

A Voice in the Wilderness

The Newsletter of St. George Orthodox Christian Church



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Glory be to Jesus Christ!

Glory be Forever!

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25th Sunday after Pentecost-Christ heals on the Sabbath

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There are few things in life more difficult to bear than a prolonged illness or permanent condition. In the Gospel today, we meet a woman who probably expected a lifetime of physical pain and struggle. She had been contorted not just for a week or a month or a year, but for a full eighteen years. There was no reason to believe her situation would change.

She was bent over at the waist –

contorted, the Fathers say, by an evil spirit. She had a most abnormal crease in the middle of her body. She couldn't straighten up. The Lover of mankind looked with concern and sympathy on this miserable human creature, and saw in her not a withered and twisted animal, but a daughter of Abraham, a soul created by God and deserving of His mercy.

Bent and twisted as this lady was, we should notice that her priorities were a lot straighter than those of many who walk upright. Saint Luke tells us that her miraculous healing occurred in one of the Synagogues on the Sabbath. We may ask ourselves, "What was this lady doing in the synagogue?" Well, obviously, she was there to worship. But you know what? It couldn't have been easy for her to be there. If she had been looking for

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+ 25th Sunday after Pentecost +

+++ St. Alypius the Stylite +++

Epistle: Ephesians 4: 1-6

Gospel: Luke 13: 10-17

St. George Orthodox Christian Church is a community of believers who strive to live a life according to the Gospel of Christ and teachings of the Church.

We worship God in Trinity -
Father+Son+Holy Spirit.

We are dedicated to Christ's commandment, *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, ad with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.*

What does it mean to believe in God, by St Arsenia, part 6

But with this decision you must prepare yourself for all sorrows, both spiritual and bodily. Much is required of a man who desires salvation. The walls of the monastery, a black cassock, even all the external labors of the monastic life mean nothing without the inner labor that is the goal of the monastic life.

It consists in the perfect rebirth of the entire man, in the removal of all things earthly, in the mortification of everything that is of him—human reason, every hu-

man feeling—in order to come alive for God and in God. As far as a man is from God, so great is the abyss that separates him from God, so great is the work of reunification.

Not only is this path difficult, but it's not even accessible to everyone, it's not open to everyone; not everyone finds it, not everyone seeks it, not even everyone wants it. This path is desired, sought, and found only by those who are called to it by the Lord Himself.

The soul feels the calling of God when it's not

satisfied by anything in earthly life, when it constantly feels some kind of incompleteness and when it seeks to discover in itself a sense of immortality that leads it into eternal life and brings it near to the Eternal Lord.

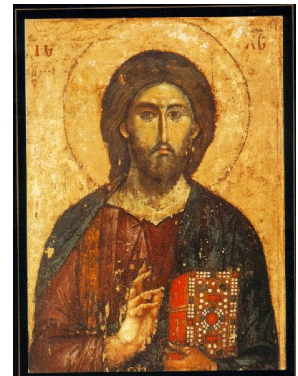
The soul can't resist such a Divine calling; it becomes obedient and will not stop in its search for the inner life, for communion with the Lord until it finds the path that leads to this goal; and then it will not stop, but will continue to

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We invite all to worship in our services. Sunday Divine Liturgy begins at 9:30 AM

If you have any questions about the church or would like to speak with our pastor, please call Fr. Matthew at 607-280-1586

Glory be to
Jesus Christ.
Glory be
Forever.





As the deliverer
of captives
and defender
of the poor,
healer of the infirm
and champion of kings,
victorious great
martyr George
intercede with Christ
our God that our souls
may be saved.

News and Notes

We welcome all who are with us today and invite you to join us at our coffee social following the Divine Liturgy.

Pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5.17)

Please keep the following in your prayers: Mother Onufria, Larissa, Jack, Evan, Ryan, Anatoly, Alexey, Heidi, Mackenzie, Mike, Lisa, Jeff, Bonnalee, David, Carol, Norris, Debbie, Linda, Daniel, Michael, Abraham, George, Rochelle, Brianna, Tamam, the homeless, the hungry, victims of abuse and violence, & those persecuted for their faith in Christ

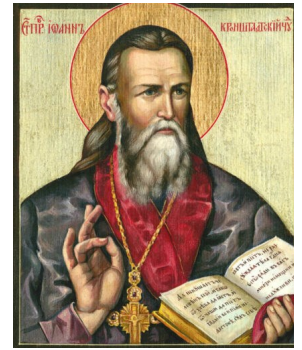
From St. John Kronstadt

You who pray, give God your heart, that loving true heart, with which you love your children, your father and mother, your benefactors and friends, and in which you feel the sweetness of pure unfeigned love. Sometimes during a long-continued prayer only a few minutes are really pleasing to God and constitute true prayer and true service to God.

The chief thing in prayer is the nearness of the heart to God, as proved by the

sweetness of God's presence in the soul. "Let it be as I will, and not as thou wilt." Such is the mighty voice of God, which our soul ever hears when it has fallen into sin and desires to emerge from a state of spiritual, sinful affliction. "Let it be as I will: either repent from the depths of your heart in proportion to the sin, and return to the road that leads to life, shown by Me; either bear the punishment, corresponding to the sin and determined by My justice, or your sin will torment you as a deviation from My laws."

And only then will our soul enjoy peace when we truly repent from the depths of our heart in proportion to the sin, or bear the punishment due from God. O! Almighty and most just power of our God, invisibly governing our invisible souls, all glory to Thee, glory to Thee, God our Savior! Thy will be done in us!



What does it mean to believe in God? cont'd from p.1

labor in the field of its heart; it will go further and further, despite the path becoming more and more difficult. If you don't accept this inner labor, if you aren't seeking this path, then don't go to a monastery. People enter a monastery in order to form their spirit in this school of spiritual life, to find guides and all the means for passing through this spiritual arena.

We must love ourselves

We also have to learn how to love ourselves. Indeed, this is something we truly must labor over. For example, sometimes a man is unfair to himself, demanding more than he can give. He demands victory over his passions and grieves, worries, and resents himself when he sees that he is being taken over by those very passions that he had decided to leave behind. But is such indignation against oneself justified? No. Man will never be able to defeat his passions by his own power: They are overcome in us by the power of God. This power is inherent in His commandments.

When, with the help of God, a man makes them his own, when they live in his heart, then sin and the passions weaken and completely cease to operate in his heart. We must constantly revive in our hearts the desire to live according to Christ's commandments; we must entreat His help in prayer, humble ourselves in our deviations, endure our infirmity, and not resent ourselves for it. After all, if I'm not strong enough to overcome it in myself, why demand from myself that which only the Lord can give? Why should I grieve myself for not becoming higher than myself? Such a demand for spiritual success reveals our pride. Let us await everything from the One Lord and deeply humble ourselves in our infirmities and sinfulness.

On the soul and the flesh

Our spirit is so closely connected with the flesh that they make up one inseparable being. If we develop all the animal powers in ourselves, then we'll become bestial. By animal powers, I mean not just the physical pow-

ers, but also all the powers of the soul given for earthly life. If, with the help of God, we strive to develop the powers of the immortal spirit within ourselves, this will certainly be to the detriment of the animal powers, and will even contradict all the laws and demands of our animal nature. Only a soul strengthened by the grace of God can rise above this nature.

The law of nature draws us to the actions inherent to it, regardless of whether they're holy or sinful, without even asking our consent. This attraction of the law of our animal nature is called natural in our fallen human nature. It's unnatural for our spirit, because it oppresses, suppresses, and kills it. Living by the laws of our fallen nature, we still sometimes feel an



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Homily on Christ healing a Woman on the Sabbath, (cont'd from p.1)

an excuse not to be there, she had a pretty good one! You can imagine her saying, "Rabbi, I just prefer to stay home. It's hard for me to walk to synagogue, my back hurts terribly by the time I get there. When I'm there, people stare at me and I feel so uncomfortable. It's just better for me to stay home!"

The truth is that she was there because it was a priority for her to be there. Her body may have been bent, but her priorities were straight. God came first. She did not let the obstacles of life get in the way; she didn't let it stop her. She was there and that is the point. She made herself available so that God in His time and through His means could heal her. All she did was to show up and be present.

