

12-8-19 Jesus Heals the Woman Who was Bent Over for 18 Years on the Sabbath © S. Hinde

Some of you may have heard that last night, Elder Ephraim passed away, the Holy Elder from Greece that started all the Greek monasteries in the United States and Canada. I was saddened when I heard it, I knew that it was a matter of time. He was old and becoming very feeble, but he was a holy man and as we were reading the Epistle, I thought that expressed Elder Ephraim perfectly, a man worthy of his calling.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

When we made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land a number of years ago, the first time a whole busload of us went over there and it was a great trip, wonderful trip. We were blessed to have Bishop Nikiforos as our personal guide and if I remember the story correctly, he had gone to Jerusalem as a young man, was about 16 years of age and remained there for many, many, many years, became a Bishop. Whenever we would go to the monasteries, the bells would ring because the Bishop was with us. The people knew him, and he spoke whatever language was necessary in whatever place we went. We visited so many of the holy places that we read about in the scriptures that as time went on, I began to forget where we had gone and where we were going, but one of the places I remembered well was our trip to St. Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai, in Egypt.

From the top of the mountain where Moses had received the Ten Commandments, you could look across the desert to the next mountain and see a mountain named in St. Catherine's honor. Saint Catherine was a beautiful and brilliant young lady, educated by the best scholars of Alexandria. Many young noble men came to court her, but she refused them all. She told her parents that she would consent to marry if they could find her a man that was handsome and intelligent, a man her equal. Her mother was a secret Christian and told her daughter to visit an elder who lived in a cave not far from the city. So, she went to see him and told him her circumstances and the elder informed her that he knew exactly the bridegroom that she was looking for.

He gave her an icon of the Queen of Heaven and her son and told her to pray fervently to the Theotokos that she would be allowed to see her son. Catherine prayed all through the night and in a dream, she saw the Theotokos, but the Lord did not wish to look upon her because she was not washed in the waters of Holy Baptism. Saddened, she returned to the elder and told him of the vision. He instructed her in the Christian faith, and she desired to be baptized and become a member of Christ's heavenly kingdom. Again, she went home and prayed, and this time Christ revealed himself to her and He gave her a ring.

There was a large festival going on in Alexandria at the time and the Emperor was present for the festival. Many Christians were brought along to be martyred at the celebration because they refused to offer sacrifices to the pagan gods. Catherine learned of this, went to the Emperor herself and informed him that she too had become a Christian. Catherine's beauty intoxicated the Emperor and he wanted to convince her to abandon her faith in Christ, so he called together the fifty of the most learned scholars to convince her to offer sacrifices to the false gods. But during this whole process, Catherine brought the Emperor's wife and about 200 of his entourage to the faith, including the fifty scholars.

They were all beheaded and eventually, Catherine herself voluntarily went and laid her head down and was beheaded. Her relics were taken by the angels to Mount Sinai and remained there until about the 9th or 10th century when it was revealed where her relics lay. They were recovered and are today preserved in the monastery named in her honor, St. Catherine's Monastery. Those of us who are blessed

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to venerate her holy relics were given a ring with her name inscribed on the side of it. Today we commemorate this great Saint.

In today's Gospel we have the story of the woman who was severely bent over for eighteen years. Christ is in the synagogue teaching. This woman enters with this severe deformity, bent over to the ground, unable to straighten up and has suffered for this way for such a long time. The Lord has compassion on her, and He heals her infirmity and forgives her sins. There were those there that saw this miracle and their hearts were lifted up to heaven and they praised God for what had happened, but the ruler of the synagogue, like many of the scribes and Pharisees, became indignant that Christ has healed this woman. He, the synagogue ruler, was himself in a sense so bowed down in his spiritual infirmity and his simple passions of jealousy and self-righteousness, that he was unable to lift his hands to heaven to thank God for this great miracle.

Luke 13: "He was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath and behold there was a woman who had a spirit of infirmity eighteen years and she was bent over and could no wise raise herself up." Think about this woman. She has bent over so severely that she was facing the earth as if she was doing a full prostration. We don't know why she was in this condition, but we gain some understanding from St. Cyril of Alexandria. St. Cyril says, what happened to her? We see that Satan often receives authority over certain persons who fall into sin and become lax in their efforts towards spiritual piety.

