

**Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time C - STRIVE to enter by the narrow gate for Salvation**  
August 21, 2022.

The Church reminds us of **three things** in this Sunday's Gospel passages (Luke 13:22-30): First, that **heaven exists**. This is the banquet in the Kingdom of God, the way Jesus describes salvation and eternal life. Second, that **hell exists**. This is what's outside that banquet, where there is "wailing and grinding of teeth" - images of the hopeless frustration that the human soul experiences when it is cut off forever from friendship with God. And third, that **in order to make our way to heaven, we have to keep on doing our part**. It is not enough to have a superficial knowledge of Christ - like the people who said, "We ate and drank in your company and you taught in our streets." Rather, **we have to have a living, lasting, growing friendship with Christ**. That is what we were created for, and that is what will lead us to true life. **And since friendship always involves effort, self-sacrifice, and the investment of time and energy, the same thing goes for our friendship with Christ**. Salvation comes from actually following him, knowing him better and living out his teaching. **This is what Jesus means by "the narrow gate" that leads to salvation. To get through a narrow gate we have to leave behind all our excess baggage - we have to go through it on purpose.**

This conversation that Christ has about how many people will be saved is not easy to swallow. We can picture Jesus resting during his travels, seated on a stump or a rock outside a town, or maybe on a low wall inside a town square. He is surrounded by a crowd of followers and curiosity seekers, speaking with them about God and the meaning of life. At one point, someone (possibly someone who believed in eternal life but was wondering if it was as hard to attain as what the Pharisees said) asks him if only a few people will be saved. In our culture, the prevailing view is just the opposite. It says that most people are nice guys and will get to heaven. But what does Jesus say? He doesn't give a direct answer. **He doesn't say, "Only a few will be saved," as the Pharisees taught. Neither does he say, "Many will be saved," as today's popular culture teaches. Instead, he changes the focus from general statistics to the individual. He looks at his questioner and says, "Strive to enter by the narrow gate."** Then he tells a parable that reinforces this emphasis on individual responsibility (as opposed to general appearances) by showing that on Judgment Day there will be a lot of surprises - the first will be last, and the last will be first. **What Jesus wants is clear: he wants us to take seriously the adventure of life; he wants us to be responsible for our choices; he wants to lead us to heaven, but he can only do so if we decide to follow that lead with our hearts.**

This is why it is not unreasonable for God to want all of us to become saints - which he does. If being a saint required some special talent, like extraordinary intelligence or athletic ability, it would not be fair to call all of us to holiness. But it doesn't. **Holiness comes from living our friendship with Christ, from the heart, more deeply every day.** St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (1891-1942), began life as Edith Stein, the child of Jewish parents. Youngest of seven children. Edith lost interest and faith in Judaism by age 13. She identified herself as an atheist. Brilliant student and philosopher with an interest in phenomenology at the age of 25, she earned a doctorate in philosophy and her thesis "**The Problem with Empathy**" earned her great renown. Later, while trying to gain a professorship, a near-impossible feat for women of the day, she witnessed the strength of faith of Catholic friends which led her to an interest in Catholicism. She started studying catechism on her own. Inspired by the Autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila, she converted to Catholicism and was baptized on 1 January 1922. She continued academic life and translated works of Aquinas and Newman. She taught in the Dominican school in Speyer, Germany and lectured at the Educational Institute in Munich, Germany. However, anti-Jewish pressure from the Nazis forced her to resign both positions. In 1934, she professed in the Carmelite Order taking the name Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. Facing the hostile Nazis, she and her sister Rose, also a convert to Catholicism, managed to escape to the Netherlands in 1938. But when the Nazis invaded the Netherlands, they were captured and sent to the concentration camp at Auschwitz

where they died in the gas chambers. We just celebrated her memorial on August 9. There is a movie on FORMED, Edith Stein: The Seventh Chamber. The film highlights her hardships as a novitiate (like forbidden to get out to visit her Mom who was dying). This film shows how two worlds, the Jew and the Christian, were united within her in absolute coherence in her search for truth. It captures the interior struggles of this extraordinary woman, as well as the great conflicts from her decision to convert to Catholicism and joining the Carmelites and finally her martyrdom. She was canonized by John Paul II in 1998. It wasn't her intelligence, good looks, or winning personality that gave her the strength and wisdom to stand up to evil and bear heroic witness to Christ. **She is one of the most beautiful symbols in a horrifying period of history because she sought to transform her sufferings under the Nazis into a journey through the "interior castle" as the way to mystical union with God through the "narrow gate".**

We cannot take our friendship with Christ for granted. Our Lord wants us to consciously and continually strive to enter by the narrow gate. So we need to ask ourselves: Is strive the word that best characterizes our Christian life? The Greek word translated as "strive" is "agonizomai". It is used to describe the contests in their Olympic games, and also hand-to-hand combat with an enemy. Jesus in the Gospel reading is inviting us to **"make every effort" and "try your hardest"** to break out of our comfort zones and start striving to follow him more closely. He only asks this of us because he loves us, and love always seeks the very best for the beloved. We each have to examine our hearts and see where we have been falling into routine - where in our Christian lives we have been getting lazy. We cannot strive with all our strength to follow Christ if we do not know Christ, if we do not seek to understand him and his message, seeking to learn the honest truth about him. This week, why not make the resolution to start striving to know Christ better? It can be done in many ways: weekly Eucharistic adoration, joining a Faith Sharing group, renewing your prayer life, reading the Gospel everyday...Whatever each of us decides to do, let's make sure we decide to do something - depending not on our own strength, but on God's grace. Entrance into heaven is a case of struggling rather than strolling in. **Jesus is eager to help us through the narrow gate, but we have to strive to do our part.**

Brothers and sisters, Jesus looks beyond appearances and into the heart. This has two practical applications for us. First of all, it teaches us never to judge others by appearances. Many times, those who seem great or holy on the outside are actually filled with selfishness and arrogance on the inside. And many times those who seem petty and indifferent on the outside are actually filled with humility and wisdom on the inside. That's why Jesus says, ***"some are last [in the world's eyes] who will be first [in God's Kingdom], and some are first [in the world's eyes] who will be last [in God's Kingdom]."*** As a result, if we just go by appearances, we will make rash and maybe even unfair judgments. Instead, we should follow Christ's lead and give all of our neighbours the same benefit of the doubt that we give to ourselves. We're always making excuses for ourselves; let's be equally quick to make excuses for others. That's part of what it means to love our neighbours as ourselves. That's the first practical application. Here's the second. Since Jesus looks to the heart, if we want to please him, we should take care of our hearts. That means encouraging good desires and starving bad desires. Desires pop up inside of us without being invited. We should dwell on the ones that go together well with our friendship with Christ, since they will help us live life to the full. We should turn away from the ones that are self-centred and destructive, since they will interfere our friendship with Christ. Let's ask him to make our hearts more like his. And also through **the intercession of Edith Stein, may those whose personal and family histories are both Jewish and Christian, contribute to the necessary dialogue between our faiths so as to live as fratelli tutti, siblings all, in our common home. Amen.**