August 21, 2016
Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time – “The Narrow Door to the Kingdom of God”
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Reading 1  Isaiah 66:18-21
Thus says the LORD: I know their works and their thoughts, and I come to gather nations of every language; they shall come and see my glory. I will set a sign among them; from them I will send fugitives to the nations: to Tarshish, Put and Lud, Mosoch, Tubal and Javan, to the distant coastlands that have never heard of my fame, or seen my glory; and they shall proclaim my glory among the nations. They shall bring all your brothers and sisters from all the nations as an offering to the LORD, on horses and in chariots, in carts, upon mules and dromedaries, to Jerusalem, my holy mountain, says the LORD, just as the Israelites bring their offering to the house of the LORD in clean vessels. Some of these I will take as priests and Levites, says the LORD.

Reading 2  Hebrews 12:5-7, 11-13
Brothers and sisters, You have forgotten the exhortation addressed to you as children: “My son, do not disdain the discipline of the Lord or lose heart when reproved by him; for whom the Lord loves, he disciplines; he scourges every son he acknowledges.” Endure your trials as “discipline”; God treats you as sons. For what “son” is there whom his father does not discipline? 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.
So strengthen your drooping hands and your weak knees. Make straight paths for your feet, that what is lame may not be disjointed but healed.

Alleluia  John 14:6
R. Alleluia, alleluia. I am the way, the truth and the life, says the Lord; no one comes to the Father, except through me. R.

Jesus passed through towns and villages, teaching as he went and making his way to Jerusalem. Someone asked him, “Lord, will only a few people be saved?” He answered them, “Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I tell you, will attempt to enter but will not be strong enough. After the master of the house has arisen and locked the door, then will you 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, all you evildoers!’ And there will be wailing and grinding of teeth when you see Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God and you yourselves cast out. And people will come from the east and the west and from the north and the south and will recline at table in the kingdom of God. For behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.”

HOMILY
A little over a week ago, I opened the front door of our house early one afternoon and walked into a lively and very energetic chant going on in our living room, by 4 of our grandchildren sitting and/or jumping in front of the television: “USA … USA … USA …” That chant seemed to go on for as long as that particular Olympic event was lasting. It then subsided, only to resurface when the next event eventually came on. The evenings last week were also full of energy, with similar chanting. They have
been back home in Maryland for just about a week now, but that chanting is still vivid in my mind, “USA … USA … USA …”

Now, I’m not a rabid sports fan, but I did get caught up somewhat with the excitement that is still going on in Rio. It was tough not to, hearing news reports of Michael Phelps, “the greatest swimmer,” Simone Biles “the greatest gymnast,” Usain Bolt “the fastest runner,” and so forth. Sports history was being made, almost every day, and the names of some superstars became household words in many homes. Anybody else get caught up in this Olympic fever, even if for a little while? But, even with all of the gold, silver and bronze medals being awarded and flashed around, there’s even greater stories going on behind the Olympics, stories that have been captured and picked-up by certain writers and news outlets, stories that you may or may not have heard. … How about the struggles that Michael Phelps has had over the past several years – just a few years ago, after having won multiple gold at previous Olympics and when it seemed like he might be on top of the world, he was in the pits of depression, struggling to find peace in his heart and then turning to substance abuse. It had gotten so bad that he was on the verge of ending his own life, when he listened to friends and family and checked into a rehab center and read a Christ-centered book given to him by another friend. It turned his world around and he realized he had a purpose for living, outside of himself. And then, he shared the book’s ideas with others at the rehab center, getting the nickname, “Preacher Mike.” I might suggest that Michael Phelps, superstar swimmer and dubbed the most decorated Olympic athlete of all time, may be on the path to developing a relationship with Christ. … And, how about Simone Biles? Adopted and raised by her grandparents from the age of 3 because of family substance abuse issues, this 19 year-old had claimed 14 World Championship medals and 4 U.S. titles, even before the 4 gold and 1 bronze medal she won in Rio, and has been chosen as Team USA’s flag-bearer for today’s Olympic closing ceremony. Raised as a Catholic, Simone admits that she prays before a competition, attends Sunday Mass with her adopted parents, and carries a white rosary with her in her gymnastics bag. I might suggest that Simone Biles may also be trying to develop a relationship with Christ. … Katie Ledecky? Another 19 year-old, she was the youngest American participant in the 2012 Olympics, and is now a five-time Olympic gold medalist, nine-time world champion, and current world-record holder in several women's swimming categories. Katie, who notes that she says a Hail Mary – or two – before she swims, was quoted recently as saying, “My Catholic faith is very important to me. It always has been and it always will be. It is part of who I am and I feel comfortable practicing my faith.” … And how about Usain Bolt? He’s from Jamaica, and this “fastest man on earth” just won his 9th Gold Medal overall on Friday. Besides making the sign-of-the-cross before each race, seen by millions on television this year, he always wears a Miraculous Medal around his neck and offers silent prayers before each race. He is very open about his Catholic faith, proudly noting his middle name as “St. Leo” – Usain St. Leo Bolt. … And, while we are away from the U.S., how about that gold-winning Rugby team from Fiji, who emphasize that God is the ultimate motivation of their playing, “we know that being here is not from our strength but from God and it’s all God’s plan that we are here.” … Here are great athletes who are displaying their faith, displaying their ongoing relationships with Jesus Christ. Now, hold that thought for a few moments. < … >

