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“Enter by the narrow gate” (Matt 7:12)

Gen 13:2, 5-18; Matt 7:6, 12-14

I once had a teacher whose favorite line to his classes was that teaching us was like “casting fake pearls before real swine.” It was a joke, I think. We took it as humor but also as a swipe at undergraduate education in general.

Successful communication of an important message requires an attentive audience. When Jesus sent his disciples out to preach, they must have reported back their frustrations at trying to tell the crowds his message, only to have it misunderstood and even distorted by critics.

Jesus himself may have started out by speaking directly to people, only to revert to parables that conveyed the message but made it available to a range of audiences and interpretations. The crowds would hear entertaining imagery, but those seeking

deeper meaning would get the real invitation contained in his stories.

His audiences were like concentric circles. At the fringes were people who were curious but only in passing. Others felt the challenge but were not ready to commit. The innermost circle was drawn to Jesus personally and felt the call to follow him. Those most affected by Jesus could not turn away, realizing that he was offering a once in a lifetime invitation to give themselves to God, whatever that entailed. Some few must have realized that Jesus himself was God's parable to the world. He was the treasure hidden in a field, the pearl of great price, the source of grace and love they were longing for.

Matthew preserved several short parables in today's text. The invitation to enter God's kingdom should not be wasted on audiences that were not ready to receive it. "Don't cast your pearls before swine." Jewish audiences were to be preferred. "Don't give what is holy to dogs," was a slur on pagans who were thought to lack context to grasp the deeper message.

The door to God's kingdom is open, but it is "a narrow gate" that requires a stripping away of assumptions and certainties by those who try to enter. Real conversion is a multi-stage process that requires commitment, and only those who are serious will persevere. It requires a unique life decision, the kind a person must make alone, free of all distractions and outside influences, with the purest of motives, from the heart, what we really want but also who we really are.

As in every love affair, God first lures us closer, then tests us before revealing the deeper truths and challenges of intimacy. How much do we really want to be holy? Real love will break our hearts in order to enlarge our capacity for the kind of love God has. Only if we are ready to surrender ourselves completely will we enter full friendship with God. But what else is there except to say yes? We were made for this kind of love.

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