

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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15th Sunday after Pentecost—The Greatest Commandment

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Today we're challenged by Christ to "love our enemies" and to "lend without hoping to receive anything in return." But before we can begin to understand the "how" of such commands that are so contrary to the way our world works today—the way we're all trained to think in the world, the way our sinful impulses would have us be-

have—we have to understand what Christ means by love. And there's a lot of confusion today about what love really means.

First, we need to recognize as Christians that true love is learned from God. He is the Author of love. Without that reference to God as our starting point, we could not know what love is. The word translated "love" used in this passage in the original Greek is 'agape.' It is a word specifically used to describe God's unconditional love and the love He calls us to as those who are "in Him." It's a selfless, giving love, which is manifested in humility, service to others, and self-emptying—kenosis in the Greek. The prime example of such agape love, is God's condescension to us in the Incarnation in which God takes on human nature and becomes

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+ 15th Sunday after Pentecost +
+ Sts. Zacharias and Elizabeth +

Epistle: 2 Cor 4:6-15

Gospel: Matthew 22:35-46

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.*

Acceptance of God's Will, by Elder Moses the Athonite

Let's not fear any delay in a miracle we've asked for. It may be better thus. It's certain that God knows our state much better than we do. God is on our side and the miracles are for us, but his presence and his intervention aren't predetermined by us. God's presence is often felt in our life in many and different ways, not in a deafening and phantasmagorical display.

What else are an inexpressible inner peace, an exceptional and moving sense of contrition, a pro-

found feeling of sinfulness if not a sign of the serene presence of God in our life?

God isn't merely the provider of health, longevity and prosperity, much less earthly immortality, but also the dispenser of the heavenly gifts and graces, of the salvation of our immortal soul. It's a great mystery, which is hidden in the depths of the Orthodox spiritual life: that the faithful can experience the sweetness, the beauty and the peace of eternal life deep in their soul,

despite their many external adversities.

It's vital that we all wake up immediately and put other priorities in place in our life. As Christ says, we should seek the Kingdom of Heaven and then add all the rest. Those who don't have serious bodily ailments may still be suffering from more serious spiritual ones: spiritual incapacity, spiritual blindness, hardness of heart and so on.

We want a God who's easy, obedient, generous

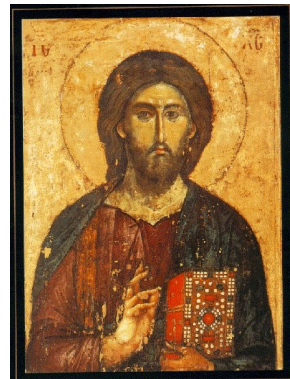
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We invite all to worship in our services. Sunday Divine Liturgy begins at 9:30 AM

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. We are also happy to announce that coffee social has resumed out on the church lawn following the Divine Liturgy.

Pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5.17)

Please 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, Joan, Terena, Loretta, Bill, Mike, Carol, Pam, the homeless, the hungry, victims of abuse and violence, & those persecuted for their faith in Christ

Faith Endures

“One thing is needful and Mary has chosen the better part.” How many of us understand what this “one needful thing” is in our lives? How many of us prioritize what is truly needful? To be honest, many of us treat Jesus and His teachings and our relationship with Him as

something nice, but not something central. We don’t “seek first the kingdom of God” above all else. We allow ourselves to get distracted by many worldly pursuits that demand our attention. We turn to what we think is urgent and temporarily important instead of what is essential and eternal.

Now it’s interesting that we read this Gospel story at all the major feasts honoring the Virgin Mary. The story has nothing to do with the Theotokos, yet we read it because the Virgin Mary, above all others in the history of the world, offers the greatest example of choosing the “one thing needful.”

All the saints of our Church are examples for us to imitate, but the Virgin Mary is the first among the saints. When the Archangel Gabriel tells Mary that she is the chosen one, she has the free choice to either accept or reject. God never imposes His will on anyone. The greatest gift He has given us is freedom, freedom to choose to follow and obey Him, or freedom to turn away from Him and follow the ways of the world.

Acceptance of God’s Will, continued from p.1

with gifts, whom we hold in our hand, so that we can live well and happily, in which case we’ll thank him and glorify him. We don’t allow him to send us trials for our edification, to admonish us strictly, to prevent us making mistakes. We want control of our life so that we can do what we like. When things work out as we want, we say how good God is; but when something goes wrong, we don’t just find fault with him, we want nothing to do with him. We think him harsh, fearsome, strict and implacable.