The example of the woman healed today is a good lesson for all of us. If we take our life in Christ seriously, and believe that the church through her sacraments offers us grace and healing, as long as we are physically able, it is important for us to be present in the life of the church. If we are honest: most people usually figure out a way to do the things they really want to do. This crippled woman struggled to put God first. She, in her own feeble way, was saying yes to the Master.

It should be stressed that in today's gospel the women's healing was the result of her presence in the synagogue that day, not the cause of it. There is no indication in the text that she came looking for healing. She just came to the assembly where God's people were gathered, as was probably her custom. Jesus saw her and called out to her. She didn't see Him and call to Him; she was not even near Him. So we can see that because she was there, she was available. She was available to receiving the healing grace that Jesus offered that day. Had she just stayed home that Saturday, her back would have remained just as bent as it was on Friday.

Here's the point for us: A most basic condition for the grace of the Holy Spirit to be present in our lives is that we be available to God. Sounds simple... So how do we practically make ourselves available? We try, with God's help, to continually say Yes to God in all that we do throughout our day and we practice patience in our

infirmities, no matter what they are. We also have many gifts of grace available to us. In addition to the rich services of the church and the holy sacraments, a consistency in a rule of prayer, accountability and an ongoing relationship with a Priest. Sometimes we forget that what attracts the grace of God is just being quiet and still, saying the Jesus prayer. Also visiting monasteries, and making pilgrimages to holy sites, and the observances of fasts and feasts are aids for us in reminding us of what is important on this earth. All these, and much more, have the purpose of rendering us available to God.

We all should realize that the bent over woman in the Gospel had no special claim to the mercy and grace of God. God simply was a priority in her life; so much so, that she was willing to endure pain, suffering, and discomfort to be faithful to him, and wait on Him with patience. But in that process of putting God first, she found the solution to the thing she struggled most with.

When the mercy and salvation of God entered that synagogue on that day, she was there. She didn't have to plead for anything from God; but she was available. And so the abundance of God's goodness was poured out on her. Let us be reminded of Jesus' words: "...seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you."

Let us take those words to heart. Seek first the kingdom of God; be pre-

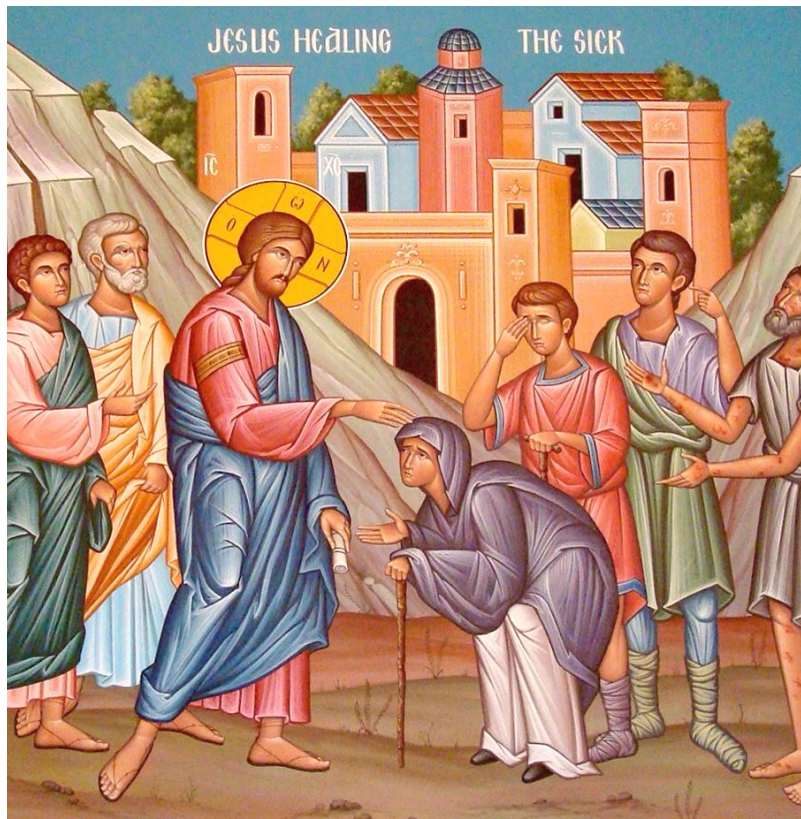
sent; make yourself available; and may His great mercy and grace be poured out on you now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen,

