

## OUR DOORS AND THE DOOR

A Sermon by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Revelation 3:20-22  
Luke 13:22-30

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Several years ago, I became aware of the Winchester Mansion in San Jose, California. Perhaps some of you know about the mansion. It's a huge and very strange Victorian mansion built in the late 1800's and early 1900's by Sarah Winchester, heiress of the Winchester rifle fortune. It has 160 rooms – 40 bedrooms, 47 fireplaces, 40 staircases, 3 elevators, and 6 kitchens. It's not just the sprawling size that grabbed my attention, but also how it was built. It was built over 38 years with continuous 24 hour a day construction.

Sarah Winchester was obsessed by some very strange ideas, and one was her belief that as long as construction continued, she wouldn't die. Well, she did die in September of 1922 at the age of 82, and that's when the construction finally stopped. The mansion looks like a house with one addition after another. It's very spread out and is practically like a maze. In fact, one can easily get turned around, and have a hard time getting out of the mansion. One major reason that the house is so confusing is that there are 950 doors. The doors are different sizes – some wide, some narrow, some short and some tall. And what's even more bizarre are the doors that open to walls, the doors that open to staircases that end at the ceiling, and then there's the door that leads to a straight drop into the outside garden and is known as the "door to nowhere." We just don't expect such things when opening a door.

Today, we can be glad that there are not hundreds of doors to choose from when it comes to God's heavenly kingdom. In a choice filled world like ours, the thirteenth chapter of Luke tells us there is only one door. So apparently, we need not worry about choosing the wrong door. However, according to Jesus, there are other concerns about the one door. **Jesus says the door is "narrow," and "many will try to enter and will not be able" (Luke 13:24).** And as the passage continues, we discover that an even bigger concern is that the one, narrow door appears to be locked from the inside. Those of us on the outside cannot wander through the door by accident or open the door to let ourselves inside. The door can only be opened from the inside, and it will not be opened for everyone.

Oh, how we hate locked doors when we want to get to the other side. Certainly, some of you have had the experience of locking your keys in your car or locking your house door and pulling it shut only to realize that your key is inside. And what about those times when children lock their bedroom door, and you are standing on the other side instructing them to unlock the door now. Perhaps a few of you have stood at the front door of a house, concerned about someone inside, but unable to get in to check on that person. Being on the outside of a locked door is a frustrating and even maddening experience.

About 39 years ago, I was a young pastor beginning my first appointment out of seminary and attending Annual Conference like we pastors are supposed to

do. To my surprise, I discovered that the doors of Hoover Auditorium at Lakeside were locked during morning worship. Apparently, there were those who felt it was rude and distracting for people to come to worship late, so the decision had been made that the doors to Hoover would be locked right after the call to worship, so about 8am. In my opinion 8am is very early for worship, and I admit there were mornings when I was practically running down the street hoping to make it before the doors were closed and locked. Then there were other mornings when I didn't even bother going to morning worship, because I knew that I would never make it in time and would be left standing outside.

As you might imagine, many of us thought it was wrong to lock the doors of the Auditorium and prevent people who wanted to worship from entering. I'm not sure how many years the locking of Hoover's doors was practiced because it was that way when I first started attending Annual Conference, but I do remember a few years later when a motion was made from the floor of Annual Conference to discontinue the practice. The motion overwhelmingly passed. For most of us, locking the doors was unreasonable, unfair, unchristian. After all, the doors to Christ's church should always be open to everyone no matter who they are or when they show up.

It's difficult for us to imagine that Jesus might think differently than we caring and considerate Christians who do not like the thought of preventing people from participating in the community of faith. However, we are told today that the door of God's heavenly kingdom is not only narrow and hard to get through, but we also cannot open it to let ourselves inside. Some will try, but we will fail because it is impossible for us to open or break through the door. We can knock and knock until our knuckles are raw; we can shout through the door until our voices are hoarse; we can peak through the windows and try to get Jesus' attention. We can remind the Lord of that time we ate supper with him, and how we heard him teaching in the streets, and we can even quote something he said. But none of that will be enough if our acquaintance with Jesus was too little and our lives do not bear convincing evidence of knowing him. We are told that **"he will say, 'I do not know where you come from; go away from me...'" (Luke 13:27)**. Just like a child is told never to open a door to a stranger no matter what that person says or how nice he or she may seem to be, Jesus will not open the door to those who are basically strangers.

