

**HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH
SEPTEMBER 25, 2022**

LUKE 5:1-11

“BOTTLES, AROMAS, AND SOULS”

Most priests usually have with them a satchel or briefcase that contains the holy things they need when they go calling in a hospital or nursing home or someone's house---especially if it's an emergency situation. In that emergency bag, they have the reserved Holy Communion, prayer book, Bible, and bottles-----with wine for Communion, holy water for blessings, and holy oil for the sacrament of Unction. When I was a young priest, even less organized than I now am, for a while I had all those liquids in what are sometimes called medicine bottles----those little dark brown glass bottles. But when you look at those bottles, you can't at all tell what kind of liquid is in them. Not so good when you're in a hurry to start a ceremony because someone is very ill or even dying. But I had a simple solution----you just open a bottle and smell..... And you know right away what's in it! Now I'm better organized and have different types of bottles for everything---but actually the smell test did work pretty well!

Think of a parish as being a dark brown glass bottle. What is the church really like? You have to open the bottle, spiritually speaking, to find out. What is the aroma of a parish, what is the smell? That aroma will tell you what the parish is like.

Some aromas attract, some aromas repel. Richard Nixon was a very fussy fastidious child. One day he told his mother that he could not stand to ride the bus to school anymore. His mother asked why. Young Richard said, “Because all the children on the school bus smell bad!”.

Perhaps a bit of an extreme reaction to odors, but bad odors do repel. And good odors attract. And, spiritually speaking, that is true about us as Christians and about churches.

In today's gospel reading, Luke 5:1-11, our Lord Jesus Christ is calling to follow Him some of His 12 Disciples. They are professional fishermen and He calls them to start a new life with Him. He calls them to leave behind fishing for fish and instead to start fishing for people, for human souls for the Kingdom of God. As Jesus said to Peter in verse 10----“from now on you will be catching men.”

Catchers of souls, fishers of men—that's what Christ called His Disciples to be. And by calling the 12, He was calling the whole Church for all ages----- and that includes our parish.

And very important for us as fishers of men is this question---what kind of spiritual aroma does our parish give off? If our church is a little dark brown glass bottle, what is the smell if someone screws off the cap? Do we have a good aroma or an unpleasant aroma? Does the aroma of St. Matthew Church attract fish to be caught for God? Or does it push fish away? How do we smell?

Back in London in the Middle Ages, there was a street where there lived a very holy man---full of goodness, love, and kindness to all. So good that he became well known. And people began to refer to the street where he lived as "the godly man's street". Much later, because that reference persisted long after he died, the city officially changed the street's name to "Godly Man Street". And that's still its name today.

Are we a godly parish? Any chance the city of North Royalton might change the name of Albion Road? Well, don't hold your breath about that question! But--- what kind of aroma do we have?

Let's look at 2 categories of parish life (there are more, but just 2 for now) having to do with what kind of spiritual aroma emits from St. Matthew Church-----

NUMBER ONE--- How do we treat visitors? We get lots of visitor; we have quite a few today. It's a very rare Sunday when no visitor attends. Sometimes we have first time visitors; sometimes we have visitors who may have been here once or twice before..... I don't think it's a matter of chance when visitors come. I think God moves people to visit a liturgy.

So if God has moved a visitor to attend.....how do we react to that? Do we just ignore them? Or do we warmly welcome them? The goal of a church is to save souls. But we have to get know the soul for that to happen!

There are different types of visitors.

One type is people who are working on making a very big decision--- whether or not to believe in God and live for God. Just like each of us, these visitors will live forever. But where will they live? Perhaps they will decide while they are visiting here! So the stakes are very high indeed. How we treat a visitor could be a big factor in that person's eternal destination!

A second type of visitor is someone who already believes in Jesus Christ. But they are considering becoming more serious about their faith. It could be an Orthodox person who has faded away from their spiritual life.... It could

be a non-Orthodox Christian who, in an effort to get more serious about their spiritual life, wants to check out the ancient Church founded by Christ Himself.

