

A Voice in the Wilderness

The Newsletter of St. George Orthodox Christian Church



Rev. Matthew P. Binkewicz, Pastor

Glory be to Jesus Christ!

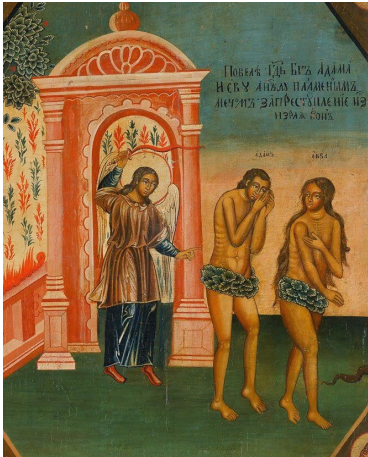
Glory be Forever!



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36th Sunday after Pentecost-Forgiveness Sunday

February 14, 2021



Today we stand right on the edge of Great Lent, for the weeks of preparation to follow our Savior to His Passion begin tomorrow. We have already been challenged to prepare with the Sundays of the Tax Collector and the Pharisee, the Prodigal Son, and the Last Judgment. Now it is the Sunday of Forgiveness, when we are reminded

that we must forgive one another if we hope to receive God's forgiveness for our sins.

Every time we pray the Our Father, we say "and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Christ teaches in today's gospel lesson that "If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." It is impossible, of course, to earn God's forgiveness or put Him in our debt by anything that we do. Before His infinite holiness, we stand in constant need of mercy and grace. At the same time, it is impossible to open ourselves to receive His mercy and grace if we do not extend the forgiveness of which we are capable to those who have wronged us.

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Forgiveness & Cheese Fare Sunday *Adam & Eve expelled from Eden*

Epistle: Romans 13:11-14:4

Gospel: Matthew 6: 14-21

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 living out Christ's commandment to, *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.*

Forgiveness Sunday

Orthodox Christians enter Lent with a special post-Liturgy or vespers service that launches us into "Clean Monday," the first day of the rigorous Lenten fast. The forgiveness service begins as any other vespers, but it soon changes with different hymns and more mournful prayers. In the midst of the service, Lent begins as the choir cries out in earnest supplication:

Turn not away thy face from thy servant; for I am in trouble: hear me

speedily. Attend to my soul, and deliver it. From the ends of the earth, I cried unto thee. I shall be protected under the cover of thy wings. I will praise thy name forever.

As they sing, the altar cloths are changed to Lenten purple and the priest changes into dark vestments to symbolize mourning.

At the service's end, our first Lenten act is to ask from and offer forgiveness to everyone present—not collectively, but individually from

person, to person, to person. This is one of the most powerful moments of the Church year. One by one, each parishioner bows or prostrates, first before the priest, and then each other, asking, "Forgive me, a sinner."

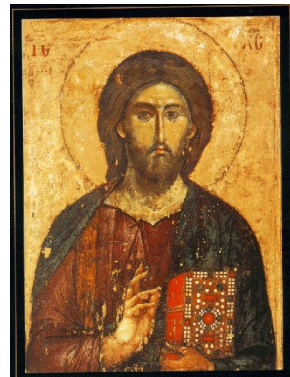
Each responds with a bow or prostration, asking also for forgiveness and assuring, "God forgives." Each then exchanges the kiss of peace. The service is a healing balm. It is hard to bear grudges when

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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.





Troparion to St. George

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
for our souls
salvation.

News and Notes

We welcome all who are worshiping with us today. Because of COVID-19, our social hour has been canceled until we receive further instructions from the Department of Health.

Pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5.17)

We ask that you keep the following in your prayers: Esther, Clement John, Mother Onufria, Meg, Larissa, Jack, Stephen, Louise, George, Evan, Ryan, Sandy, Samuel, Anatoly, Alexey, Abraham, Susan, Jenny, Deb, Dan, Bob, Catherine, Skip, Doug, Heidi, Laura, Elizabeth Matthew, Corella, Ron, Daniel, Frankie, Pat, Kathleen, Terena, the homeless, the hungry, victims of abuse and violence, & those persecuted for their faith in Christ.

Wisdom from St John of Damascus

All who ask receive, those who seek find, and to those who knock it shall be opened. Therefore, let us knock at the beautiful garden of Scripture. It is fragrant, sweet, and blooming with various sounds of spiritual and divinely inspired birds. They sing all around our ears, capture our hearts,

comfort the mourners, pacify the angry, and fill us with everlasting joy.

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The saints must be honored as friends of Christ and children and heirs of God. Let us carefully observe the manner of life of all the apostles, martyrs, ascetics, and just men who announced the coming of the Lord. And let us emulate their faith, charity, hope, zeal, life, patience under suffering, and perseverance unto death so that we may also share their crowns of glory.

