

**21st Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C
21 August 2022**

“Many will attempt to enter...but will not be strong enough”

Late every summer, no matter what else is happening around the world, there's always at least one ray of light, a dose of genuine good news. It may not be world-shaking, but it's always great to be able to say...the NFL season has finally arrived. True, right now, it's just training camp and the preseason, so I couldn't get too excited last weekend about the 49ers beating the Packers again, but it's still NFL football. In fact, this time of year provides one of the most compelling of all pro football narratives. We tend to focus on the quest for the Vince Lombardi Trophy in the Super Bowl, and well we should, for victory there is the goal of all NFL players and coaches. Still, August provides a story-line which is almost as compelling—which players will stick with the team, fulfilling their dream of making it in the NFL, and which will have to pack up and go home with their dreams shattered?

The Packer's training camp roster began a few weeks ago with 90 players, but by the end of the pre-season, head coach Matt LaFleur and his staff have to whittle that down to the regular season roster of 53. So, more than 40% of the players in camp at the beginning of August are cut by the end of August. Why don't all those guys make the team? Because in one way or another, they're not strong enough. Their skills may be weak, or they may lack physical and mental toughness. Bottom line—they're just not strong enough to compete in the NFL. To use a Biblical image, training camp separates the wheat from the chaff, or in more contemporary terms, the warriors from the wannabes.

Today's Gospel passage speaks about *spiritual* wannabes, those who will not make the final cut. When someone asked Jesus, "Lord, will only a few people be saved?" he responded, "Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many will attempt to enter but will not be strong enough." Our Lord then describes some of those who won't make it in. "After the master of the house has arisen and locked the door, then you will stand outside knocking and saying, 'Lord, open the door for us.' He will say to you in reply, 'I do not know where you are from.' And you will say, 'We ate and drank in your company and you taught in our streets.' Then he will say to you, 'I do not know where you are from. Depart from me, you evildoers!' And there will be wailing and grinding of teeth when you see [others] in the kingdom of God and you yourselves cast out."

Returning to our training camp analogy, this passage suggests that many of us will be surprised, and not necessarily in a good way, when the Head Coach of heaven makes His final cuts. And listen again to what led to those wildly optimistic but misplaced expectations. "[But Lord,] we ate and drank in your company and you taught in our streets." So what? The Lord's apostles certainly ate and drank in his company, but so did thousands of others when he provided them bread and fish. Did that guarantee all of them salvation? Similarly, many Catholics "eat in the Lord's company," receiving communion but not believing that it is truly Christ's flesh, the Bread of Life. Others do believe, but then do nothing to use that great gift to grow in holiness. Does simply participating in the Lord's supper guarantee salvation? Of course not; as St. Paul noted, we actually sin by participating in the Eucharist unworthily (1 Cor 11:27-29).

Similarly, the mere fact that Jesus taught in your streets doesn't count for much. How many folks come to Church and hear his Word, but do nothing with it? Do they bother even listening to his words? If they do listen, do they then try to put his words into practice through obedience and faith? If not, then they are no better off than the Galilean townspeople who heard Jesus teach and saw most of his miracles. But they did not truly believe and repent, so despite witnessing Jesus in action, he warned that their fate would be worse than that of Sodom (Mt 11:20-24).

So, how do we avoid that fate? How do we make sure that we are strong enough to enter through the narrow gate? By actively fostering spiritual strength in our lives. As today's passage from Hebrews encourages us, "Strengthen your drooping hands and your weak knees." Hebrews also tells us how that strength develops—through discipline. Our passage reminds us, "[Whomever] the Lord loves, he disciplines; [so] Endure your trials as discipline. God treats you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?" Then, like a coach assuring his players after a tough work-out, the author of Hebrews concludes with these words: "At the time, all discipline seems a cause not for joy but for pain, yet later it brings the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who are trained by it."

St. Augustine had this to say about such discipline: "Whenever we suffer some affliction, we should regard it both as punishment and correction. Our Holy Scriptures themselves do not promise us peace, security and rest. On the contrary, the Gospel makes no secret of the troubles and temptations that await us, but it also say that they 'who persevere to the end will be saved.'"

