I was sure I deserved an A, or least a B+. But as I explained my answers to the professor he realised that the problem wasn't that I was a poor

student or that I was stupid; it was that I'd been taught by a very poor professor using a curriculum that had over-simplified and dumbed down all the things I was supposed to know. My professor apologised for telling me that I wasn't cut out for the programme and instead dropped a very heavy volume of Hebrew grammar in my lap and told me I had a lot of work to do to catch up. It was a huge vote of confidence and I went home very overwhelmed, but much relieved.

I thought I was on the right track. I even went out of my way to study for a year with someone people told me was a good teacher. I *knew*—I was *certain*—that I was on the right track. But when the day of reckoning came I was left in the outer darkness weeping and gnashing my teeth. In our lesson today Jesus gives give Israel two warnings very much like this. Israel *knew* she was on the right track and that when the Lord returned she would be vindicated for her faithfulness. Israel was something like me going into that Hebrew exam, confident even though I was ignorant. Israel was a lot like people today, absolutely sure of their eternal salvation, and yet walking through life with little knowledge of Jesus and no real commitment to him. Jesus has been trying to show Israel her ignorance. Judgement is coming—and soon—but she's confident she's on the right track and refuses to hear Jesus.

Jesus' first illustration is in Luke 13:22-30. Remember that he's travelling again. He's on his final trip to up to Jerusalem, following this winding route through the towns and villages, preaching the kingdom and showing people how it is breaking in. He's calling the people to turn from the path their on and to follow—to completely reorient their lives in and around him. But the people just don't get it. A lot of them honour him as a rabbi and teacher—maybe even in a few cases as maybe potentially being the Messiah—but they just can't wrap their heads around Jesus' mission and

around God's plan. And we see that in verses 22-23:

He went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem. And someone said to him, "Lord, will those who are saved be few?"

The question is a test of Jesus' orthodoxy. He's been preaching about a big kingdom that crosses boundaries and he's been inviting in the outsiders and people didn't like that. The "right" answer—the one they were looking for—was, "Yes. Only a few will be saved."

We get a sense of the mindset of the Jews of that day from passages in books from the time period. 2 Esdras in the Apocrypha is a good example: "The Most High made this world for the sake of many, but the world to come for the sake of few" (2 Esdras 8:1). Abraham had been told he would bless the nations. The prophets had described God's kingdom drawing in the nations. But in the period between the Old and New Testaments, Israel had drawn the circle much smaller. The kingdom was only for Israel. And people like the Pharisees drew it even smaller—only those few in Israel who met their standard of faithfulness.

Christians are still prone to asking questions like this and those questions often reveal our vision of God's kingdom. The great theologian Karl Barth was often at the centre of controversy because people claimed that he taught universalism—the doctrine that in the end all of humanity will be saved. Barth was very insistent that he was not a universalist, but he still found these questions very troubling. Yes, hell is real. And, yes, hell will be populated, but it troubled him that Christians were so *insistent* that at least some people *must* be damned. It's a truth that there will be people in hell, but it's a very sad truth. Again, questions like these tend to reveal our thinking about the kingdom. Does our vision of the kingdom focus

on making sure sinners get their just desserts or does our vision of the kingdom focus on taking Jesus' message of grace to sinners so that they can escape their just desserts?

And this is what Jesus gets at in his answer. He doesn't answer the question directly. Instead he tells this person—and there's a reason Luke leaves him anonymous, because this is something we all need to hear—Jesus tells this person that rather than worrying about the judgement of others, he needs to worry about where he'll be himself when judgement comes. Jesus goes on in verse 24 with what amounts to both an answer and a rebuke.

“Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. 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.’” (Luke 13:24-25)

Jesus describes a feast—probably a wedding banquet. The owner of the house threw open the door to let people in, but many of the people waited to come. They were family members, after all, and family members always have a guaranteed seat at a wedding! So they went about their business. The party wasn't really in full swing yet anyway—they'd show up later. But Jesus stresses two things: First, it's not that easy to get in. The door is “narrow”. Family members are not guaranteed entrance. To get into this banquet you've actually got to do something—Jesus says to “strive to enter”. Second, you can't delay. He's made this point before when talking about the kingdom: don't leave it until the last minute. Once the door is closed, you'll have missed your chance.

