

HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

HOLY PENTECOST JUNE 12, 2022

ACTS 2: 1-11

“PENTECOST----ONE IN CHRIST”

Church splits are common---and always have been....even going back many centuries. Back around 400 A.D. there was a small split-off group from the Church. They were called the “Tascodrogi”. Very little is know about them. It all stemmed from a disagreement about prayer. There are different prayer postures that are common---kneeling or standing, hands folded or hands raised, eyes open or eyes closed. Apparently, the Tascodrogi had a unique belief about prayer---it had to be done in a certain way: with your finger touching your nose! We don’t know why they believed this but it was a strong enough belief that they they started their own church because of it. That church faded away not long after it started. If you are driving around North Royalton, noticing the various churches in our town, you will not see a sign by a church building that reads “The First Tascodrogi Church of North Royalton”! (Nicene & Post-Nicene Fathers, 2nd Series, Volume 16, Eerdmans, p. 497)

Yes, lot of church splits over the 20 centuries of Christianity. Some on a big level—giant world-shaking schisms. And some on a small level---an already small congregation splitting into two still smaller congregations.

Unity is so much better than church splits! And a very special unity began on the day we celebrate today----Pentecost. We hear about it in Acts 2, today’s reading. It was 50 days after the resurrection of Christ when it all happened. There already was an Old Testament feast called Pentecost, 50 days after the Passover. And so because of the Old Testament feast, Jews from all over the known world had traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate.

Our reading gives at least a partial list of where they came from in Acts 2: 9-11----“Parthians, and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya adjoining Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs...” People from many countries, from three continents (Asia, Africa, and Europe), all with their own languages. Many of

them couldn't even talk to each other!

Meanwhile, because it was Sunday, guess what the apostles were doing? Same thing we do on Sunday—they were having liturgy. And in the midst of their worship, the Holy Spirit, the eternal 3rd Person of the Holy Trinity, came down upon them and filled them. And our Orthodox Church began---Happy Birthday to us!

The apostles, filled with the Spirit, prayed and preached. And the crowds in town for Pentecost? By a miracle they were able to understand what the Disciples were saying. The crowds said in Acts 2: 11----“we hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God!”.

3,000 new people came to believe in Christ that day. 3,000 people were baptized (and you think our services sometimes get long!).

Our Orthodox Church on that first day of its full existence transcended all language lines, all border lines, all color lines----and it still does. There are (a partial list!) in our world-----American Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, African Orthodox, Ukrainian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Arab Orthodox, Jewish Orthodox (I don't mean Orthodox Jews, but Jewish Orthodox Christians!), Romanian Orthodox, Serbian Orthodox, Japanese Orthodox, Indian Orthodox, Chinese Orthodox, Mexican Orthodox, etc., etc.! Very different from each other in some ways, but all one, all united in Christ and in His Church.

Now we Orthodox are very human, very fallen, very sinful. So we have certainly had our squabbles and fights over 2000 years----and they are not all over yet. But somehow in the long run, unity prevails and the Church pushes on. We believe that being one in Christ will survive all our sinful fights and disagreements. Christ said the gates of hell would never prevail against His Church-----and we will still be here as His Church when He returns on the final Day.

Now, the moral of the story. (There could be many morals to the story of Pentecost! Just one specific one today....)

If you have in your mind and heart negative feelings or bias against people of different backgrounds than yourself, different language or accent, different skin color, etc.....that is a sin. Pentecost is a very good day to repent and ask God's forgiveness for that sin. It is truly in our world a very common sin and perhaps some of us have that sin. If so, being we are Orthodox, the true Pentecostals, today is the perfect day to ask God's forgiveness for it and leave that sin behind.

The true Orthodox way to relate to people of different color, national background, etc. was expressed very well not long ago by a modern Greek

holy monk named Father Amphilochius. Let me give you a brief bit of context before I quote him. Greeks and Turks do not have a history of getting along real well! Violence and wars between them have gone on for hundreds of years....

Here is what Father Amphilochius said, "I was born to love people. It doesn't concern me if he is a Turk, or black, or white. I see in the face of everyone the image of God. And for this image of God I am willing to sacrifice everything." (Precious Vessels of the Holy Spirit, Herman Middleton, Protecting Veil Press, 2004, p. 59)

If you hear someone speak with an accent, or find out their home country, or see that they are of a different color than you---and you find negative feelings popping up in inside yourself and you start to think badly of them---that is a sin. Remember Father Amphilochius' words---instead of thinking poorly of them, we should be ready to "sacrifice everything" for them. Because they are in God's image regardless of their color or nationality.

And so if we have that sin, we should today, on Holy Pentecost, repent and ask mercy from God. You'll have plenty of time to do that in the Kneeling Prayers at the end of today's liturgy! We should repent and ask God to help us to truly love every person made in God's image---which means every human being.

Priests sometimes get asked---"What does the Bible say about the different races?". Well, actually that is a mistaken question to start with. The Bible doesn't talk about different races, because it teaches there is only one human race. St. Paul is crystal clear about this in Acts 17:26---"God has made from *one blood* every nation of men." One blood, one race----the human race. Every human, whatever color or language, is made in the image of God. And so we should all be united to each other. And, of course, this is especially true in God's Church!

In our parish we have members of many varying backgrounds, nationalities, etc. But all are one in the Lord----we pray together, we work for God together, we eat together, we live together..... God really has blessed us! We are united and may the Lord always keep us that way.

The Holy Spirit came down at Pentecost 2000 years ago. He filled the first Christians, the Church began, and 3,000 were baptized on that one day.

That same Church is still ongoing---you're it! Let us stay united in the Lord like His people were on that first Pentecost. Let us stay united until the day when the One who loves us best returns for us at last.