From the Vespers for St. Alypius the Stylite

O wise Father Alypius,
you were truly the example of an immovable pillar to all monastics,
for, high upon your pillar, you stood in vigilant prayer,
enduring both the heat of the day and the cold of the night.

Therefore, you received the divine gifts of the Spirit to heal infirmities and drive away evil passions.

Therefore, entreat the Lord that He grant our souls peace and great mercy!



unaccountable longing, dissatisfaction, desire for something higher, for freedom from everything that makes up our earthly life. This longing, this desire, reveals the need of our spirit.

If we drown out this voice in ourselves, then it will fall completely silent or turn into a feeling of despair. But why is it so weak? Because due to our fall, we can't do any good by our own strength, and only the grace of God can do good in us when we give room to grace by our humility and faith. That's why the spiritual life is called "above nature." We have to work on ourselves, we have to see what is above earthly interests, and we have to believe that everything holy is obtained only by the grace of God—and that's why we have to humble ourselves.

The way of Christ's commandments

Although all Christians must follow the path of Christ's commandments, the path of renunciation of our sinful passions, there is a difference in spiritual labors and approaches to life, so to speak. A recluse, a novice, and a layman can all achieve the renunciation of their will, but they achieve this goal in different ways.

The first of them sees the will of God before which he renounces his own will in light of the word of God; the second—in the will of his spiritual father; and the third—in the circumstances of life. Purity of heart is possible for all three, but the first strives for it with unceasing prayer, the second with the work of obedience and confession of thoughts, and the third by the honest fulfillment of his work and familial duties. They all achieve the same goal, but in different ways.

It's the same in all matters of life. I have mentioned the main characteristics, briefly pointed them out, but I want to tell you only one thing: I'm afraid you might veer too much into asceticism. Monasticism is nothing more than an external form of life, and however good it may be, it mustn't be the ultimate goal of our search. Strive for the best gifts, says the Apostle (cf. 1 Cor. 12:31). In the commandments of Christ is hidden all spiritual treasure: to love God above all and our neighbor as ourselves. How much we must renounce our pas-

sions in order to love God more all things earthly—more than ourselves! How much we must struggle over ourselves in order to love our neighbor as ourselves! These two commandments contain all the purity, all the holiness of the soul.

Human dignity and nobility

The dignity and nobility of man is not so much in the privileges he received from his ancestors as in those good qualities of the soul that he acquired by working on himself. This is how the Lord appreciates all the good in us; this is how rational people appreciate us. And man himself must appreciate everything that the Lord gives him. Without God, without His help and grace, man can't even approach the concept of spiritual goodness. What can man do? Only one thing: bow down to the will of God and in humility of spirit call out to Him: "Lead me, O Lord, wherever You will, and help me to fulfill Your will." And how easy, how salvific it is to follow the path where the Lord leads.

Does it please the Lord to fulfill our request and give peace and calm to our lives? If we don't dare persistently ask for something from someone else, even more so must we not ask it of God and expect that our request will certainly be fulfilled. We don't even know what's good or what's bad for us. But we can see God's help, His mercy for us in that He allows us to bear the unbearable with patience, with humility, with submission to His holy will.

Without the Lord, we can't take anything; without Him we can't give anything. He gives us everything by His grace. Those who loved Him saw Him everywhere and in everything, and He revealed to them His living word, revealed His will and the ways of His providence. How and in what is it revealed? In the purity of their hearts, we must, with God's help, preserve our hearts from the passions. Preserve it first of all from doubt, from pride; preserve it from lying, from self-justification; preserve it from antipathy, from contempt for one's neighbor. And if, with the grace of God helping us, we keep all these passions from possessing our heart, then it will be able to accept the prompting of the word of God and follow His will.

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