

7-28-19 Healing the Paralytic

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

I believe the count was 36 of our members that left yesterday for the pilgrimage to Russia. You can certainly see the empty spaces here in the church today. Pray for them, not just that they would have a safe trip, but that their spiritual edification and growth. It's a great opportunity for all of them. There are three themes for today, which if I were to address each one would require a rather lengthy homily, perhaps three or four hours.

In the gospel reading, we have the story of Jesus healing the paralytic in Capernaum. The Epistle, we have Paul exhorting the church to practice their gifts with spiritual zeal. In addition, this is the Sunday of the Commemoration of the Fathers of the First Six Ecumenical Councils. I'll only share a few thoughts for your consideration from the Epistle reading from Romans.

As you already know, we are all, each and every one of us blessed with something. Something that we can contribute to the wellbeing of our fellow men. Whatever your spiritual gifts, your natural talent, your character, everyone has something of themselves to share and contribute with one another. Today's Epistle reading from Romans, Saint Paul is instructing the church and the use of their gifts. He lists several. Prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, generosity, and giving leadership, mercy, love. He instructs the church to use their gift with a sense of seriousness. If you take your gift seriously, this gift, this unique ability that God has given to each of us, whatever it is, whatever gift you have is given to you for your salvation.

However, it always involves more than just yourselves. Well, the Thomas Hopko of Blessed Memory says that we don't go to heaven alone. We only go to hell alone. We are saved through our fellow men. When we use the gifts that God has given us, we use those gifts, those talents or characteristics that we have as a means of fulfilling Christ's commandments. In fulfilling Christ's commandments, we are working out our salvation through faith and good works. Quite often in the Holy Scriptures when Christ instructed people how to live, it is directed to loving God through loving our fellow man. The very concept of love is meaningless.

The concept of love is meaningless, unless there is an object of that love. God has given to us the ability and the opportunity to prove our love for Him through our love for each other. Saint Paul also warns of hypocritical love when he says, "Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good." So there is the possibility of pretending. The possibility of pretending to do good, but the motive is wrong. He clarifies by saying that we are to be kindly affectionate to one another in brotherly love, in honor, giving preference one to another. Within our church, within our community, in our interaction with others, we are always potentially, we are always the link that God will use to reveal himself through us to others.

So yes, of course we are to be serious about living willfully and as much as we are able joyfully the Christian life. Saint Paul continues. He says, "We should not be lagging in diligence." That means we should be careful and persistent in our spiritual work and effort. He says, "We should be fervent in spirit." That means we should have or display a passionate intensity for Christ and His church. He says, "We should serve the Lord." The root word from serve comes from the word slave. We should be the slave of Christ, the slave of the Lord, willfully and joyfully to be His slave.

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He says, "We should rejoice in hope." That means the hope of our salvation should be a cause of joy in our hearts. He says, "We should be patient in tribulation." That means that in the struggles, the problems even in the suffering, that we should put our trust in God and not be anxious about the circumstances. He says, "We should be steadfast in prayer." That means we should be firm and unwavering in our faithfulness to prayer, and our prayer rule in the noetic prayer, the prayer of the heart. These are the instructions of Saint Paul, the great apostle of Christ, instructing the church how they should live. It seems to me that he is giving us a very sober and serious view of what is expected of us as followers of Christ.

At the same time, he hints at the indescribable majesty of heaven, and the compassion of God, when he insists on our being joyful in the hope of our salvation. Even the fact that the Saint Paul says that we can have hope in our salvation reveals God's patient, God's love, long-suffering, His forgiveness in spite of our unworthiness. Yes, we are unworthy, but still we must try. We must struggle. We must embrace the sacramental life of the church. We must participate in the liturgical life of the church. We must gather together as the body of Christ to worship God and to receive the holy mysteries. This is the path that leads to life.