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Gluttony should be destroyed by self-control; unchastity by desire for God and longing for the blessings held in store; avarice by compassion for the poor; anger by goodwill and love for all men; worldly dejection by spiritual joy; listlessness by patience, perseverance and offering thanks to God; self-esteem by doing good in secret and by praying constantly with a contrite heart; and pride by not judging or despising anyone in the manner of the boastful Pharisee (cf. Lk. 18:11-12), and by considering oneself the least of all men.

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Forgiveness Sunday, continued from p.1

all have shared such an intimate mutual humbling. Indeed, Forgiveness Vespers is emotionally intense, tears often flow and hugs of true reconciliation are common.

Why start Lent with a service that almost forces us to forgive? "Lent calls us to spiritual perfection," explains Archimandrite Vassilios Papavassiliou in *Meditations for Great Lent*, "which is impossible without love and forgiveness. Thus before Lent begins, we are called to forgive all who have wronged us. Only then can we hope to attain perfection, which is the likeness of God." Having given and received forgiveness, we enter the desert journey of the Great Fast.

Unlike many Western traditions, we Orthodox don't choose what to "give up" for Lent (although we often do that as well—for example, a friend in my parish is foregoing all social media). Rather, during the forty days of Lent (and Holy Week thereafter), we are asked by the Church to become essentially vegan: No meat. No dairy.

No fish (other than shellfish). Not only that, other than on weekends, we also abstain from wine and olive oil.

Why such a rigorous course? Papavassiliou again elucidates: *The purpose of our fasting is spiritual. Spirit-*



uality must not be viewed as something that does not concern the body, but as something that is made possible through and within the body. . . .

The desires and needs of the flesh can all too often overpower the spirit.

Fasting is a means of restoring balance between soul and body, a means of bringing the flesh under the control and will of the mind and spirit.

The Great Fast is one of those times when we must journey alone. Yes, it helps to know in times of weakness that we are simultaneously sharing the same struggle with three hundred million others. But Lenten asceticism is a matter of solitary steps through the desert.

This discipline is not intended to draw us away from others. Moreover, the Church is very clear that fasting per se is not virtue, nor is failing to fast sin. Indeed, we are strictly instructed not to judge in this regard. If we see someone we know to be Orthodox eating a hamburger, it is none of our business. We have our own vegetables to fry. The arduous Lenten disciplines of the Great Fast help us, again in the words of Papavassiliou, "turn back to Paradise to the Life of Eden" so that "like Moses, we too may see God."

(Homily on Forgiveness Sunday, cont'd from p.1)

If we ask for the Lord's forgiveness and refuse to forgive others, we are in the false position of those who want something for themselves but will not give it their neighbors. That is a form of selfishness that reflects a lack of love for those in whom we encounter Him every day of our lives. It is a form of idolatry in which we imagine that we are serving a false god who simply does our bidding rather than a Lord Who calls us to die to self as we share more fully in His life.

Forgiveness is not some kind of commodity that can be hoarded greedily. It is ultimately a divine energy of the Lord in Whom we participate by grace. If we refuse to forgive others, we refuse to be healed, transformed, and illumined like an iron left in the fire of the divine glory. We refuse to be truly in communion with Christ; indeed, we refuse Him. But if we forgive, even as we acknowledge the imperfection of our efforts to control our thoughts, words, and deeds toward those who have offended us, we open ourselves in humility to become more like our Savior in holiness by the power of His grace.

Like the rest of the Christian life, forgiveness is not simply a matter of how we feel about God, our neighbors, or ourselves. It is not about whether thoughts of past wrongs or future fears pop into our heads. It is not about whether we particularly like someone else. Forgiveness occurs when our vision of those who have wronged us is clarified or restored such that we see them not in terms of past wrongs, but as those who bear the image and likeness of God. Only our inflamed passions keep us from seeing our neighbors this way, for pride tempts us to hold on to anger and judgment that quickly condemn anyone who has ever dared to cross us.

The "quarreling and jealousy" that St. Paul associates with "the works of darkness" will never end in our own souls if we do not find healing from such distorted desires. That process of healing is a way of speaking about putting "on the armor of light," of "putting on the Lord Jesus Christ, and making no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires." "Flesh" in this sense refers to our corrupt humanity, enslaved to death and the war of the passions within us.

Adam and Eve were cast from Paradise when they stripped themselves naked of the divine glory by their

prideful disobedience. They diminished themselves to a life focused on "making] provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires." We do not have to look very closely at our world or into our own souls in order to see that we have followed our first parents on a path out of Paradise. When their son Cain murdered his brother Abel, it became abundantly clear how powerful the passions are at destroying human relationships as God intended them to be, even within our own families.

If we are truly in Christ, the New Adam in Whom all the corruptions of the first Adam are set right, we must be in the processing of healing from the self-centered desires that separate us from Him and one another. The weeks of Lent provide us with profound opportunities to open even the darkest corners of our lives to His brilliant light. But no matter how strictly we fast, how fervently we pray, or how generously we give to the needy, we will be unable to receive God's forgiveness if we do not forgive one another. That is the clear teaching of Christ in today's gospel lesson.

