

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!



Volume 9 Issue 434

19th Sunday after Pentecost–The Parable of the Sower

Sunday, October 18, 2020



If the Lord's disciples had trouble grasping the meaning of the parable of the sower, we should not be surprised if we do also. Unlike them, we do not live in an agricultural society in which people were familiar with planting seeds and growing crops. In that time and place, there was no doubt that life

itself depended on the success of raising plants to maturity.

That is still the case today, of course, but most of us are far removed from the actual production of our food. We probably have more experience with trying to keep grass alive and green during our hot and dry summers than with growing crops to eat. As frustrating as lawn care can be, just imagine how the common people of first-century Palestine felt when they cast their seed on the dry, rocky ground. They knew that their lives depended on at least some of those seeds taking root and growing to fruitful maturity.

Though we usually try to ignore it, the same matters are at stake for us in the Christian life. Jesus Christ is the Word of God become flesh for our salvation. As God and Man, He has
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***19th Sunday after Pentecost ***

St. Luke the Apostle & Evangelist

Epistle: 2 Corinthians 11:31-12:9

Gospel: Luke 8: 5-15

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.*

The Struggle with Prayer, by Fr. Vasile Tudora

If you ask anyone in church about prayer, they will most likely use a descriptor like: a pleasant experience, a conversation with God, a link with the absolute or other general terms, all positive in nature. Things are different however when you ask someone how often do they pray. They will most likely hear more about the lack of time, loss of focus, procrastination and struggle in general. The truth is that prayer is easier said than done.

One of the main reasons that we struggle with prayer is that we expect from it a different experience than what we actually get in most cases. Reading books like *The Way of the pilgrim* or the *Philokalia* we may get a wrong impression of what prayer is, at least at the beginning, because we forget that the wonderful experiences described in these books belong to people that have literally struggled with prayer their entire lives. We all expect an

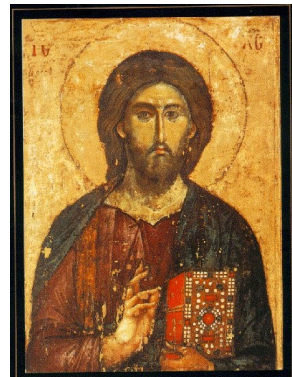
exhilarating time rejoicing in the Lord while our souls are taken to the 3rd heaven. Well, this does not happen for the majority of us.

Jesus Christ Himself prayed while on earth and not all His periods of prayer were a "walk-in-the-park" kind of experience. Take for instance the prayer in the garden of Gethsemane: "*And being in an agony He prayed more earnestly. And His sweat was as it were great drops of*
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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 worshipping 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, Olga, Lillian, Meg, Larissa, Stephen, Louise, Marcia, George, Evan, Ryan, Kathleen, Sandy, Samuel, Anatoly, Alexey, Abraham, Susan, Jenny, Deb, Dan, Bob, Catherine, Skip, Doug, Heidi, Bonnalee, Vicky, Corella, Gail, Mike, Ron, Renee, the homeless, the hungry, victims of abuse and violence, & those persecuted for their faith in Christ.

Words from St. John of Kronstadt

When praying, we must absolutely subject our heart to our will, and turn it toward God. Our heart must not be cold, crafty, untruthful or double-minded. The heart is the principal aspect of the human person. One who does not pray or serve God with his heart does not pray at all be-

cause only his body prays, and the body without the mind is nothing more than mere dust. Therefore your prayer ought to be in body and mind-all spirit and understanding.

When your heart inclines to evil, and the evil ne begins to undermine your heart, so that it is completely removed from the rock of faith, then say to yourself inwardly: "I know of my spiritual poverty and nothingness without faith. I am so weak, that it is only by Christ's name that I live and obtain peace, that I rejoice and my heart grows. Only Christ keeps me alive, and the Cross is my peace and my consolation."

