

SERMON AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

JULY 28, 2024

ROMANS 10:1-10

“IF YOU CONFESS WITH YOUR LIPS JESUS.....ROMANS 10:9”

Dag Hammarskjold was the Secretary General of the United Nations in the early 1960s. He became famous because of his many travels around the world trying to prevent wars or help bring wars already under way to a peaceful end. Once he was being flown to the Congo in central Africa to try to bring an end to the ongoing fighting there. His pilot had a book of maps prepared for those flying over Africa, giving detailed instructions for landing at every airport. The city they were flying to was Nadalo, Congo. But the pilot got the last letter wrong and had the page open instead for Nadola, Zambia. Just one little letter, one little vowel wrong---but it meant he was looking for safe landing directions in the wrong country. And being Nadalo was higher up than Nadola, he came in too low in a fog.....and crashed into a mountain. All, including Hammarskjold, were killed. (No One Ever Spoke Like This Man, Father Anthony Coniaris, Light & Life Publishing, p. 63) One letter wrong. That led to the wrong map. And that led to flying too low. And that led to the crash and death of all on board. Just a wrong name....

In our own lives, what map do we follow? Which *name* do we follow? If we are to live right, we have to have the right name for whom we will follow. St. Paul, in today's epistle lesson, in Romans 10:9, tells us specifically what name, what person, we should center our lives on----“if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.”

There is only one map to follow in life that gets us to a safe landing in heaven. There is only one name to call on---Jesus. As the Apostle Paul wrote----Confess Jesus with your lips and believe in Him in your heart, and you will be saved.

And so the topic of my last sermon to you as your pastor is: What should our lives be all about? Or more precisely, *who* should our lives be all about? The answer is given to us in our epistle reading---Jesus Christ.

Our parish has been in existence now for about 35 years. I hope we have always been faithful to the Lord Jesus. I hope He has been the focus of our existence. Much goes on in the life of a church. And that's good! But what is it all about?....for what reason does so much go on? Hopefully, to glorify Jesus Christ. Not to make us feel good about ourselves or to look good---to impress other people. Hopefully, not as an attempt to earn brownie points with God. But just out of love for Jesus Christ.

May our love for Christ always fill our parish life and be the whole reason we exist. And the same for us in our own families and as individuals----let us allow our love for Him fill our lives.

As we read earlier, St. Paul summed up this kind of living, focused on our Lord, in Romans 10:9-- "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." Confessing Jesus, living for Jesus---that's what being saved is all about.

Make our Lord Jesus Christ the center of your daily life. Talk with Him every day. Talk with Him *all* day. Pray to Him throughout the day---morning, noon, and night.

And concerning your children.... (a slight digression here.....we have lots of children in our parish. Lots and lots and lots! This is one of God's greatest blessings upon our church!) As to your children----*immerse* them in Jesus Christ. Have family prayers, read them the Bible stories, observe the Holy Days, celebrate all the many celebrations in our Orthodox Faith. Teach them to love Jesus above all. Get them heavily involved here. And then someday you will have the joy of having your grandchildren sitting with you in church! It's such a joy... and such sadness when your grandchildren aren't with you at church. Of course, each child as they grow up will eventually make their own decisions about whether or not to live for God, but the more you immerse them in Christ, the more likely they will walk the right road.

And all the work that you folks do for God! It's really a lot---read closely through the bulletin. You will see that you people do an amazing amount of service to God! And you take the initiative, which I love as a priest. I don't have to try to drum up interest in new ministries at St. Matthew's. You come to me and say, "Father, do you think we can try.....". All I do is say, "Sure, go for it!" And you go for it! God bless you for that. Keep working for the Lord, keep helping the needy, keep doing all the good you do. And do it with joy. And be sure to remember as you do---it's all for Jesus Christ! Thank Him for the chance to serve Him.

To start to sum up what I have been saying---God has richly blessed us. In thanks, let us continue to focus our congregational life, our family lives, and our personal lives on Him, Jesus Christ.

There was an elderly woman who for many years had walked closely with the Lord. She did much for God, for her church, for everyone. And she greatly loved the Bible and studied it all the time. She had a gift not everyone has---memorization. She was great at it. So she memorized huge amounts of the Bible---many, many long passages. But in her last years, as commonly happened, her memory began to fade bit by bit. She started to be unable to recite any more the long Bible passages; she could only remember shorter ones. And as her memory faded, so did her physical health. As she declined, pretty soon she could only remember and recite some verses. And then in her last days, she could only remember one verse....and because that was the only verse she could remember, she recited it a lot. It was St. Paul's words in II Timothy, 1:12---"I know *whom* I have believed, and am persuaded that *He* is able to keep

that which I have committed unto *Him* until that day.” As her last days slipped by, soon she could only remember and say small phrases from this verse....and then as death approached she was only able to still remember and speak one word from the whole Bible---“Him”. And so she died proclaiming in that simple way the focus of her life---“Him, Him, Him...”. And the Lord took her home. The Lord Jesus---Him whom she had lived for now took her to be with Him. (in “Pulpit Helps”, February, 1981, p. 15)

May that same “Him”, that man Jesus Christ, fill our lives and even fill our deaths like He did for that woman. Let us make the motto of our lives----“Him, Him, Him”.

In closing-----it has been my joy and my family’s joy to be with you and serve God with you for 34 happy years. As you know, we are not moving away. The majority of our grandchildren are here; we have a house here-----and we just love Cleveland. 34 years ago, when the Department of Evangelism and Missions of our Archdiocese told me it looked like I might be assigned to Cleveland, we had our doubts, never having been here. But we love Cleveland and don’t want at all to leave. All that to just say we will see each other plenty, thanks be to God!

As we all continue our journeys through life, let us continue----as a church, as families, as individuals----to make our total focus: Him, our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ!