

Struggling to Enter Through the Narrow Door

August 20-21, 2022

Fourth in a Series of Five Sermons, “Our Life Together in Christ”

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 13:23-24 - And someone said to Jesus, “Lord, will those who are saved be few? And he said to them, “Strive to enter through the narrow door.”

Dear Friends in Christ,

In this sermon series, we are exploring what it means to be traveling through the ups and downs of life as God’s precious and loved people. We have zeroed in in particular on the difference between following Jesus Christ **at a distance** and following Him **closely**. Last Sunday, our theme was “Divided at the Cross.” The week before, “Valued by God.” Three weeks ago, “Rich Towards God.” And next week, “Invited to Come Up Higher.”

Today’s theme is “Struggling To Enter Through the Narrow Door.”

Even though salvation is free and paid for in full at the cross by Christ, there is a cost that comes along with being one of His disciples. Even though the ultimate victory is ours in the church triumphant, there is a battle that needs to be fought here and now in what we call the church militant.

In our second lesson for today, the writer to the Hebrews makes it clear that there is a struggle, a striving, and an agony that comes along with traveling the narrow road of salvation. That whom the Lord loves, He disciplines. That all discipline is painful at the time and will need to be fought through. That sin and all the enemies of the faith will need to be intentionally resisted. Also in today’s Gospel, Jesus would look us in the eyes and remind us that the struggle is real. Say it with me, please, “the struggle is real.”

Perhaps the most famous struggle for Americans these days is the struggle to lose weight. One person had this to say about the struggle, “The only difference when I’m on a diet is that instead of saying, “I ate nachos,” I say, “I accidentally ate nachos.”

Another suggested, “I don’t need a personal trainer as much as I need someone to follow me around and slap the unhealthy foods out of my hands.”

Still another summarized the struggle nicely, “I wanted to work out, but then I wanted to not work out even more.”

Even more important than disciplining our bodies, of course, is the matter of disciplining our souls. Paul writes to the young pastor Timothy, ***“Train yourselves for godliness, for while bodily training is of some value,, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.***

Two parts to our sermon today. The first is Law, and the second is Gospel. The first has to do with looking into the mirror of God’s Law and self examination, and the second has to do with looking to the cross for motivation. ***Part #1 is no pain, no gain. And part #2 is not our hard work, but God’s Word working inside of us.***

No pain, no gain.

Coaches have said it for as long as we can remember - no pain, no gain. Parents have drilled it into our heads that anything worth doing is worth doing well. Music teachers have insisted that practice makes perfect. Dieticians and medical experts and life coaches have preached it in a thousand different ways, “Success isn’t supposed to be easy.”

Marian Wright Edelman - “Don’t feel entitled to anything you didn’t sweat and struggle for.”

Napoleon Hill - “Strength and growth come only through continuous effort and struggle.”

William Oster - “To have striven, to have made the effort, to have been tied to certain ideals, this alone is worth the struggle.”

Lucretius - “Life is one long struggle in the dark.”

Pain is the gift nobody wants. That’s the title of a book written by Philip Yancey and a doctor named Paul Brand. The authors suggest that pain is not the enemy, but the loyal scout announcing that the enemy has arrived. Dr. Brand tells the story of a girl with a diagnosis of “congenital indifference” to pain, which happens to be one of the symptoms of what we call leprosy.

At the age of 18 months, Tanya bit off the tip of her finger and was found playing in her crib with her own blood. At age 4, she came in with a severely injured and infected ankle. She would step on a tack and not bother to remove it. She would

walk on a twisted ankle and thereby twist it over and over again. Eventually she lost both legs to amputation.

When you and I touch a hot stove, the pain causes us to withdraw our hand in a hurry. Right. Pain, in that circumstance, isn't our enemy. It's a friend advising us to change course.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul invites us to rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces, endurance and endurance produces character. In James 1, Christians are invited to count it as pure joy when we face various trials because we know that the testing of our faith produces steadfastness. Jesus teaches that it is through much tribulation that we must enter the kingdom of God.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem, and He refused to be distracted. Along the way, He was teaching and healing and explaining to His disciples that the road ahead would be full of bumps and bruises and brutality beyond imagination.

Again and again Jesus taught that the road to destruction would be broad and traveled on by many. Only a few would be able to stay on the narrow road of salvation.

A man asks what could be considered an academic question, "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" Jesus makes it a teachable moment for all who would listen in, "**Struggle to go in through the narrow door.**" The Greek word is *agonizethe*. It's a strong word that comes from athletic games and describes the extreme effort of a runner who "hits the wall." A runner with sheer determination who runs through the pain to complete the race. Jesus would teach us this morning to put everything we have into running the race marked out by God for us to run. To put on the full armor of faith and to understand that in all the seasons of life there will be particular temptations to resist. There will be bad habits that will be hard to break, and there will be good habits that seem almost impossible to form.

In September of 1980, I went to my first ever circuit pastors' conference. We call them Winkels, which is a German word for corner, as in pastors going to their corner for study and encouragement. I was the typical seminary graduate, 25 years old, thought I knew what I was doing, fire in my belly, ready to turn my little corner of the world upside down. There I met an older pastor, about 64 years old and a year away from retirement. He looked me in the eyes and said, "Larry, I hope you never get to where I am in ministry. I've lost my ambition and I'm just

sort of coasting into retirement.” I thought to myself, perhaps even said it aloud - that will never happen to me.”

A few years ago, I found myself in my 60’s starting to slow down, wondering whether I should retire or not, my bursts of energy less than what they used to be, and caught up in a brand of Christianity I’ve often preached again - lukewarm Lutheranism.

The kingdom of God is like a congregation of believers who have either sailed or stumbled into the golden years, at least most of them. Their temptations are different than they were 40 years ago, but they are real. The fire in their bellies isn’t what it used to be, but it isn’t gone. They still ask God questions, but they’re different, and for the most part, they lead to better answers. Instead of asking why God is permitting such pain and suffering to be in their hearts, they ask, “Lord, what are you trying to teach me today?” Instead of asking God to help them survive the day, they ask Him to give them opportunities to serve. And on their best days, they see pain not so much as an enemy to be avoided, but as a friend inviting them to cast all their cares upon their Savior, knowing that He cares for them.

- **Not our hard work, but God’s Word working in us**

All this talk about struggling and striving to enter the Kingdom is enough to make the average Lutheran twitch. Add to it Paul’s exhortation to the Philippians to *work out your salvation with fear and trembling*, and the patriarchs and matriarchs here at Faith Lutheran might just sit up straight and do some serious twitching! We have had it drilled into our hearts, and rightly so, that we are saved by the grace of God alone, received by faith in Jesus alone. We believe and we teach and we confess again and again that no effort or good works on our part can add to what Christ has already accomplished with His perfect life, His excruciating suffering, His once and for all sacrifice, and His glorious resurrection.

And that’s why we do well to read the rest of Philippians 2:12,13, *work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*

This matter of running the race well and fighting the good fight of faith starts and finishes with hearing the Word of God and keeping it. The work of sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit, not ours. That’s why Jesus prayed on the night He was betrayed, **“Father, sanctify them with Thy truth. Thy Word is truth.”**

All of this language about struggling and striving is really about daily repentance. Repentance isn't pulling ourselves up by the bootstraps. It's a work of God in the human heart. Repentance isn't us working more diligently to be better Christians. It happens when the Word of God is taught and preached and listened to. Repentance isn't us getting our act together through sheer determination, it's the Law of God telling us what to do and not to do and the Gospel declaring to us what God has done in the person and ministry of Jesus Christ. It's the Law acting as a mirror and showing us our sin and the Gospel showing and inviting us to believe in our Savior.

The first of Luther's 95 Theses is that *"When Jesus said, repent, he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."*

I said it last Sunday, and I'll say it again. Our assignment each day isn't to sort of wash our old sinful adam and make it look and sound better. It is to drown the old sinful adam through sincere repentance so that the new person of faith might rise up on the inside of us and live.

Professor Henry Eggold from the Ft. Wayne Seminary used to teach us homiletics, and one of his more memorable lectures was what your face should look like when you preach Law and Gospel. He said that when you preach the Gospel, your face should light up like the brightest of Christmas trees, your face should be absolutely radiant and joyful and as if the best news the world could ever hear is being delivered. And when you preach the Law, he said, well then your regular face will do just fine.

Dear friends in Christ, two assignments I would suggest as you move forward with this desire to struggle to enter through the narrow door.

Assignment #1 is to look into the mirror each and every day and to examine your soul, ask questions of yourself, reflect and identify the bad you have been doing and the good you have been failing to do. See where you have gone wrong, admit the ways you have fallen short, cry out again and again for the forgiveness of your sins.

Assignment #2 is to look to the cross, where Jesus was rejected, that you might be accepted. Jesus is that narrow door and wants more than anything else in the world for you to live with Him face to face through all eternity. Jesus is that Good Shepherd Who follows you around with goodness and mercy in all the seasons of

life, even when and especially when you are stumbling into a lukewarm brand of Christianity.

The kingdom of God is like a small group of travelers who have their bad days, their good days, and their good days. On their bad days, they just sort of wander through the day, they do little in the way of self examination, and they are just sort of coasting their way through the ups and downs of life. On their good days, they are quick to confess their shortcomings and slow to complain. They ask good questions, they engage with God's Word, and slowly, but surely, they are growing in faith. On their really good days, they struggle and they strive in such a way that others are encouraged. In Jesus' Name. Amen