We are very frequently having visitors of both types attend----How we as individual parishioners react to their being with us can be a *huge* factor in their decision making. I know this from talking with them when I follow up with them personally after their visits.

So warmly welcoming a visitor is a very big deal. Some might respond by saying, "But, Father, I'm shy.....I really don't think I can greet a stranger at church." My response to that is---"just suck it up and be friendly and unshy for 5 minutes!". That's probably all it takes for you to greet someone and chat a bit----and then, if you're a super shy person, hand them off to someone else who will talk with them more..... It will work! Be brave---walk up to that person you don't know and say, "Good morning! Glad you came today...."

I must say, though, that really you folks do quite well at this. When I talk later with people who visit here, and then come back---one of the main things they mention to me is how friendly and warm to them you are! So keep up the good work. But sometimes someone "falls through the cracks". So if you see a person you think might be a visitor (don't wait to be sure they are! Or you may never talk to anyone....) just say "Hi" and welcome them. Your doing that will be a good spiritual aroma! It will draw people to God.

NUMBER TWO--- What kind of aroma does our worship give off? Not talking here about the incense, but about *spiritual* aroma.

What do visitors think when they attend our liturgy? Do they think---"I think these folks are just 'going through the motions'. No ones seems to care about the service, not even paying attention..." If a visitor thinks our worship seems dead or stale, that's not a good aroma! They probably won't be back, and they won't advance at all towards God by being here.

Are we really worshipping God when we have church? Or are we "just here" and maybe just watching the clergy, chanters, and altar boys worshipping God? Are we just spectators? It can happen!

Once an NFL coach was being interviewed and the sports reporter asked---"Do you think professional football contributes to the health of the American people?" He replied, "Oh, no, not at all! Think about it.....At a game, first there are the 22 men on the field. They are crashing into each other, over- exerting themselves, getting broken legs, damaged tendons, and concussions. The healthiest thing they could do would be to stop playing and go home and take a nap. Then there are the thousands of fans in the stands---- there they sit,

eat junk food, and drink lots of beer. Not healthy! The healthiest thing they could do is jog around the field a few times!” (Father Anthony Coniaris, Sacred Symbols That Speak, Vol. 2, Light & Life Press, p. 186)

For some, church may seem like that! You have the small little group---the clergy, the chanters, the altar servers who are busy “down on the field”. And everyone sits “in the stands” sits and watches----just like a football game! But, of course, it’s not supposed to be like that! The people need to enter into the worship themselves, not just watch us up front. So pray, sing, make the ancient prayers of the service *your* prayers.

Don’t be passive in the liturgy---be active. Participate by crossing yourself, bowing, etc. Pray with attention the prayers that are done by all together. Read along closely with the priest’s prayers, seeking to understand them. Most of our people sing out loud the hymns and it’s truly a beautiful thing to hear! It is possible, and in some churches common, for people to not sing much---- and they can still truly worship by singing the hymns in their heart if not with their lips. But it is sure wonderful that you *really* sing----it is such a blessing to hear the high volume of your praises to God! You lift me up.

So what aroma does a visitor pick up from our worship service? Does the visitor leave thinking, “Those people aren’t really there with their hearts and minds, just their bodies.....they are just not involved with the service.” Or does a visitor leave here thinking---“Those people mean it! They really do worship!”

This hour and a half on Sunday is the most important thing we do in our lives, the main thing in our lives every week. Give it your all when we worship together, because that means you are giving your all to God.

And then the aroma of our worship will be a sweet spiritual smell----an aroma that will attract others to God and His Church. People will be drawn to the person we worship---Jesus Christ.

In conclusion----In today’s gospel lesson from Luke 5, the Lord called His disciples to follow Him; to become fishers of men. To save souls for God.

His calling them to do that applies to us modern disciples, too. To us as individuals and to us as a congregation. Does the aroma of our lives and the aroma of our parish attract people to God? Or repel them? It is all up to us!

May God help us to be good fishers of souls!