

Last week in the first reading when we had the story of the Israelites dealing with the tribe of Amalek, one of the things I reflected on was how in life as we journey to the promised land, there is a series of Amaleks if you will, things big and small that come at us. And just as the people looked at the staff Moses held up and were reminded that God is with them, we too must remember that God is with us. But if we are going to win those battles, we also have to be prepared and know how to fight them. And two keys to them include humility and perseverance.

You might not know the name John Corcoran, but he is the founder of one of the largest organizations in the United States that helps combat adult illiteracy. And it all began with John having to be like the tax collector in the Gospel and show humility by asking for help, and also having to be like Paul, an elderly man in the second reading, having to persevere and run the race to its completion.

For as long as John could remember, words had mocked him. The letters in sentences traded places, vowel sounds lost themselves in the tunnels of his ears. In school he'd sit at his desk, stupid and silent as a stone, knowing he would be different from everyone else forever. If only someone

had sat next to that little boy, put an arm around his shoulder and said, "I'll help you. Don't be scared."

But no one had heard of dyslexia then. And John couldn't tell them that the left side of his brain, the lobe humans use to arrange symbols logically in a sequence, had always misfired.

Instead, in second grade they put him in the "dumb" row. In third grade a nun handed a yardstick to the other children when John refused to read or write and let each student have a crack at his legs. In fourth grade his teacher called on him to read and let one minute of quiet pile upon another until the child thought he would suffocate. Then he was passed on to the next grade and the next. John Corcoran never failed a year in his life.

In his senior year, John was voted homecoming king, went steady with the valedictorian and starred on the basketball team. His mom kissed him when he graduated - and kept talking about college. College? It would be insane to consider. But he finally decided on the University of Texas at El Paso where he would try out for the basketball team. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and recrossed enemy lines.

On campus, John asked each new friend, which teachers gave essay tests? Which gave multiple choice? The minute he stepped out of a class, he tore the pages of scribble from his notebook, in case anyone asked to see his notes. He stared at thick textbooks in the evening so his roommate wouldn't doubt. And he lay in bed, exhausted but unable to sleep, unable to make his whirring mind let go. John promised he'd go to Mass 30 days straight at the crack of dawn, if only God would let him get his degree.

He got the diploma. He gave God his 30 days of Mass. Now what? Maybe he was addicted to the edge. Maybe the thing he felt most insecure about - his mind - was what he needed most to have admired. Maybe that's why, in 1961, John became a teacher.

John taught in California. Each day he had a student read the textbook to class. He gave standardized tests that he could grade by placing a form with holes over each correct answer and he laid in bed for hours on weekend mornings, depressed.

Then he met Kathy, an A student and a nurse. Not a leaf, like John. A rock. “There’s something I have to tell you Kathy,” he said one night in 1965 before their marriage. “I can’t read.”

“He’s a teacher” she thought. He must mean he can’t read well. Kathy didn’t understand until years later when she saw John unable to read a children’s book to their 18-month old daughter. Kathy filled out his forms, read and wrote his letters. Why didn’t he simply ask her to teach him to read and write? He couldn’t believe that anyone could teach him.

At age 28, John borrowed \$2,500, bought a second house, fixed it up and rented it. He bought and rented another. And another. His business got bigger and bigger until he needed a secretary, a lawyer and a partner.

Then one day his accountant told him he was a millionaire. Perfect. Who’d notice that a millionaire always pulled on the doors that said “push” or paused before entering public bathrooms, waiting to see which one the men walked out of?

In 1982, the bottom began to fall out. His properties started to sit empty and investors pulled out. Threats of foreclosures and lawsuits tumbled out of envelopes. Every waking moment, it seemed, he was pleading with bankers to extend his loans, coaxing builders to stay on the job, trying to make sense of the pyramid of paper. Soon he knew they'd have him on the witness stand and the man in black robes would say: "The truth, John Corcoran. Can't you even read?"

Finally in the fall of 1986, at age 48, John did two things he swore he never would. He put up his house as collateral to obtain one last construction loan. And he walked into the Carlsbad City Library and told the woman in charge of the tutoring program, "I can't read."

Then he cried.

He was placed with a 65-year-old grandmother named Eleanor Condit. Painstakingly - letter by letter, phonetically - she began teaching him. Within 14 months, his land-development company began to revive. And John Corcoran was learning to read.

The next step was confession: a speech before 200 stunned businessmen in San Diego. To heal, he had to come clean. He was placed on the board of directors of the San Diego Council on Literacy and began traveling across the country to give speeches.

“Illiteracy is a form of slavery!” He would cry. “We can’t waste time blaming anyone. We need to become obsessed with teaching people to read!”

He read every book or magazine he could get his hands on, every road sign he passed, out loud, as long as his wife could bear it. It was glorious, like singing. And now he could sleep.

It then occurred to him that one more thing he could do was to go to a dusty box in his office and, a quarter century later, read his wife’s love letters.

Now 80, his granddaughter has become active in the John Corcoran Foundation which he founded to help the illiterate and thousands of people have been helped, both with special training to teachers to help people learn to read, and training for young and old.