Although St. Cyril doesn't suggest a specific sin, he simply acknowledges that Satan received permission to exercise a certain degree of authority over her because of her sin. Verse 12: "but when Jesus saw her, He called her to Himself and said to her, 'Woman, you are loosed from your infirmity.' And He laid his hands on her and immediately she was made straight and she praised God." So we see here as we have seen over and over again, Christ shows his love and mercy and compassion to the afflicted, to the suffering. Imagine what it must've been like for this poor woman to be so severely bent over that she could not even raise her eyes to heaven. And it wasn't just for a few weeks or months that she suffered, but eighteen long years. We should also point out the scripture says it was a spirit of infirmity. It wasn't just a physical condition; it was also a spiritual condition.

She was held in infirmity by the evil one. The devil had authority over her physically. Saint Ambrose says her soul was bent down as well because it inclined to the things of earth and did not possess heavenly grace. The Jews of that time assume that if you had such an infirmity, it was because of your sin. Jesus makes it clear that that's not always the case. With a man born blind, His disciples said, who sinned, him or his parents that he was born blind and Jesus said neither him nor his parents, but that the glory of God might be revealed. But in this story, the woman with the infirmity, she had received this condition as a result of her sin. But when Jesus saw her, He addressed her. He called her to Himself and said to her, woman, you are freed from your infirmity, just as the woman at the well, St. Photini heard Christ's words and believed, so also this woman immediately when Christ laid hands on her, was healed and she praised God.

Blessed Theophylact, Archbishop of Bulgaria, says we must also understand these miracles refer to the inner man. The soul is bent over in infirmity whenever it inclines to earthly thoughts, ignoring that which is heavenly and divine. The soul is bent over when it is attached to things of this world, choosing sin over the commandments of God, ignoring the Age and judgment to come. The body and the soul of this woman was bent over for eighteen years until Jesus comes and releases her.

Saint Cyril points out that it was Jesus' hands, His fleshly hands, His bodily hands, that reached out and touched this woman, proving that in His flesh, He possessed the power of God. I would say in all

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probability, the reason that Saint Cyril points this out is because he was a contemporary of the heretic Nestorius who was condemned at the 3rd Ecumenical Council held in Ephesus in 431, and it was important to Saint Cyril to continue to educate and instruct the Church concerning the proper understanding of Christ. You may remember that it was Nestorius who wanted to call Mary the Christotokos, meaning the mother of Christ, not Theotokos, the mother of God. Nestorius denied the Orthodox dogma of Christ's one hypostasis with two natures and two wills.

So, we see that it was important for St. Cyril to emphasize in his commentary on today's Gospel, the two natures, human and divine, existing in the one hypostasis, the single person of Jesus Christ. But moving on verse 14: 'the ruler of the synagogue answered with indignation because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath and he said to the crowd, there are six days in which men ought to work, come and be healed on them and not on the Sabbath.' How many times do we see in the scripture Jesus working a miracle on the Sabbath? Does anybody know? How many times are recorded in the scripture of Jesus working a miracle on the Sabbath? It's seven, seven, the number that represents perfection and completeness. He heals this woman bent over on the Sabbath. He healed the man with dropsy on the Sabbath. He healed the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath. He healed Peter's mother-in-law of a fever on the Sabbath. He healed the man born blind on the Sabbath. He raised the lame man at the Pool of Bethesda on the Sabbath, and He drove out the unclean demon in the synagogue on the Sabbath.

It seems that every time Jesus heals the sick, the blind, the lame, the leaders of the synagogue or the temple become indignant. Remember Matthew, remember in Matthew 21 when the chief priest and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did and the children crying out of the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David", they became indignant. So, we see this attitude of indignation frequently among the priests, the scribes, and the rulers of the temple. You have to wonder, where is their compassion for this suffering woman? Where is their concern for her crippled, broken down body? They should have been rejoicing with the people that this daughter of Abraham was healed.

She was one of their own. She had been suffering for such a long time, but no, they were not rejoicing. They were indignant that Christ had healed her. Their argument was that He had healed her on the Sabbath, but of course that was simply a smokescreen for their jealousy. Their condition, their spiritual infirmity was in a sense worse than that of the woman. Their heart and mind were bowed down to the earth for it was earthly things, power and prestige that they desired. The woman, when Jesus called her to himself, she obeyed. She obeyed. She didn't turn away, and her spiritual infirmity was healed. When Jesus touched her, she was immediately made to stand up straight and her physical infirmity was healed. What does she do? Immediately, she praises God.