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus is on His way through towns and villages, teaching, and heading towards Jerusalem. Jewish people at that time were undoubtedly very confused by many of Jesus’
teachings and actions, ones that you’ve heard about over the past several months as we’ve explored the Gospel of Luke. These included His views on the Sabbath and the Pharisees, loving one’s enemies, His forgiveness of others’ sins and His association with known sinners, and His control over demons. And now, someone is asking Jesus how many will be saved, how many will enter this Kingdom of Heaven, eternal life that Jesus had been talking about. The Jewish people felt that they would, in general, be saved because of the covenant that God made with them – they would be automatically “in” except for those who were the “obvious sinners”. So Jesus’ answer, addressed not just to the one who asked the question, but to “them,” all of “them,” was unsettling. He told them that they weren’t automatically “in” just because of the covenant, and then, the invitation to the Kingdom was open to both Jews and Gentiles alike. He said that to enter, they must “strive to enter by the narrow door.” Elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus notes that He is the door, and if anyone enters by Him, he would be saved. This narrow door is Jesus, a loving relationship with Jesus that He invited the Jews and others to enter. And the word “strive” didn’t mean that it’s an automatic “in” to say they knew Jesus, that they ate with Him or that they listened to Him talk, they had to develop that relationship, to grow that relationship with Jesus.

And us? The message certainly applies to us also. Jesus is that narrow door for us to reach our eternal reward, our heavenly destination that we were born to reach – that heavenly destination that each and every one of us were born to eventually attain. Jesus extends that invitation to the Kingdom of God to us, He extends that invitation to strive to enter by being in a loving relationship with Him and by developing it, by growing it. It’s not enough to say we know Jesus, to say we are Catholic or Christian, and then doing nothing about that, or doing the minimal amount of effort that we feel is needed. It’s not enough to say we heard the Word of God but then didn’t follow up with it. Jesus is calling us to be the ones who help people around us like Michael Phelps when we see they need help, by guiding them through the tough times of their lives. We are called to be people like “Preacher Mike,” sharing the Word of God to others around us by word, by prayer, by action, by example. We need to be people like Simone Bile’s grandparents, stepping in when needed and then helping by our Christian guidance, sacrifice and examples. We have to be people like Michael, Simone, Katie, the Fiji players, Usain, Joe Kovacs and all the others who are out there using their faith to help them live their lives and attain their goals, setting good examples for the rest of us, so that we can live our lives and attain our goals, including that ultimate goal, that ultimate gold medal, the Kingdom of God, available not to one, but to each and every one of us. As widespread author Matthew Kelly noted, “Be bold, be Catholic,” we are called to not hide our faith but be proud to display it, and be proud to live it. As Catholic Christians, we are called to continue growing our relationship with Jesus Christ, the narrow door to eternal salvation, by nurturing that relationship, by getting to know Christ more every day, by making frequent use of the Eucharist, by reading the Word of God, by helping others around us, and by making Christ the most important part of our life. And then … then, our hope is that someday we will be able to enter the Kingdom of God and see Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, all the prophets, all those who helped us on our faith journey and all those who we helped on theirs.