While praying, we ought without fail to take possession of the heart and turn it to the Lord, but never allow even one exclamation to God which does not proceed from the depth of the heart. When we shall learn during prayer to speak from the heart only the truth – that which we actually realize and feel then sincere or true prayer will cleanse our heart from falsehood and we shall not permit ourselves to lie in life either"

The Struggle with Prayer. , cont'd from p. 1)

blood falling to the ground." (Luke 2':44). There was pain in His prayer but as He struggled in prayer His prayer became more profound, reaching out from the bottom of His human nature screaming for help and deliverance.

The same is true for us: we tend to pray harder and with more seriousness when we face suffering. In suffering we genuinely pray, there is no more habitual, casual prayer, there is real purpose behind it. The problem is how do we transfer these rare moments of honest prayer into our daily praying routine?

The reason we pray honestly in suffering is that we have a goal that is acute, that we desire with our entire being. Shouldn't we however have the same desire for the things we automatically recite during the morning or evening prayers? Shouldn't we pray as hard for the salvation of our souls that we pray for the health of our bodies? Of course, but for many of us the soul is abstract, theoretical while the body is tangible and con-

crete. We are more affected by what we receive through our senses than what we are promised in the Scriptures.



Prayer is undoubtedly one of the most difficult ascetic exercises because it requires a combination of faith, will, perseverance and patience that is very difficult to achieve. Prayer requires a learning curve that cannot be skipped. We cannot reach the vision of God and partake in the un-

created light in our first hour of prayer, but this is rather achieved along with the other Christian virtues, so as the souls is cleansed of sin it also becomes light and more likely to reach up to the Lord.

So how do we learn how to pray? A father from the Desert was asked by a novice "Abba, how do I pray?" The father answered "Pray and the prayer will teach you everything."

Of course this profound answer will not satisfy some of our the contemporary Christian brothers so here are some hints for the beginner.

The first and necessary step is to create a minimal *daily routine*. The usual excuse I am too busy to pray does not stand anymore when Americans watch an average of 4-5 hours of TV per day. Reaching consistency is the most important goal.

Spiritual "warm-up": reading from the Scripture, writings of the Holy Fathers on prayer, virtues and repentance are all building blocks of an increased appetite for prayer.

(continued next issue)

(Homily on Christ as the Sower, *cont'd from p.1*)

restored and fulfilled the unique glory of the human person in God's image and likeness. He has shared His life with us such that we may become radiant with the divine glory through personal union with Him. The Savior was born into the same world we inhabit with all its corruptions, distractions, and sorrows. His ministry drew large crowds at times, yet all but a handful of His closest followers had abandoned Him by the time of the crucifixion.

Christ's preaching and healing had touched so many, but only a few remained faithful to the end, especially the women who stood at the foot of the Cross and then went to anoint His dead body on Sunday morning. That was when they saw the stone rolled away from the tomb and heard the unbelievably good news of His resurrection. In their steadfast faithfulness, they were in a unique position to bear good fruit for the Kingdom of God.

Our challenge is to respond to Christ like those myrrh-bearing women whose obedience made it possible for them to become the first recipients of the news that the Lord had conquered death. This is a high calling, for left to our own devices, we would remain like dry, rocky soil that grows only weeds. Had the Savior come simply with a set of religious instructions, we would surely have misinterpreted and disobeyed them. Even if we followed them, we would still be enslaved to death. But since He has vanquished the grave and made us participants in His life by grace, the Lord has enabled us to flourish in His image and likeness as we become our true selves by sharing in the divine life.

Farmers do not harvest a bumper crop by accident, for they must remain vigilant against threats of all kinds as they prepare the soil, plant the seeds, provide them water and fertilizer, and protect them from weeds, pests, and bad weather. The same will be true for us as we seek to grow to fruitful maturity in the Christian life. The healing of our souls will not happen by accident, but requires a daily struggle against temptation in all its forms, especially those associated with "the cares and riches and pleasures of life."

