

## *The Narrow Door*

The Second Sunday in Lent • March 17, 1998

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

The Very Rev. Patrick Raymond

*Jesus went through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. Someone asked him, "Lord, will only a few be saved?" He said to them, "Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able. When once the owner of the house has got up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, open to us,' then in reply he will say to you, 'I do not know where you come from.' Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.' But he will say, 'I do not know where you come from; go away from me, all you evildoers!' 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, and you yourselves thrown out. Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God. Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last." Some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'" Luke 13:(22-30)31-35*

Surely by now you're aware of the great college admissions scandal of 2019. This past Tuesday, 50 people were charged by the US Justice Department. Thirty-three were parents who paid staggering sums to assure their children's admissions to elite schools: Georgetown, Yale, Stanford, the University of Southern California and more.

US Attorney Andrew Lelling described the parents as a '*catalogue of wealth and privilege.*'<sup>1</sup> One parent-icon of that privilege is actor and celebrity Lori Loughlin, whose daughter Olivia was admitted to USC last year under what might be called a very expensive false pretext.

In response to Lori Loughlin's downfall, social media lit up with the refrain, "*Not Aunt Becky!*"<sup>2</sup> referring to Loughlin's best-known role on the TV sitcom '*Full House.*' We are often strangely surprised by the disconnect between actors' well-known wholesome roles and their actual broken, conniving lives. How often, though, does our surprise lead us to see and wonder about the discrepancies between our own roles and personas, on the one hand, and our own real-life motives and choices, on the other?

As Lori Loughlin was being arraigned on felony counts in Los Angeles on Wednesday, her 19-year-old daughter Olivia was on spring break in the Bahamas. She was aboard a yacht that is known to have cost \$100,000,000. It belongs to a billionaire named Rick Caruso – the president of the board of trustees of USC.

The name of Rick Caruso's yacht is *The Invictus*, from the Latin for "unconquerable." *Invictus* is also the title of a 19th century poem by William Ernest Henley that includes the famous lines: "*I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul.*"

What a contrast to a gospel story that we heard five Sundays ago! You may recall the fisherman named Simon who stepped out of his little boat on the day that he recognized, or decided, that he was *not*, after all, the *captain of his soul*.

Who knows what will become of young Olivia? In a gossipy story about her on Friday, a friend said of her, "*She thought she knew what the future had in store for her, and it all just crumbled.*"<sup>3</sup> We may find it hard to muster any sympathy for Olivia. (I myself grew up in California and many times heard that USC stands for the University of Spoiled Children.) But wait! Before we lower the boom of judgment, some of us should relive that instant when the future that *we* had imagined crumbled. From a divine view, these devastations can become invitations to step out of our false sense of *invictus*.

Much of the present college admissions scandal may seem far removed from Galilee, where, according to today's gospel, Jesus is passing through and teaching as he makes his way to Jerusalem. But Chapter 13 of Luke's gospel, from which today's text is taken, suggests that issues of class and privilege and uses and abuses of power were as rampant in Galilee as in our own time.

Chapter 13 begins with some people telling Jesus '*about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.*' (13:1) The story isn't spelled out for us, but even without knowing more, we can imagine the display of cynicism and violence put on by one who imagines himself to be above the law. Chapter 13 ends, as we hear in today's gospel, with some Pharisees, whose motives are suspect, cautioning Jesus: "*Get out of town! Herod wants to kill you!*"

Immediately prior to the Pharisee's caution, "*Someone asked [Jesus], 'Lord, will only a few be saved?'*" By placing the question here, Luke may be drawing attention to the place where any of us should ask the most important questions of life and faith and meaning and our final standing before God. Our most authentic asking and answering take place where we actually live, in the midst of our own class and race and culture, our own wealth or poverty, our own fears – all that drives us to survive and get ahead.

"*Will only a few be saved?*" Notice that Jesus does not answer the question directly. He does not say how many or few will be saved. Rather, Jesus turns the question into an imperative: "*Strive to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able.*" The English word *strive* here comes from a Greek word with the root *agon*, from which we get agony and agonize. "*Agonize to enter by the narrow door,*" *Your ego will resist. Your friends and family will tell you that you are crazy. Even as you become more committed, more faithful, you may try to smuggle in parts and pieces of your old life to keep with you, to fall back on, just in case.*

During a yoga class in which I took part last year, we came to a particularly challenging pose. The wise, young instructor said, "*I want you to take this pose to what you think is your limit. And then, without hurting yourself, take it just a bit further.*" And then she said, "*Now I want you to hold the position for as long as you think you can — and then hold it just a bit longer.*" I wonder if Jesus may be aiming for a similar stretching and holding – of our intentions and wills and commitments – when, in today's gospel, he speaks of striving to enter by the narrow door.

The man at the center of the college admissions scandal is named Rick Singer. His consulting company is widely known as The Key – as in THE KEY that will get your child in the door of USC. Rick Singer’s consulting firm has locations in 81 US cities and six countries. In testimony that he’s already provided to the Justice Department, Singer described his scheme this way: “... *there is a front door of getting in [to college], where a student just does it on their own. There’s a back door, where people ... make large donations, but they’re not guaranteed in. And then I created a side door that guaranteed families to get in ...*”<sup>4</sup>

A number of Bible scholars speculate that the real question being asked of Jesus today is not how many will be saved but rather “*Where’s the side door?*” The response of Jesus makes clear that, where the kingdom of God is concerned, where our salvation matters, there is no side door or back door. As we separately learn from John’s gospel, Jesus himself is the only door (10:7, KJV), and the only way in is by way of God’s mercy.

It’s also true that the sign on that door sometimes has your name on it, or mine. And if you can imagine your name there, you may also notice the small print below it – a personalized invitation or call, or sometimes an indictment. Part of our work in Lent is to see and take to heart that small print. Reading further, we may also learn of a particular summons to respond. We may be required to *strive*, to stretch beyond our comfort zones, some way of love or forgiveness or justice by way of which the narrow door will be legitimately and joyfully opened for us. *Amen.*

<sup>1</sup> Washington Post, March 12, 2019, story by Devlin Barrett and Matt Zapposky.

<sup>2</sup> Washintgon Post, March 14, story by Emily Yahr

<sup>3</sup> People.com, March 15, 2019, story by Jodi Guglielmi.

<sup>4</sup> [www.townandcountrymag.com](http://www.townandcountrymag.com), March 13, 2019, story by Lauren Hubbard.

