

Deacon Randy Perkins
First Kings 19: 9a, 11-13a
Romans 9: 1-5
Matthew 14: 22-33

NINETEETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
EPIPHANY CATHOLIC CHURCH
Louisville, KY USA
August 9, 2026

There's an old story about a woodcutter. When he first started out, he was highly efficient. He could chop down fifty trees every day! Word of his skill spread, and he became busier and busier. Over time, though, he noticed his productivity began to decrease. Now, on a good day he could chop down forty trees. He worked harder and harder but became less and less productive. One night he came home, totally exhausted, telling his wife he'd reached his limit! "I'm working all day, every day, and I'm worn out. I can't do this anymore." She asked him, "When was the last time you sharpened your axe?" He snapped back at her, "I don't have time to sharpen my axe! I'm too busy cutting wood!"

It's only funny because it's true! Maintaining balance in life is not easy.

In today's first reading, the great prophet Elijah found himself out of balance. For context, Elijah was wrapped up in a violent dispute with Queen Jezebel. She wanted to force Israel to worship her pagan gods and was having the Jewish prophets killed off. Elijah had devoted all his efforts to defeating her, including killing many of her pagan prophets. Eventually, Elijah fell apart. He'd lost his grounding. He ran off and hid. Scripture tells us, "He asked that he might die: 'It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life'"

But an angel told Elijah to get up, eat, and keep moving; and eventually Elijah found himself in a quiet cave. That's where today's reading begins. And as you'll recall, while in the cave there came a loud wind, a terrible earthquake, and a destructive fire. Then, after all the noise and violence, "there was a tiny whispering sound." In the cave. In the quiet. In the still. Away from the noise. Away from all the messed-up things happening around him. That's where Elijah reclaimed his grounding. That's where he reconnected with God! That's where he restored balance.

Today's gospel begins at a point where Jesus had reached his human limit. He'd recently learned that John the Baptist had been beheaded, and he tried to get away and regroup. But people heard he was around, and eventually a crowd of

5,000 people showed up with all kinds of needs. “And he had compassion for them and cured their sick.” Then, he did the whole fish and loaves thing.

But even Jesus eventually reached his human limit. Doing good things! Doing great things! But he needed to get away from it all. So, when the day was over, he dismissed the crowds, sent His disciples on a boat ahead of Him, and “went up on a mountain by Himself to pray. When it was evening, He was there alone.” Jesus needed to rediscover, or at the least, maintain balance. And to do that he had to get away from the crowd, the noise, the needs.

The woodcutter, Elijah, and Jesus all represent very real human experiences. Doing and doing and doing, to the point that we risk losing sight of why we’re doing what we’re doing.

So, let me ask: Do you take time to sharpen your axe? Are you taking care of yourself? Do you spend time in the cave or on the mountain, away from all the noise and nonsense in the world?

In our consumerist culture, we’re constantly bombarded with messages all around us telling us we need to work harder so we can make more, so we can spend more, so we can have more! And the result is that all our efforts go toward achieving that end, except there is no end. We lose balance and grounding. We get caught up in, even consumed in, the rat race!

But as comedian Lily Tomlin used to say, “Regardless how well you run in the rat race, at the end of the race you’re still a rat.”

It’s no surprise that worker burnout in the U.S. is at an all-time high. The American Journal of Preventive Medicine reports that 55% of workers describe themselves as “burned out.” Post-Covid, workers sought to continue remote work because they wanted to protect work/family balance, but burnout rates are now highest among remote workers because they’ve discovered they can never really get away from work. Boundaries are blurred. Life becomes unbalanced. Our axes become dull.

The same is true with our media consumption. We spend countless hours either watching or scrolling on one-sided news propaganda. According to the National Institute of Health, “Robust evidence has shown a positive association between the frequency and total time spent watching or reading media news and symptoms of mental distress, highlighting the need to limit media exposure. . . . Preventing overexposure to media . . . is . . . critical to buffering distress.” Unmanaged, overexposure to negative one-sided media leaves us fearful, angry, anxious, even hopeless. It throws off our balance, we lose sight of our common humanity, and we prioritize self-protection over self-giving.

Those aren't the lives God intends for us. God doesn't intend for us to measure our value by how much we can produce, and God doesn't intend for us to spend our lives in contempt of our brothers and sisters who have different political or social beliefs than us.

But to experience the life God intends for us requires a challenging commitment—a commitment to slow down and sharpen our axes, a commitment to retreat to the cave, a commitment to spend time alone on the mountain. Away from all the noise of life. Away from the pressure to perform and produce. Away from the negativity of our media algorithms. Quiet time. Alone with God.

How are you doing with your time alone with God?

The greatest gift of praying the Rosary, to me, is its simple repetitiveness. It helps quiet my mind. It helps clear my head. It helps me make space to hear God. And you know what? I haven't prayed the Rosary in months. Why? Well, I don't have time. I'm too busy.

Epiphany is blessed with ministries that teach meditation and centering practices. I should check them out, but I haven't yet. Don't have the time!

I know I need to step up my commitment to dedicated one-on-one time with God. If you can relate, let's recommit, together, taking time to sharpen our spiritual axes.

And, it feels like that might be the natural place to end the homily, and you're probably hoping it is, but it's not. Finding balance through prayer, grounding ourselves in God, listening for God's quiet voice, they aren't ends in themselves. Rather, they're means to our intended end.

The woodcutter could spend his entire life sharpening his axe, but if he never puts it to work, what has he accomplished?

After Elijah heard God speak, he didn't just go back to the cave. God didn't come to Elijah to tell him to live out the rest of his life in the cave. He came to Elijah to refocus him, to renew him, and to send him back out to do God's work. And Elijah became one of the greatest prophets in Jewish history.

After Jesus went alone to the mountain to pray, he didn't pitch a tent and camp out on the mountain. He went back to the middle of the storm, and he cared for people. He went back to the battle, speaking unpopular truths to political power, preaching freedom to the oppressed, and standing up for the beaten down.

God expects the same from us. God intends that the strength and courage we grow in prayer will empower us to walk back into the storm, to push back against the hatefulness in our society and in our politics, to work to tear down unjust social structures, and to love those who are loved the least! That's what Elijah did. That's what Jesus did. That's what we're called to do.

How are you doing when it comes to putting your axe to the hard work of chopping trees? Just as Epiphany offers any number of opportunities to spend time in quiet, reflective prayer, our parish, from its founding, has dedicated itself to the hard work of social justice. Habitat for Humanity, the Hunger and Poverty Committee, our Creation Care committee all perform wonderful works of mercy and charity, and advocacy right here in our community.

Another of our ministries is CLOUT, and later this weekend we'll commission CLOUT's parish leadership team as they begin to discern a justice issue to pursue in 2027.

If you're not familiar with CLOUT, it's a faith-based organization made up of almost thirty local congregations—Catholic, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Unitarian, Jewish, and other faith traditions. CLOUT works at the policy level to give voice to those often left without a seat at the power table—the homeless, the mentally ill, the outcast. This month CLOUT begins its annual discernment process by listening to people's concerns about our community. We need your prayers and support as we continue this ministry, and we invite you to join us in the ministry as we move into a new year of work.

As we begin a new week, a new school year, and move toward a new stewardship year, let's examine our faith commitments and commit to time alone with God. Time to be quiet. Time to focus. Time to listen. Let's commit to sharpening our axes.

Then, let's commit to going out and doing the hard work of making the world a more Christ-like place.