

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time (2025) – Year C

There's this quote by Jerzy Gregorek, an Olympic weightlifter, that I can't help but hear in a thick Polish accent: ***“Hard choices easy life, easy choices hard life.”***

Nothing meaningful has ever been created in a short period of time with a minimum of effort.

St. Luke tells us that “Jesus passed through towns and villages...making his way to Jerusalem.” When someone asked him, **“Lord, will only a few people be saved?”**

A typical Jew at the time would have expected Jesus to answer, “Yes! Only a few will be saved,” because most Jews believed that only Jews — and Jews who faithfully kept God's covenant — would “recline at table in the kingdom of God.”

The inquisitor likely thought he was among the chosen few. But Jesus didn't reply, attempting to satisfy the person's curiosity, because he hadn't come from heaven to earth to answer the questions of inquiring minds.

Jesus had come from heaven to earth to save us, and so he responded not by giving him a number but rather by showing him the way.

“Strive to enter through the narrow gate.”

And here is where it gets interesting. The word translated as “strive” is from the Greek word to “agonize,” and it’s used in a verb tense that means “keep on agonizing.”

In other words, to enter and remain in Christ’s kingdom, we must continuously agonize, as Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane, to align our will with the Father’s.

We need to work harder than an undrafted free agent who gives everything he’s got in an NFL training camp to make the cut, harder than a young gymnast works to make the Olympics and win the gold, harder than an immigrant father works to ensure his family’s survival, harder than a missionary to plant the faith in a place that is resistant to the Gospel.

To be a faithful Christian means to “agonize” in following Christ each day. There is never a point that we can stop fighting to follow Jesus and “live off the interest” of the previous years of good discipleship.

We are called to struggle, to keep fighting the good fight of faith, until the day we die.

As Archbishop Sheen used to say, “If we’re not going uphill, we’re sliding downhill. If we’re not swimming against the current of the world toward Jesus, we’ll be floating downstream over the falls.”

The width of the narrow door to Heaven is the span of a needle's eye, something that is anything but easy to pass through. We need to agonize to fit through the narrow gate as if our whole life depended on it.

In the midst of a culture that consistently tries to water down our commitment to God, we must be honest in assessing the world's current situation, including among those who call themselves disciples of Jesus.

Which is more popular today, the path of spiritual poverty or that of materialist wealth? The path of purity or pornography? The path of peace-making or score-settling? The path of mourning or partying? The path of turning the other cheek or slapping back? The path of keeping the commandments or breaking them?

St. Luke wants us to know that Jesus' path is not an easy one. Loving according to his standards can be crucifying. But he's telling us today that it is eternally worth it.

The good news is Jesus doesn't leave us on our own, with all our weaknesses, staring at the uphill, narrow road, wondering if we will be one of the few who can make it.

The Lord empowers us with his Word, bolsters us through the intimate friendship of prayer, and fortifies us with the incredible gift of Holy Communion, so that united with him, we might follow Him step by step, entering into Him who is the narrow gate.

In the words of St. Rose of Lima, the first American saint:

“Let all men know that grace comes after tribulation. Let them know that without the burden of afflictions, it is impossible to reach the height of grace.”

“Let them know that the gifts of grace increase as the struggles increase. Let men take care not to stray and be deceived. This is the only true stairway to paradise, and without the cross, they can find no road to climb to heaven.”

Office of Readings – August 23

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