And all of this happened because one man learned that God didn't want 30 Masses attended as a way of showing thanks for getting a degree. Rather, He wanted Him to run a race through showing humility by owning up to his shortcomings, and using the grace that he had been given to see that race through to its completion.

In the Gospel, we hear of a man who could be called spiritually illiterate, the Pharisee. He reads God's laws and words, but he does not understand what they mean. In life, it can be easy to become like that Pharisee and a bit prideful. On the one hand, he may have done many good things as he lists off his virtues. But notice he separates himself from the rest of humanity; it's everyone else who is greedy, dishonest and adulterous. He even notes how he goes above and beyond the fasting and tithing requirements. Unfortunately, he's become arrogant. His pride negates these achievements, and he's oblivious to the fact that while he does some things well, he still has a long way to go before he achieves sainthood. For John, maybe he fell into this mode of thinking too, thinking he could hide forever his struggle with reading.

It's not a sin to be illiterate, but we do not want to be spiritually illiterate. Rather we want to continue to grow in our faith, and a big part of that entails taking a page from John and the tax collector. Jesus does not say that the tax-collector is a virtuous man. Jesus does not say that the tax collector is not a hypocrite in his own way. What is good about the tax collector, according to Jesus, is that he admits his faults and his hypocrisy, he is humble, and asks God for mercy. This is what Jesus asks of us all. John finally had to get to the point where he could say he could not read both to his wife and the librarian, and then help came. So throughout our lives, we need to ask ourselves where our spiritual illiteracy is, what do we struggle in, what do we hide from others or what can't we seem to overcome? We must always bring these things out into the open and trust that God and others are there to help us. We also can't think like John did for a time that just because he had a degree, a teaching job, or even was a millionaire that we've made it just because we go to Mass weekly, pray regularly, or don't have any "big" sins. Sins and struggles are always there; they wax and wane throughout life. We don't want to end up like the Pharisee who is blind to his shortcomings, but rather take an honest look at them and turn them over to God.

John though did not learn to read right away. As he shares in the story, it was difficult to sound out each word phonetically and he had to start from scratch. The same is true in the spiritual life. Paul, writing in the second reading nearing the end of his life, is reflecting on how he's been able to do that as he sees his departure coming. But he looks forward in hope to this new adventure or chapter that will eventually begin, because he has seen growth. He's run the race. And we need to run the race too, remembering that it's a true marathon. The first part of a race isn't too hard; we're full of energy and the same can be said sometimes in our faith. There are moments where it's real easy to follow Christ. But learning the faith just like learning to read takes time; our faith is also challenged when we have to make moral decisions or our conscience tells us we need to be an apologist or defender of our faith with others. So how do we run that race of life to see it to its completion?

For one, we remain faithful. Paul says "I have kept the faith." This means we go to Mass, we pray regularly, but we also remain faithful to God's law.

Second, Paul says he "competed well." Again, life is a grind. But we need to keep going. We have to ask ourselves do we get spiritually lazy and fall

into sin or bad habits? Do we get lazy in our vocation, or do we listen to our conscience when it says we need to do a better job as a spouse, parent, priest or whatever it is we are called to do in life?

Lastly, through it all, we remember we do not run alone. John had his wife and his teacher, but most of all he had God. Paul says “the Lord stood by me and gave me strength.” God is with us always through our ups and downs, and we must never forget that He will always stand with us. This means we can turn to Him and also to the people that He blesses us with in our life and admit our weaknesses, our fears, our struggles and trust they will help us to the finish line, for the Lord will indeed rescue us and bring us safely to the heavenly kingdom if only we ask for His help.

A few weeks ago, Tyler Moon, a 25-year old man from Eden Prairie, was running in the 10-mile race for the Twin Cities Marathon when he collapsed. He had a heart attack. He was wearing a racing bib that said “Jesus Saves” instead of his name. He was feeling great but by mile 8 something went wrong; he had a fast irregular heartbeat that caused him to collapse. And he fell quickly. Behind him was a man from Lakeville, a nurse named, interestingly, Jesus Bueno. He dropped down beside him and

helped start CPR. Paramedics arrived, and got him to the hospital where he was able to recover. He was able to meet up with Jesus during his recovery, and earlier this week a celebration was held where he was able to talk to all of those involved in helping him that day and through the recovery; runners, nurses, physicians and race volunteers. Tyler was quoted as saying: “Amy (his fiancée) and I are Christians and on my race bib I wanted to have a statement so that when people saw me run by, it pointed them to Jesus,” he explained. “It says ‘Jesus Saves,’ which is pretty fitting after everything that happened. We’re just happy God had it happen where it did, where there were all these wonderful people that stepped up. Like I’ve said, I went for a run, then all of a sudden, a bunch of strangers saved my life.”

The same is true in our lives. For John, it was God, his wife, his tutor and now he gives back to helping others gain the freedom to read. For Tyler, it was a bunch of people who helped him through what could have been a tragic moment. But for both of them and for all of us, the race goes on. But as Tyler and John’s story go to show you, we never run the race alone - so may we have the humility to know we can’t run it on our own, and

determination to see the race to the end, and the knowledge that through it all God and so many others will help us see it to its completion.