It is so easy to direct our desire for fulfillment to any-

thing except God. The results of doing so for the health of our souls, however, will be as disastrous as those for a crop when farmers decide they have something better to do than to stay on guard. Even if we initially made a good beginning, we can easily fall away, wither, and die.

In order to bear good fruit for the Kingdom, we must remain focused on sharing more fully in the life of Christ. That is how we become better icons of Him, how we embrace the fulfillment of our humanity in God's likeness that He has brought to the world. Mindfulness is essential, for unless we keep a close watch on our thoughts, we will easily fall prey to distractions that turn our attention away from "the one thing needful" of hearing and obeying the Word of God. (Lk 10:42)

Mindfulness is simply staying focused so that we see clearly what we are thinking, desiring, saying, and doing. It is entirely possible to live in the world with all our daily cares, but nonetheless to recognize the truth about our thoughts as we turn our attention away from those that are contrary to sharing more fully in the life of Christ. We face the same challenge with what we say and do, but our thoughts and desires should be our most fundamental concern for they lead to our words and deeds. As we cultivate the habit of recognizing that pride or anger, for example, is rearing its ugly head in what we think or want, we should turn our attention and energy to

the Lord in a humble prayer for strength in rejecting the temptation. Instead of being shocked or upset that we have any thought or desire, we should simply refocus on doing what we know we should be doing for the healing of our souls in the service of God and neighbor.

Focused prayer from the heart in silence fuels mindfulness, for it is through being fully present before the Lord that we gain the spiritual vision to know the truth about ourselves. We must turn off our media and screens, shut our mouths, and stand before Him without distraction on a daily basis. That is the first step in gaining the spiritual clarity to discern the particulars of how to become "those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bring forth fruit with patience." Mindfulness is essential for cultivating the garden of our souls for the Kingdom as we become more fully ourselves in the image and likeness of God.



Holy Communion-The Medicine of Immortality and Antidote to Death

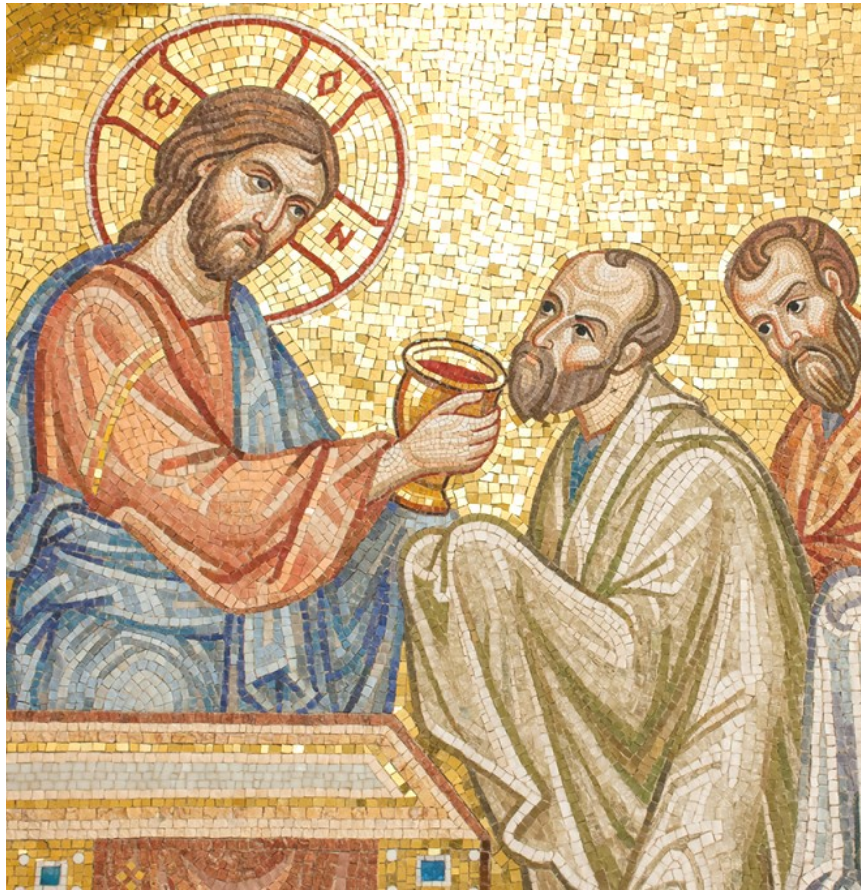
Holy Communion is real, not symbolic communion; it's the union of Christians with our Savior, Jesus Christ, precisely because, in our Orthodox faith, the bread and wine are really transformed by the almighty energy of the Holy Spirit into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. The bread and wine at the Holy Eucharist aren't symbols, as some may believe, but they are actually the real Body and Blood of Christ.