These people waited. They're family—or so they thought—but as they beat on the door the owner of the house looks out the window and says, “Go away. I'd don't know you.” But they plead with him:

Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.’ But he will say, ‘I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil!’ (Luke 13:26-27)

Jesus is describing his own ministry. He ate and drank with tax collectors and sinners and all sorts of outsiders. He also ate with scribes and Pharisees and with all sorts of people who were convinced they were insiders. Remember that to be a Jew was to be part of a family. Their expectation was that when God came to judge the world, he would vindicate his faithful family and welcome them into a great banquet. That's what the prophet Isaiah described. But Jesus is telling them that just being part of the biological family won't cut it. “But,” they'll plead, “we ate with you and we listened to you preach!” But Jesus warns them again: even that isn't enough. Jesus didn't eat and drink and preach with the Jews to confirm them as family members or to confirm their faithfulness and righteousness. No. He ate and drank and preached to invited them to respond to his message. He called them to leave behind the old family and to join a new one rooted in and oriented around him. Unless they've done that, there's no hope. In fact, instead of being vindicated as faithful Israel, the Lord will send them away, calling them “workers of evil”. Jesus goes on:

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. And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and

recline at table in the kingdom of God. And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.” (Luke 13:28-30)

This is a powerful warning, especially considering how much stock Jews put in their status as sons and daughters of Abraham. That was their ticket into the kingdom—or so they thought. But Jesus stresses that it takes more than that. Yes, Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets will be there at the banquet, but that highlights the issue. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob truly followed after the Lord. And so did the prophets, but consider what the ministry of the prophets was. God sent them to Israel in the times when she had apostatised—when she'd prostituted herself to pagan gods, when she'd stopped trusting in the Lord, when she oppressed the poor, the widows, and the orphans, when she tithed her mint and cumin, but ignored justice and mercy. The prophets will be at the banquet and even gentiles will be there—from north and south and east and west. The last will be first and the first will be last. The unclean lepers, the sinful tax collectors and prostitutes, the dead men will be there because Jesus has washed them clean and given them life. But the one who had the light and hid it under a basket, the one who sealed himself in a bag on an airplane, the one who was sure of his status because he could trace his lineage to Abraham and had kept all the rules, but failed to love justice and mercy, will all find themselves on the outside.

No amount of earthly status and no amount of law-keeping will get you're a ticket into the kingdom. Identity with Jesus is the only way in. He himself is the door. And that's how he can talk about “striving to enter”, but it doesn't cease to be about grace. Strive to latch on to Jesus. Strive to give up and to abandon all our old sources of security and identity. Take hold of him. Don't let go. Find your

life, your being, your identity in him. That's the way in to the banquet. Strive to give up your old identity and take up the grace offered by the God who has come to earth to die for our sins. It's simple and it's hard at the same time. It's easy—that's grace—Jesus does it for us—but we have to strive after it in faith and with all our being.

At this point—"at that very hour"—Luke tells us that some Pharisees came to Jesus with a warning:

"Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." (Luke 13:31)

Not all the Pharisees were opposed to Jesus. In Luke's gospel, when he talks about "scribes *and* Pharisees" he usually presents them as hostile, but we've already seen that some of them were ready, at least, to give Jesus a hearing. These Pharisees now warn him not to go to Jerusalem—Herod wants him dead. But this is nothing new for Jesus. Herod's been trying to kill him since his birth. And so Jesus responds, saying:

"Go and tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course. Nevertheless, I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following, for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem.' O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! Behold, your house is forsaken. And I tell you, you will not see me until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!'" (Luke 13:32-35)

Nothing is going to stop Jesus from going to Jerusalem. He already knows that death is in store. As it turns out,

Herod's role in that death will be a small one, but nevertheless, Jesus knows what he has to do. The Son of Man has to represent Israel—fulfilling the faithfulness she's hasn't been able to manage. The Son of David has to go to Jerusalem to take his throne. The Suffering Servant has to go to Jerusalem to die for the sins of his people.

So, yes, Herod is crafty and cunning like a fox. Herod is an evil and dangerous man, but no matter what he does or how bad he is, he can't upset God's plan. This is probably what Jesus means when he calls him a "fox". In the scope of God's plan, Herod is malicious, but he's no more than a "pesky varmint". He may get into the chicken coop and he'll probably kill some of the chickens, but he can't stop Jesus from doing what he needs to do.

Jesus hints at that too. These men on that day probably just took his talk of working today and tomorrow and then finishing that work on the third day as Jesus being insistent on pressing on to Jerusalem. But twice Jesus stresses this. For two days he has work to do—a journey and to cast out demons and to heal the sick—but the third day the work will be done. He's stressing God's plan for him at Jerusalem. As he's said before, he will be handed over to the authorities, he will suffer and die, and on the third day he will rise. Neither Herod nor anyone else will stop that plan.