There’s no Byzantine icon of God smiling; he looks you straight in the eye, with complete sincerity and understanding. Without a trace of pity, revenge, threat, terror, fear or compulsion. We have an astonishing, unique, wonderful God who surprises us, moves us, shakes us up and shocks us in order to transfigure us. We should allow him to speak and tell us what he wants, rather than what we want to hear.

Only if we manage to accept God’s

will within ourselves shall we be free of the myriad wicked thoughts that strain and exhaust us. Accepting God’s will isn’t easy, we must admit, and it may sometimes seem incom-



prehensible, especially for those people who are without humility.

If, with God’s help, the faithful don’t allow themselves to be overcome, to become disappointed, isolated and melancholic, then they can live in an enhanced state, rich in the

grace of the Holy Spirit. Humbled by pain, they can experience the great joy of the presence of God in their life and know that the sole purpose of this life isn’t to enjoy good times, health or longevity, but a genuine connection with God, that is, life in Christ.

* * *

When grace comes to dwell in someone, unclean spirits can’t come in. And the Scriptures say that when an unclean spirit departs from a person, it passes through ‘waterless places’, seeking rest. And then it says ‘I’ll return to the house which I left. When it comes, it finds it empty, swept and beautifully arranged’ and then brings in another seven demons and so ‘the last state is worse than the former’.

So we need to pray for our souls continuously.

Everything we do should be for the glory of God and the benefit of souls. We shouldn’t waste our hours and days but should use them to praise God and provide succour to the souls of other people.

(Homily on the Greatest Commandment, cont'd from p.1)

one of His own creation in order to enter into our human nature as man and redeem it as God. This same agape love is also witnessed in Christ's willing offering of His own life to defeat sin and death on behalf of our salvation.

Agape always desires what God desires for us and for every human being. Agape is not what is pleasing to the senses or the passions. Instead, it's the heavenly love that God, in turn, calls us to exercise if we're to live in communion with Him and each other, living out our calling as Christians in witness to His truth and life in the world around us.

Now, "Love" as our culture often understands it is often actually lust (a twisted form of eros), driven by the passions, as well as ego and pride, of a "me-first" attitude instead of a "God-first" attitude. Love is often seen manifesting itself as something focused on wants and rights, on a self-focused understanding of individual fulfillment, such as we see in the 'identity' politics of today. Such is not and cannot be the agape love I just described.

And so if that's how we understand love in terms of whatever we decide it is even when it's clearly not what God has revealed, there it's no wonder people, even some in the Church, are confused. It's no wonder that Christ's calling seems so impossible. If love is changed into a temporary emotional feeling, an obligatory attachment, or a twisted eros, then no wonder so many marriages end in divorce, why many young people ask, "why bother with marriage, why wait for sex in marriage when I 'love' this person at this moment, even as others, as a result, even venture to change what marriage is or to change their gender. The further we get from agape love, the more such confusion and lawlessness will abound, just as Christ warns.

Indeed, without agape love, the very idea of loving one's enemies or being generous in our giving seem almost 'quaint'—surely not something to be expected of a Christian living in the 21st century. I'm here to assure you that the need has never been greater. Where confusion and hedonism abound, so too does the need for true Christians to live out the Gospel—with vigor, with faith, and with authenticity!

So, rather than putting Christ's commands aside, rele-

gating them to a by-gone era of Church history, we have the obligation here, as we do with ALL the Holy Scriptures of the New Testament, to honor them and strive to apply them and bring the truth of Christ to bear on our lives; there's nothing unintentional in any of Christ's commands. Rather, our Lord is unlocking for us a part of what it means to be in Him, to live for Him and help change the world around us.

Christ comes to interject the Kingdom of God into the Law, as He who is the Law Giver Himself, saying, "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill" (Matt. 5:17). The command to "love our enemies," to "give without hoping for anything in return" need to be seen in this light: as a supreme opportunity to see the Kingdom of God manifested now, in our lives, in our church, in the world around us—to be part of being Christ's "light" and "salt," the hope of a better way.

