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Pentecost 14

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Be Striving”

Text: Luke 13:22-30; Hebrews 12:4-24; Isaiah 66:18-23

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

***Strive to enter through the narrow door.***

When this verse is read, it is (I believe) the narrow door that is often the focus. How narrow is it? the folks who asked Jesus wondered. What is it? we often wonder. And, why did God make it so narrow and not nice and wide?

We'll answer those in time. But first, there's another word in that verse, in that sentence, I want to focus your attention on this morning, and that is the word *strive*. *Be striving to enter through the narrow door*. The Greek word used there brings out even more the sense of the word: *agonizomai*. Agony. Be in agony to enter through the narrow door. The Christian life is a life of striving.

I'm not sure we usually think of it that way. After all, Jesus did the striving for us, didn't He? On the cross. He took our sins and paid the price. He fought the devil and won. He was forsaken by His Father and suffered the torments of hell. Right, right, and right. Jesus knew all that was coming, too, when He said these words. Yet still He said them. Still, He says, you be striving.

*The Christian life is one of striving.*

And actually, that's not God's doing - we're responsible for that. God's doing was a life of perfection, peace, and fellowship with Him. In the beginning there was work, Adam was charged with taking care of the Garden, but it was pleasant, and all that was needed was provided. It was, in fact, the life we all want. But it is the life we gave up. The life given up by sin to sin. And ever since, not only the Christian life but all of life has been one of striving.

The question is: *what are we striving for?* And if we are striving for the same things as those who are not Christian, what does that say? What does that mean?

***Be striving***, Jesus says, ***to enter through the narrow door.***

So what does that striving - what does that *agonizomai*, that agony - look like? We've seen worldly pictures of it. I've seen people caught up in flash floods and tornadoes striving for life - hanging on to whatever they can to not be swept away. I've seen men agonizing over every last detail of what they're going to say and how they're going to propose, striving for the woman who they hope will be their wife. I've seen pictures of athletes in agony, hobbling, crawling, injured over the finish line. Striving for victory. Sometimes just striving to finish.

Is the Christian life like that? Is your Christian life like that? Maybe it is at times, and maybe not so much at other times.

But think in terms of those examples I just mentioned. Are you striving to hang onto Christ and not be swept away by the flood of sin in our world? The devil sometimes sends torrents of temptations and the winds of political correctness and worldly opinion can be awfully strong and destructive.

And the details - are we paying attention to and in agony over every word our Lord has said to us, over all the doctrine and teaching, wanting to get it just right? Or do we fall into the trap of thinking it really doesn't matter?

Or what about the athlete? Paul uses that analogy for Christians, too, in First Corinthians. And then we heard from the letter to the Hebrew Christians this morning: ***In your struggle against sin*** - and actually, it's the same Greek word used there: in your *striving*, your *agony* against sin - ***you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood***. How often have you shed your blood in your struggle against sin? In *striving to enter through the narrow door*? Or do you cave long before that?

And the words from Hebrews go on, speaking about the Lord's discipline to help us in the struggle. Strive to be at peace with everyone. Strive for holiness.

The Christian life is a life of striving, of struggle, of agony. And when you cross through those doors back there again this morning and leave this place, the torrents, the trials, the temptations, the troubles will all return.

And it will be like the words we heard from Hebrews: ***For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear."***

That's a description of what life was like at Mt. Sinai. When the Lord came down

and spoke of this struggle against sin. The people couldn't take it. It was all too much for them. Even Moses trembled with fear. **It's you**, too, when hearing of the struggle, the striving of the Christian life and thinking: *I don't do that! I'm so worldly, I'm so unholy, and I don't even agonize that I am!* And it's true.

But notice what Hebrews said: ***you have not come to that . . . here.*** Out there, yes. All that is frightening. The struggle of the Christian life. The torrents of sin and death that swirl all around. The temptations to settle for less than perfect; to get tired of the struggle and striving.

***But you have not come to that . . . here.*** Instead, he says . . .

***you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.***

That's quite a different picture! And interesting because he says: ***you have come to Mount Zion.*** Folks usually think of Jerusalem and specifically the Mount the Temple was on when they hear "Mount Zion." But it's possible that by the time Hebrews was written the Temple was already gone, destroyed; and even if it wasn't, this letter was written to the Hebrew Christians living in Rome a good distance away from Jerusalem and the Temple. And yet still, he says, ***you have come to Mount Zion.***

And he does because Mount Zion is no longer in Jerusalem and no longer where the Temple was - *Mount Zion has now gone out into all the world.* Mount Zion is wherever the gracious presence of God is - where our Lord is with His promises of forgiveness and life. And so Mount Zion is in Rome, Mount Zion is here, and in every pulpit, every font, every altar, every chancel, every church where Jesus and His forgiveness is given.

So get the picture: the Christian life is a striving, a struggle. Out there your life is a striving, a struggle. An *agonizomai*; agony. But not in here. Because into this world of struggle, right in the midst of enemy territory, all over the world, are havens of rescue and peace. Where tired, beat up, bloody Christians come. Where there is the blood of the new covenant, given and shed for you **for the forgiveness of your sins.**

*And that is the narrow door: Jesus and His forgiveness.* For that is the only door in the wall of sin, the wall of death, the wall of separation between us and God. And rather than wish there were more doors, thanks be to God that there is a door at all!

And while it is as narrow as Jesus and His forgiveness, it is also that wide - for Jesus and His forgiveness is for all people. **For you.**

And that is the door that is open from the first day of sin when God promised a Saviour, until the last day when that Saviour comes again. That day when Jesus will take His own through Himself to His Father. That day when this old, sinful world finally comes to an end, and **the new heaven and the new earth** of which Isaiah speaks will come. When all struggle, all striving, all agony will finally be over.

**Will those who are saved be few?** Jesus doesn't answer that question, directly. But He does say that **people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God.** A truth which is, in fact, already happening. For you have come. And you, today, will recline - will rest and relax and receive the service of your Lord - here at His Table, in the midst of this turbulent world, in the midst of the struggle and striving. And receive his forgiveness, His life, His strength.

And *go in peace* will be the words ringing in your ears, the word given you as you depart, for this is a place of peace, that you might take that peace out into the world, out into the agony. To struggle on. Not uncertain, but certain. Not in despair but in hope. Not in doubt but in confidence.

So struggle on! Strive to enter! Agonize! But don't rely on your striving, rely on Jesus. That might make you last in the world. Shoved aside and pushed down by others. Beat up and ridiculed. Maybe even bloody. It's happening in other places, and more and more.

But if you are, you're in good company. That's where Jesus was too. His holy body tossed out in the garbage. But only for a time, for three days. And so it is with your struggle, your striving, your agony. It is only for a time. Your resurrection is coming too, and your new life has in fact already begun as you live in Christ and He in you. Even now.

So strive to enter through the narrow door. And do not be afraid of the struggle, for it is a good one. Struggle, and rely on Jesus and His Word. His promises. For He is faithful and He will see you through. Through the door. Through himself. To everlasting life.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.