What greater sign is there of our brokenness than how easily we offend, harm, and disregard one another? Indeed, we often enjoy doing so and come up with all kinds of reasons to justify hateful thoughts, words, and actions toward others. At Forgiveness Vespers, we will personally bow before one another as we ask for and extend forgiveness to everyone in the parish. We begin our journey toward the deep mystery of Christ's death and resurrection with humility and reconciliation. Since none of us has lived as faithfully as possible, we have all weakened one another spiritually, for we are members of one Body in Christ. Now is the time to grant to one another the forgiveness that we ask from the Lord as we prepare to follow Him to the ultimate manifestation of His forgiving love in the cross and empty tomb.

Instead of wasting time and energy by judging others or holding grudges this Lent, we must focus on participating as fully as possible in the restoration of the human person that Christ has brought to the world. Since we have put Him on in baptism, we must live in a way that reflects and reveals His mercy and blessing. The Lord is very clear about what this means: If we want

(continued p.4, column 1)



(Homily on Forgiveness Sunday)

forgiveness for our sins, we must forgive others for their offenses against us. The prodigal son had no claim to restoration as a son, and he knew that, but the overwhelming love of his father healed the deep wounds that the young man's behavior had caused. If we want to open ourselves to the unfathomable mercy of our Heavenly Father, we must become channels of that same mercy to others, despite our unworthiness.

If we are truly "partakers of the divine nature" by grace, our Lord's forgiveness will become characteristic of who we are. (2 Pet. 1:4) Those who truly share in Christ's life will share what they have received with others, especially those they are tempted not to forgive. Like prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, forgiveness requires a commitment of the will to do what is pleasing to God and is probably not immediately appealing to us. Like these other practices, forgiveness is a teacher of humility because it reveals our weakness.

Like the healing of any passion, embracing forgiveness is a journey that begins with actions of thought, word, and deed that hardly seem sufficient to the task. God is gracious, however, and accepts the small acts of which we are capable. We cooperate with His grace as we do what we can to turn our attention away from the remembrance of past wrongs, to hold our tongues when we are tempted to remind people of their failings, and to say "I forgive you" even when we have a long way to go in fully embracing the meaning of those words.

That should not be surprising, of course, because forgiveness is our participation in God's forgiveness. Before His infinite holiness, we cannot claim to have mastered forgiveness or to have accomplished anything simply by our own power. For us who are so accustomed to the darkness, it will be uncomfortable to open our eyes just a bit to the brilliant light. For us who are so addicted to our self-centered desires, it will seem impossible not to gratify them. But when we know our own weakness, then we will know how much we need His gracious strength, which conquers even the tomb. This Lent, let us open ourselves to the Lord's grace by showing His mercy to others, especially those who have offended us. There is no other way to follow Christ to His Passion and the brilliant glory of His Kingdom.

The Prayer of Righteous Symeon

At every Vespers, we hear the prayer: "Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; For my eyes have seen your salvation ..." (Luke 2: 29-31). As St. Luke the Evangelist writes, it is with these words that the Righteous Symeon praised and thanked God, when he took the 40-day old baby Jesus in his arms, while in the Temple of Jerusalem.

But who was Symeon, who claimed this special honor from God? He was a devout and faithful man, eagerly awaiting the fulfillment of the Biblical Prophecies (from Isaiah and the other Prophets) concerning the coming of Christ, the Messiah who would bring salvation to the people of Israel. Additionally, the Holy Spirit was with Symeon, and promised him that he would not leave this world before seeing with his own eyes Christ the Savior.

With this in mind, we can understand the joy he must have felt when the Holy Spirit told him that the day had come, urging him to go to the Temple. Immediately, he rushed to meet the One he had been waiting his whole life to see. As soon as he saw the Virgin Mary with Joseph, bringing the Divine Infant to the Temple, he recognized Christ, the Messiah. As St. Basil the Great writes, the divine power of the Infant illuminated the pure vision of Simeon's heart, and allowed him to see God.

The pious Symeon, overcome by these feelings, stretched out his hands and accepted Jesus into his arms, glorifying God and said: "Lord, now You are letting Your

servant depart in peace, according to Your word; For my eyes have seen your salvation which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel." (Luke 2: 29-32).

Righteous Symeon, from the moment he took the Divine Infant in his arms, felt that he had acquired all the joys and treasures in the world. He wanted nothing more in his life, believing that his purpose was accomplished. That is why he felt it necessary to ask God to release him, to loosen the bonds of earth, and set sail for the heavenly port! In other words: Lord, release me from this life and allow death to come, and dismiss your faithful servant so that he can rest. I saw with my own eyes Your Son! I expect nothing else in this world, so take my soul to be near You.