So, how do we find the strength to persevere? By responding to God's discipline by practicing discipline ourselves. Another sports metaphor is illuminating. Recall last week's reading from Hebrews, which exhorted us to "run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus." So, consider running. Specifically, think about cross-country—long-distance running. I ran cross-country in high school, and the training program, at least back in the day, was very simple. We got better at running long distances by going out every day and running long distances. We practiced and improved by doing exactly the same thing we would do in a race.

That same approach helps in our spiritual race as well. Consider today's responsorial psalm: "Go out to all the world and tell the Good News." How do we get better at going out and telling the Good News? By going out and telling the Good News! We get comfortable talking about Jesus publicly by talking about Jesus publicly when the opportunity arises. We get more confident sharing with others our personal experiences of Jesus by sharing those experiences. The same holds true with the discipline of regular Scripture reading. We get better at reading and understanding Scripture by reading Scripture—ideally with a Catholic study bible or a solid Catholic Biblical commentary. But reading *about* Scripture is very different from reading Scripture itself—ingesting, drinking in God's very words to us. Submitting to the discipline of regular Scripture reading may at first, in the words of Hebrews, "seem a cause for pain yet later it brings the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who are trained by it."

Many of Jesus' startling demands can be quite challenging to obey. For example, just last week, Christine and I were driving with

our grand-kids, and we mentioned that Jesus expects us to love our enemies. Our grand-daughter nearly choked on that as she exclaimed, “What? How are we supposed to do *that*?” Adalie’s shock highlighted a genuine spiritual challenge. Loving our enemies *is* difficult, sometimes nearly impossible. On our own, we lack the strength to do it.

Now, in sports, some players develop greater physical strength by taking steroids. They become stronger than they would be naturally; in effect, they achieve supernatural strength by cheating. In the spiritual realm, however, depending on supernatural strength is *not* cheating; in fact, it’s essential. Indeed, one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit *is* strength. So, with the supernatural strength of the Spirit and the grace of the sacraments, we can accomplish the impossible as we improve with practice: we get better at loving our enemies by loving our enemies. We get better at resisting temptation by resisting temptation. The same applies to the Lenten disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. We get good at prayer by praying, good at fasting by fasting, and good at almsgiving by giving alms. We learn by doing; we grow stronger by repeating over and over again the things that strengthen us.

Finally, let’s take a moment to re-think those Lenten disciplines. In a way, it’s unfortunate that we refer to them as “the Lenten disciplines,” because we might think that Lent is the only time we need to perform them. But that’s just like saying that the Packer’s training camp is the only time the players need to undergo strength training and develop their football skills. In reality, training camp is where you undergo the discipline to make sure that you can use, and then maintain, all your strength and skills during the regular season.

The same should apply to our Lenten disciplines. Lent should be like training camp, a time to submit ourselves to discipline, to tighten up our flabby spiritual muscles, to get back on a strict program of practice so that we can then continue to pray, fast, and give alms throughout “the regular season,” or, to put it liturgically, throughout Ordinary Time. Lent is the time to strengthen and perfect our practice of those disciplines so that we can then perform them effectively all year long—even right now in the middle of summer. In other words, Lent is not just the season when we commit to disciplinary practices for a few weeks, but rather when we practice disciplinary commitment, so that we can then sustain that commitment year-round. In order to love the Lord our God with all of our strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves, day in and day out, we need to submit to our divine coach’s spiritual discipline all year long. Not just during our Lenten “training camp,” but during the regular season as well—24/7/365!

So let’s strengthen those drooping hands and catch any passes the Lord throws our way. Let’s strengthen those weak knees and sprint to the end zone to score. Let’s strengthen ourselves so that we aren’t cut from the team on the Last Day, so that we make that final roster—those whose names are inscribed in the Book of Life. We can’t become the saints God created us to be, we won’t be able to enter through the narrow gate, unless we are strong enough, unless we embrace the disciplines that God has blessed us with, practicing them and striving to improve. Like any great coach, God wants us to succeed; he wants to get the best out of us. So, let’s cooperate with our heavenly head coach, knowing that he loves us, cheers for us, and will do whatever it takes to help us get over that eternal goal line.