

21st Sunday Cycle C

8-29-10

Well, last week we were “Livin’ on a Prayer” and “Climbing the Stairway to Heaven.” Today we are [sing it] “Knock, Knock, Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door.” (I figure if Bob Dylan can sing it, anybody can.)

[knock on the pulpit] Every day on planet earth, 150,000 people breathe their last and knock on heaven’s door. That’s one every .6 seconds, “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door.)

Which Jesus tells us today is narrow. Which is kind of scary. Many will attempt to enter and will not be strong enough. Every .6 seconds. [knock on the pulpit] To some of them Jesus will say, “I don’t know where you come from. We haven’t spent much time together!” We don’t want to have to wear a name tag when we stand outside knocking; however, I did bring a few if anybody needs one. “Hello, God, my name is....”

And a narrow door means we go through single file. Just me. Not the pope or the bishop or the pastor, not how my parents raised me, or what the government did wrong, or my boss; not what the crowd, everybody else, did—just me, my life.

And some will knock and say, “Jesus, I ate and drank with you--I went to Communion!” “You taught me—I was here for the readings and the preaching.” And Jesus will say to them, “Yes, but were you transformed?”

And when an American knocks on heaven’s door, he or she might want to say: “But America is the greatest nation in the history of the world! The most powerful, the most wealthy, the most

generous, the most free, the most peace-loving! The US was first on earth! Doesn't that count for something in heaven?"

And perhaps Jesus will say, I'd like you to meet these folks from Put and Lud: they are Africans. And Tarshish: they speak Spanish. And Javan: they are Greeks. And over here are some of the nations who were your enemies on earth: you will spend all of eternity next to them. (Did you ever realize that we'll be spending forever with people we couldn't stand on earth?) [pause]

[sing:] "Knock, knock, knockin' on heaven's door?"

This is frightening. What are we to do? One response is to spend our days and nights in fear and scrupulosity, worrying constantly that we have committed yet another sin. Or we could despair of heaven—"there's no hope for me; I am beyond God's forgiveness"-- give up on God's grace, say "the heck with it." Or, we can I suppose assume that we have "made it", that we are perfect, and judge everyone else but ourselves?

Jesus tells us how to respond to heaven's narrow door. "Strive." The Greek word is *agonizomai*. *Agonizomai* is an athletic word; it describes the effort to win an event like the Olympic. Just as an athlete gradually builds up strength through daily disciplined exercise, spiritual fitness takes the daily discipline of effort and training. We don't "strive" to get through the gate only after we die; we strive every day: the discipline of prayer and bible reading. I know how hard that is.

Don't despair. Don't presume that you are saved and everyone else is a mess. Agonizomai. Strive. Every day, knock on heaven's door, every day, climb another step on the stairway to heaven. Every morning, live on a prayer.