Let's face it, a Lord who judges is not who most of us are counting on. We are counting on the Jesus who said, **"Come unto me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens..." (Matthew 11:28)**. We are counting on the Jesus who seems to prefer the company of sinners and who said, **"I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (Matthew 9:13)**. We are counting on the Jesus who relentlessly knocks on the door of our life for as long as it takes saying, **"Listen! I am standing at the door knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you..." (Revelation 3:20)**. And when it comes to THE heavenly door of God's Kingdom, we are counting on the crucified, risen Christ holding that door open for us, wedging his own body in it if necessary, so that we can squeeze through. But today, that is not the Jesus that Luke gives us. Instead, Luke gives us the Lord who, even though there is no

question that he loved us enough to die for us, also knows from his own painful experience that life comes with choices and consequences. It did for him, and it does for us.

When Jesus talks about the narrow and locked door, Luke tells us that he is on his way to Jerusalem. We know that means time is limited. Choices are limited. A shallow, casual acquaintance with Jesus is not good enough. Those of us who want to follow Jesus through salvation's door cannot afford to stand at a distance in the crowd and just listen to him teach once in a while. We cannot afford to smile and wave only from a distance, because what we need to do is make our way to the front, present ourselves to him, and say something like, **"Here I am, Jesus. I want to know you and follow you, so teach me and put me to work."**

I think it helps to know whom Jesus was specifically talking to in our passage. Here, as he was heading toward suffering and death, he was talking to people who were confident that God's door would always be open to them. These were people who knew the rules and mostly played by them. They were not the frowned upon sinners and tax collectors; they were not even specifically the Pharisees and scribes at this point. They were the decent, common, hard-working town folks who fully expected reserved seats in the kingdom of God. They expected a special section set aside for God's chosen people. They were absolutely confident that God would be more than happy to have them around.

But being born into the right family doesn't make a person right with God. Having your name on the membership role of a church, placing a few dollars in an offering plate on occasion, praying when you find yourself in a difficult situation do not in and of themselves make one a follower of Jesus Christ. We can't get through that narrow door by dropping someone else's name or holding onto someone else's coat sleeve. According to Jesus, there will be surprises in God's kingdom, and not everyone will like those surprises.

When Jesus told them that they would have to struggle like everyone else and that some of them would not make it, or be last if they did, it was like a door was slammed in their faces. It was like Jesus had taken from them their security blanket. It made them very uncomfortable when Jesus suggested that God's ideas about goodness and badness were different from theirs. The very thought that the people they thought were undeserving might get into the kingdom ahead of them not only scared them, it angered them. If Jesus was right, then they were wrong about a lot of things, but all in all it was easier to get rid of Jesus than it was to change their way of thinking and living.

Please don't make the mistake of thinking that this passage is all about the Jews. For this is a passage for all of us who think we know the mind of God, and who believe that we are firmly on God's side and numbered among the chosen. It is for all of us who calculate our goodness and chances of getting into God's kingdom by focusing on the sins of other people, as if we can free up seats for ourselves by eliminating the competition.

Jesus thinks it is important for us to know that some who are used to simply turning doorknobs and walking through doors are going to find that salvation's door requires more of them. And some who have spent their lives

peering through windows on tiptoes thinking the door will never be opened to them, may discover the door thrown wide open for them. No matter how unsettling that thought is, I am still glad that God is the one in charge of THE door. **Whatever judging needs to happen, it is God who does it – not you or me or anyone else.** It might make us a little uncomfortable to think that there is One who knows all our secrets and hidden thoughts, who sees our every action and inaction, who hears every hurtful as well as caring word from our mouth, and who knows our every failure as well as success. Only Someone who knows the whole story, the whole truth, can accurately sort things out. And having One who is best described by the word “love” – One who loves us better than we love ourselves is the One I prefer to be in charge of THE door.

But for now, we are left with the rather unsettling thought that ***“some are last who will be first and some are first who will be last” (Luke 13:30).*** Perhaps this unsettling thought is enough to motivate each one of us. For apparently, entry into the joy of salvation is the result and reward of striving for a relationship with Jesus Christ, even though our striving in itself will not win us entrance. But what the striving does is keep us close to Jesus, and that’s how we learn that Jesus wants and deserves to be so much more than a casual acquaintance of ours. Jesus desires a personal, intimate, loving relationship that involves our time and the reordering of our lives. That is the relationship that will make all the difference when we find ourselves standing at THE door of God’s Heavenly Kingdom.

But until that day, we need to keep the door of our heart open to Jesus as well as the doors of our churches open to all. I think it’s also good to remember that the doors of our church are not only doors of entry but also doors through which we are sent out. To follow Jesus is to move freely from in here to out there with the common goal of loving God and loving others both here and there. So, from this place of gathering and worshiping, we are sent out in Jesus’ name to love and serve, to invite, bring in and welcome everyone we possibly can. And as far as that other door, THE door, is concerned, let’s leave that door to the One who knows each one of us better than we know ourselves, and who despite that knowledge chose to sacrifice his life for our salvation. Thanks be to God for the great hope we have through Christ our Lord. Amen.