

Building Walls

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

August 24, 2025

Fr. Tony Davis

Pope Francis said multiple times that those who build walls to keep other people out will end up becoming prisoners of the very walls they themselves have built. Instead of walls, he therefore often spoke of building bridges. He, of course, was speaking primarily about the immigration issue which will only intensify in the coming decades not only in our country, but also in Europe.

In our Gospel today, Jesus teaches his followers about heaven, the place (in the words of our opening prayer) where we fix our eyes in which true gladness is found. In it, he concludes with two significant points about what life will be like in heaven. First, he says, “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.” This means that the kingdom of heaven will not be tied to a single country, people, or language group. Second, he says, “for behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.” This means that the kingdom of heaven will include many people who were passed over in this world, most especially the poor in spirit. Both of these points should startle us and make us rethink our lives. Both of them should caution us against spending too much of our time on earth building walls.

There are many legitimate issues to debate regarding the reality of immigration. One common complaint that we need to avoid as Christians who are anticipating the life of heaven based on our readings this weekend, though, is the comment, 'but they don't speak English.' We say this as a criticism, frustration, and at times, an insult. As is sometimes the case, immigrants do know English but speak with an accent different from ours. Or, if they do not know English, they already speak multiple languages and are trying to learn yet another one as well. As we patiently or not so patiently try to communicate, what's important for us to remember is that English is not the only language in human history and it is certainly not the only language in heaven. As the prophet Isaiah in our first reading affirmed, God "comes to gather nations of every language." We should therefore never let the language barrier become a physical barrier in the form of a wall.

There may be a narrow gate into heaven, but once inside, there will be no walls separating people.

What factors or experiences tempt me to want to build walls in my life? How is heaven according to Jesus radically different from what we are used to on this earth? What does immigration look like in light of heaven?

In his 2024 message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees, Pope Francis shared this prayer,

God, Almighty Father, we are your pilgrim Church journeying towards the Kingdom of heaven. We live in our homeland, but as if we were foreigners. Every foreign place is our home, yet every native land is foreign to us. Though we live on earth, our true citizenship is in heaven. Do not let us become possessive of the portion of the world you have given us as a temporary home. Help us to keep walking, together with our migrant brothers and sisters, toward the eternal dwelling you have prepared for us. Open our eyes and our hearts so that every encounter with those in need becomes an encounter with Jesus, your Son and our Lord.

As we continue with this mass, let us pray that our Eucharistic table at St. Josephine Bakhita Parish may continue to foreshadow the table in heaven. Let us pray that we may not be like the group of people in the Gospel passage who were locked out of heaven, locked out not because of God, but because, as Pope Francis believed, those who build walls to keep people out will end up becoming prisoners of the very walls they themselves have built.