Of course, we know that the enemy of our soul always tried to derail our good intentions, derail our desire to follow Christ. There's nothing new there. We already know that. We can expect the challenges, the struggles in the battles with the passions. It's always been that way. Jesus warned His disciples of the trials to come. In John 16 He says, "These things I have spoken to you, so that in me, you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

In Romans 8, Paul says, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger or the sword? As it is written, for your sake, we face death all day long. We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered. No, in all these things, we are more than conquerors. And all these things. We are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am convinced, that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all of creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

It should be pretty clear from Saint Paul's letter to the Romans that he believes without the slightest doubt that God's love for us is infinite and unquenchable. He says with absolute confidence that he's convinced that nothing, nothing at all of time, nothing at all of creation, nothing in the entire cosmos will ever be able to separate us from God's love that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. This is good news. This is good news. It should be a cause of great joy and hope for all of us. Think about it. Paul is writing to people that he knows are sinners. He knows they are sinners, and he is giving them this assurance that in spite of their sin, God's love for them is unshakeable, unwavering, unailing, and alterable. This love of God that Paul speaks of applies to all of us as well.

We too are sinners, and still God loves us. According to the scriptures, if anyone says he's without sin, he deceives himself, and the truth is not in him. So let's just be honest with ourselves and admit that we're sinners, to sin means to fall short, to miss the mark. If sinning means missing the mark, then there must be a mark to miss. If that mark is perfect love or to quote the scripture, "Be perfect even as your heavenly Father is perfect," then yes, we missed the mark. So what's the deal? If God's

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love for us is infinite and we are all sinners, we all missed the mark, then why even try? Why struggle? Why resist the sinful desires? Surely, God's love will cover us.

Well, this is where we come in, where we get to choose. Where we have the opportunity to exercise our free will, and whatever the choice we make is our choice. The whole issue of salvation of heaven and hell is simply a matter of God granting to us what we have chosen for our self. Not necessarily what we say, what we've verbalized now and then, but what we really want. What we really choose. You already know that God does not force us to violate our free will. He does not violate our freewill. He doesn't violate it. This is a reflection of God's love and that he respects our freedom. He respects our freedom. Without question, we can say that it is God's desire. It is His plan. It is His purpose to save us.

John 3:16, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten son, that whosoever should believe in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." In John 17, "For God came not to the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved." There's no question what God wants. The question is, what do we want? What do we really want? In this week's Grapevine, the featured article is a quote from Saint John of Kronstadt. The patron saint of our beloved Saint John of Blessed Memory. Father John, forgive me saintly, but father John.

He asked the same question, "What do we really want?" Allow me to read from Saint John. "Dear brothers and sisters, I ask you a question. What are you seeking? What are we all seeking in our lives? Are we seeking Christ? What is it that most people seek in life? Health, riches, success, acquaintances, friends, prestige, various worldly pleasures, vain knowledge, et cetera. Only a few seek Christ the Savior. We call ourselves Christians after Christ. We see His Holy image in our homes and at church. We pronounce His name and hear it in God's temple. People seek that which they don't have, that which they need. So it may seem that we have Christ already.

It's true. We have icons of Christ, but do we have Christ Himself? We have His name, but only on our lips, not in our hearts. We know Him, but only in word and not in deed here. Here, beloved, it's a big difference. It is the same difference as between a shadow and the object that cast the shadow. It is, however, precisely with the heart that Christ is known, that is, in the inner man, in the soul because Christ, as God, is Spirit, is everywhere present and fills all things. God alone, who searches our hearts and minds, and sees what is in our hearts. It's attachments. If the Lord grants us to see the full depths of our hearts, we would turn our eyes away in horror from such an overwhelming accumulation of sin.

Let each of us look into our heart and say before the witness of our own conscience, what is it that occupies our heart most of the time? Passions, sins, voluntary or involuntary? Are these not our heart's constant companions? But where does Christ actually dwell? In pure hearts. In pure hearts, hearts that are humble and contrite. There were men do not prefer the temporal sweetness of sin, where the idols of the passions have been chased out, where crude material things are not referred to the kingdom of God, where Christians turned their thoughts to heavenly things. There where they see God's truth, where every day and every hour they are attentive to His commandments. Here is where Christ dwells."

Time and intention prevents me for really all of it. So I encourage you to take a moment, and look at your Grapevine and read the article. Saint John articulated much better than I, the message that

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Saint Paul gives to the Romans about taking the faith seriously, and utilizing our gifts faithfully. But let me end with one more line. He says, "Do not waste time in useless occupations or idleness. You have a God-given talent to put to use. Busy yourselves in acquiring the Kingdom of Heaven, while there is still time. Therefore, let us hasten to find Christ and in faith, in faith create for Him in abode in our hearts."

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.