And it's Jerusalem that Jesus has to go to. Nowhere else will do, because nowhere else represents all Israel. It was the centre of Israel's life, the centre of politics, the centre of her religion and her faith. Remember that the Son of Man represents faithful Israel. He has to confront unfaithful Israel and that can only happen at Jerusalem. Only there can he preach repentance to the whole nation, but it's also there that if he is rejected, he will

be rejected by the whole nation. And that's what he fully expects.

Think back to when Jesus talked about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. There's no coming back from that. To blaspheme the Holy Spirit is to declare God's offer of life to be of the devil and so long as you're convinced that it's of the devil, you'll never take it. It's to condemn yourself to damnation. And that's where Israel is at. She is so convinced that she's on the right track, she's so convinced of her righteousness and her faithfulness, she's so convinced that as sons and daughters of Abraham she has a guaranteed seat at the banquet, that she simply will not hear Jesus' call to repent. This is why Jesus talks about Jerusalem stoning the prophets. Stoning was the punishment that the Lord demanded for blasphemers. The prophets were the men the Lord sent to call his people to repentance. To stone the prophets—to stone the Lord's representatives—was to blaspheme the Holy Spirit. It was to utterly reject the Lord's message, his call to repentance, his Word and to declare it to be of the devil. For Jerusalem to stone the prophets—and soon to murder Jesus—was for her to condemn herself to judgement.

This isn't what the Lord wants. He's sent his Son to gather his people and to spare them from judgement the way a mother hen would gather her chicks under her wings to protect them from a fox like Herod. But the chicks will have nothing to do with the hen. And Jesus describes the consequence in words he borrows from Psalm 118 and from Jeremiah 12. "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" is the Psalmist's call for salvation. It was the call of Israel in this, her hour of need, as she cried out to the Lord to be saved from her exile. And salvation has come in Jesus, but because he doesn't fit Israel's expectations, because she's not willing to hear the call for repentance, because she's unwilling to enter the kingdom

through him, giving up the earthly things in which she found her identity and her security, her “house is forsaken”. These are the words of Jeremiah. Jesus might mean the temple when he says “house”—it is going to be utterly destroyed when judgement comes—but he’s probably talking about Jerusalem as a whole. Jerusalem represented the household of Israel. If she will not accept the shelter Jesus offers, she will be forsaken.

The judgement and destruction that came on Jerusalem forty years later are proof that the Lord means business. And now he calls to us. Israel had her false sources of security, but so do we. And we can be so *sure* of them. Billions of people in the world today have placed their faith in false gods and false philosophies. Many have placed their faith in the non-existence of God and the non-existence of divine judgement. And they’re *sure* of those things. Those are the people lost in darkness to whom we are called to carry the light of Christ—to expose their ignorance and to call them to repentance. But, brothers and sisters, even in the Church we have our false securities. We believe we’ve been guaranteed a seat at the banquet because of the good works we’ve done, because of the money we’ve given, because we come to Church every Sunday. We believe we’ve been guaranteed a seat at the banquet because we’ve been baptised, but remember that baptism is no guarantee without faith. Baptism is the door, but we still have to strive to enter. Generosity and good works and a serious commitment to the Church are not the things that will save us. They’re the things we do out of gratitude *because* Jesus has saved us. They’re the fruit born of saving faith. We must lay hold of the promise Jesus offers in baptism by faith and only by faith.

And it’s urgent we do so. Thinking we’re guaranteed a spot at the banquet

makes us complacent. We’ll go later, we think, when the party is in full swing. Maybe we’ve just got other priorities. We know that Jesus’ call is a call to turn from sin, to pursue holiness, to embrace his Church and all the people here with all of our problems. It’s a call to leave our old way of life and our old sources of security and to repent—literally to turn around—and to embrace Jesus as we reorient our lives around him and find our being in him. And we don’t want to change like that. We don’t want to hear his call to repentance. We don’t want to hear his call to holiness. We don’t want to hear his call to give when we’ve spent our lives taking. And so we wait. We think that we’ll do our own thing today and pass through the door to the banquet some other day. But, friends, Jesus warns us: If we wait we will find ourselves locked out, weeping and gnashing our teeth.

Friends, the Word and the Spirit are calling: Strive to enter the narrow door. Give up your old life and take hold of the life Jesus offers. And do not wait to be overtaken by the coming judgement.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, thank you that even when we were your enemies and living in sinful rebellion, you loved us and sent your Son to take the penalty for our sins on himself at the cross. It’s so easy for us to make the mistake that Israel made, finding our security in everything but Jesus. Keep his sacrifice ever before us that we might never forget he is the only way into your kingdom. And remind us of the urgency—to take hold of him ourselves and to proclaim his Good News to others that they might take hold of him as well. We ask this in his name. Amen.