The ruler of the temple, witnessing these wonderful events becomes himself even more crippled, even more bowed down enslaved all the more to his sinful passions. He says there are six days in which men ought to work, therefore come and be healed on them and not on the Sabbath. And the Lord answers him immediately and calls him a hypocrite. You hypocrite. I couldn't help but have a visual image of this in my imagination as I read through it. I picture the ruler of the temple as being somewhat haughty and high-minded thinking he was going to put Jesus in his place so he stands up in front of the crowd and makes this statement. He was probably feeling a bit proud of himself, that he had just chastised Jesus and all the people for not keeping the Sabbath, but immediately Jesus responds and I imagine with a voice full of authority, for He did speak with one having authority, and He says to the ruler, 'you hypocrite'. No doubt the ruler was taken back. He probably wasn't used to being challenged or confronted, but before he was able to regain his composure, think what he might say in response, Jesus continues with a very simple yet profound question, certainly not one that the ruler of the synagogue

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could have anticipated. He says, "Does not each one of you on the Sabbath lose his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it away to water?"

Well, the answer of course is yes. What else could they say? Animals are not a Monday through Friday job, they need food and water every day, including the Sabbath. Jesus asked a simple question. He applies the question to everyone, but I suspect He was looking right at the ruler of the temple, or the synagogue. 'Does not each of you on the Sabbath lose his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it away to water? So, ought not this woman being a daughter of Abraham whom Satan has bound, think of it, eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath?' And when He said these things, all his adversaries, all his adversaries were put to shame and all the multitude rejoiced for the glorious things that were done by Him.

There are some amongst us that suffer from various infirmities. Some suffer physically, others suffer financially, some suffer from chronic spiritual battles. Just as the Lord came and healed the physical and spiritual infirmities of the woman that was bent over, Christ comes and heals our souls. He raises us up again, if that's what we really want. We know the demons don't sit by passively when we choose to follow Christ to become members of His Church. They want authority over us, just like the woman in today's Gospel. He comes to our rescue as well and heals the passions of our soul. Sometimes He heals our physical infirmities, sometimes he doesn't. We have examples of both of those in this parish, but it's always connected with our salvation.

We believe in God's providence. We have faith in God's providence. We have hope in God's providence. There are many times in life when we don't understand why things happen the way they do. Most of us are converts to Orthodoxy. How is it possible that we came from so many different backgrounds, knowing almost nothing, if anything at all, about the Orthodox Church and yet here we are? Here we are. It's God's providence. Bent-over woman could have been somewhere else on that day, but it was God's providence that she be there, that Christ would have compassion and heal her. We don't have to be obedient to God's call. We are free to reject Christ and his Church. The Lord doesn't violate our freewill. He simply calls us to Himself. He knocks at the door of our heart and we are free to answer or not.

The bent-over woman didn't have to be obedient to Christ's calling, but she was, and she found salvation and healing. This was not whether we are healthy or suffer infirmity, whether we are wealthy or poor. The issue is whether or not we went Christ, whether or not we really want Christ, and we know for sure that he wants us.

St. Catherine had everything the world had to offer, even the offer of marriage from the Emperor himself, but she wanted Christ. St. John Chrysostom could have had every comfort afforded by the Imperial Court, but he chose Christ. On his final exile, shortly before his death, he uttered the famous words that we still quote today: "Glory to God for all things." Glory to God for all things. If what we want in life is wealth and comfort and leisure, if we want fame and popularity and a high social status, then most of us in life will be very disappointed.

Imagine living your whole life, wanting things that you never get, and even if we attain to some level of any of those desires, it is, in the end, just an illusion for we can't take any of it with us beyond the grave. On the other hand, if what we want is Christ and His Church, then regardless of everything else, we could have what we want. We can attain to that goal, and this is not an illusion. In Christ, we attain Paradise. In Christ, we walk the narrow path and He is our guide. He is our companion. He is our protector. He leads us. He directs us. He shows us the way. I pray that we be a people that want Christ

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more than anything else this world has to offer. That we might not be bowed down to the earth but looking up to heaven and joining with St. John saying, "Glory to God for all things."

Amen.