Now, one of our biggest impediments to loving as God loves, as God calls us, in turn, to love, is pride in all its variances, especially ego, self-focus, and, therefore, lack of agape love. Indeed, pride is so wrapped up in our modern understanding of 'love,' that we don't even see how it can be separated. It's pride that causes us to be self-focused and indifferent to the need of others; it's pride that makes us easily offended.

Christ, in admonishing us to "love our enemies, to do good, to lend, hoping for nothing in return," promises us great spiritual reward if we let our hearts put this kind of

active agape love into action, saying that we'll be His adopted children, co-heirs with Christ and fellow victors through Him over sin and death because such virtues are the fruit of life with and in Christ. Humility exercised through love in this way is powerful, courageous; it's a strong witness of the truth of Christ in a world often characterized by enmity, hatred, and pride.

It's a manifestation of the Kingdom of Heaven in our midst. Exercising agape love in our own lives is a uniquely Christian practice that comes by the power of the Holy Spirit working in us and through us. With God working through us in our striving to model humility and love in our own lives, those around us will certainly be affected and encouraged in the life in Christ as well. To God be the Glory. Amen.



Chapter 10. The blessings that will flow from faith

If you also desire [to possess] this faith, you likewise shall receive first of all the knowledge of the Father. For God has loved mankind, on whose account He made the world, to whom He rendered subject all the things that are in it, to whom He gave reason and understanding, to whom alone He imparted the privilege of looking upwards to Himself, whom He formed after His own image, to whom He sent His only-begotten Son, to whom He has promised a kingdom in heaven, and will give it to those who have loved Him.

And when you have attained this knowledge, with what joy do you think you will be filled? Or, how will you love Him who has first so loved you? And if you love Him, you will be an imitator of His kindness. And do not wonder that a man may become an imitator of God. He can, if he is willing.

For it is not by ruling over his neighbors, or by seeking to hold the supremacy over those that are weaker, or by being rich, and showing violence towards those that are inferior, that happiness is found; nor can any one by these things become an imitator of God. But these things do not at all constitute His majesty.

On the contrary he who takes upon himself the burden of his neighbor; he who, in whatsoever respect he may be superior, is ready to benefit another who is deficient; he who, whatsoever things he has received from God, by distributing these to the needy, becomes a god to those who receive [his benefits]: he is an imitator of God.

Then you shall see, while still on earth, that God in the heavens rules over the universe; then you shall begin to speak the mysteries of God; then shall you both love and admire those that suffer punishment because they will not deny God; then shall you condemn the deceit and error of the world when you shall know what it is to live truly in heaven, when you shall despise that which is here esteemed to be death, when you shall fear what is truly death, which is reserved for those who shall be condemned to the eternal fire, which shall afflict those even to the end that are committed to it. Then shall you admire those who for righteous-

ness' sake endure the fire that is but for a moment, and shall count them happy when you shall know the nature of that fire.

Chapter 11. These things are worthy to be known and believed

I do not speak of things strange to me, nor do I aim at anything inconsistent with right reason; but having been a disciple of the Apostles, I have become a teacher of the Gentiles. I minister the things delivered to me to those that are disciples worthy of the truth. For who that is rightly taught and begotten by the loving Word, would not seek to learn accurately the things which have been clearly shown by the Word to His disciples, to whom the Word being manifested has revealed them, speaking plainly [to them], not understood indeed by the unbelieving, but conversing with the disciples, who, being esteemed faithful by Him, acquired a knowledge of the mysteries of the Father?



For which reason He sent the Word, that He might be manifested to the world; and He, being despised by the people, was, when preached by the Apostles, believed on by the Gentiles. This is He who was from the beginning, who appeared as if new, and was found old, and yet who is ever born afresh in the hearts of the saints. This is He who, being from everlasting, is today called the Son; through whom the Church is enriched, and grace, widely spread, increases in the saints, furnishing understanding, revealing mysteries, announcing times, rejoicing over the faithful, giving to those that seek, by whom the limits of faith are not broken through, nor the boundaries set by the fathers passed over.

Then the fear of the law is chanted, and the grace of the prophets is known, and the faith of the gospels is established, and the tradition of the Apostles is preserved, and the grace of the Church exults; which grace if you grieve not, you shall know those things which the Word teaches, by whom He wills, and when He pleases. For whatever things we are moved to utter by the will of the Word commanding us, we communicate to you with pains, and from a love of the things that have been revealed to us.

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