In this great and wonderful mystery, when we partake of the Body and Blood of Christ, we partake of our Theanthropic Lord Himself, since, in His person, His human nature, His flesh and blood are hypostatically united with His divinity. It follows that, when the faithful partake of His spotless Body and His precious Blood, we're also partaking of the divine nature of the Lord and we truly become gods by grace.

The Holy Eucharist is the participation by the faithful in the Body and Blood of Christ. Orthodox theology stresses that because of Christ's union of His divine and human natures in a one person, the divine nature bestows on us its characteristics (its 'perfections') to our human nature. These are freedom from the passions, immortality, bliss and all its other divine attributes. In the same way, when we Christians partake of the Body and Blood of the Lord, we really are made gods by grace and share in the divine attributes ('perfections'), without for a moment ever ceasing to be human.

The Divine Eucharist (Divine Liturgy) and all the Christian sacraments are celebrated by our priests within the holy churches, in the physical presence and with the personal participation of the faithful. In no way can the Divine Eucharist be replaced by private prayer in the home, which, while necessary, is no substitute for the Divine Liturgy. This is why, at times of harsh persecution of the Church (Roman Empire, Turkish rule, atheist Communism), Christians would go secretly to the catacombs or, at risk to their lives, to the few churches which remained open, in order to take part in the Divine Liturgy and partake of the Spotless Mysteries.

The Divine Eucharist is the central sacrament of our Church, which forms the Body of Christ, because it unites us with Him, making us 'sharers in the divine nature' (2 Peter, 1, 4). It also makes us a single entity among ourselves, as the Most Holy Body of Christ, the Church, completing us as true kin to each other in Christ. In the Orthodox Church our relationship with God isn't only spiritual-mystical-individual, as is the case with prayer, but it's also visible and corporeal by means of all the faithful coming together, as at the Divine Liturgy (Holy Communion). This is why, without the Divine Eucharist and the other holy sacraments, the Church would no longer fulfill its task of sanctifying us and making us gods by grace.



In every era, we Christians go to church and, with proper preparation, partake of the Last Supper of the Lord, that is the Divine Eucharist. We do so especially in today's situation, when we are faced with the COVID-19 virus. More than ever, we need the Holy Eucharist to strengthen us against this illness. Those who would warn us against this partaking of the Holy Mysteries are endangering our lives and preventing us from receiving "the body and blood of Our Savior. Christ tells us to celebrate the Divine Eucharist and to partake, as it is an entrance door to eternal life, which Jesus Christ opened for us. They're afraid that, instead of the gift of sanctification and immortality,

they may incur infection and death through the Precious Body and Blood of the Lord. This belief is clearly untrue, and every parish priest must take precautions to prevent the spread of disease, and the church has done this throughout its 2000 year history.

We therefore call upon all those who wish to experience the continuation of the lives of the saints of our Church to attend our churches and, with fear (reverence) of God, faith and love, with the boldness to overcome human misgivings. In the words of one of the communion prayers: 'Of your mystical supper, O Son of God, accept me today as a communicant. For I will not reveal Your Mysteries to your enemies, neither like Judas will I betray you with a kiss, but like the thief will I confess You. Remember me, Lord, when you come in your kingdom'.