

SERMON AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHJODOX CHURCH

JUNE 2, 2024

JOHN 4: 5-42

“WORSHIPPING GOD IN SPIRIT AND IN TRUTH”

In England around 1500, not long before the Reformation, some odd things were happening in the worship services in the churches. People were commonly bringing their dogs with them to church for Mass. It certainly was not accepted by all, but it was taking place. Perhaps the most drastic situation was in the town of Langley. A noble woman named Lady Audely had a habit of bringing her dogs right with her-----12 of them! (English Monks and the Suppression of the Monasteries, Geoffrey Baskerville, Phoenix Press, 1937, p. 209)

Yes, different churches do worship in different ways. Sometimes people say things like---“Well, all churches’ worship services are about the same---just little differences.” No, that is definitely wrong . Worship in different types of church varies enormously. You can find out by just once in a while “investigating” by being at some non-Orthodox church. You will notice the big differences right away. (Don’t go to worship, just go as an informal “researcher”.)

Because there are so many differing opinions about worship, whose opinion really matters? Only one person’s....that person is our Lord Jesus Christ. And we see what He says about worship in today’s gospel reading from John 4.

In today’s reading, our Lord and the Disciples are taking a trip from Jerusalem in the south to Galilee in the north. They are taking the direct route, right through Samaria, instead of going around as Jews commonly did due to the tension between Jews and Samaritans. While the disciples go into the town of Sychar to buy food, Jesus sits at a well outside of town to rest. And He is thirsty. A Samaritan woman is there drawing water from the well and He asks her for a drink. And that leads to one of the longer conversations in the Bible, which is why we had a long gospel lesson today!

The Samaritan religion was somewhat different than the Jewish religion---similar, but not the same. (By the way, there are still Samaritans living in that area today 2000 years later.) Jesus and the woman have a conversation and in that conversation it becomes evident to the woman that Jesus is not just an ordinary man needing a drink of water. And so she makes sure the conversation goes deep. She asks Jesus where the right place to worship God is. Is it where the Jews worship, in the temple in Jerusalem? Or is it where the Samaritans worship, in their own temple at Sychar? Jesus’ answer to the woman can be boiled down to this----geography---where you are on a map---is not important for worship. (We learned that first hand after our church burned up a few years back---we worshipped in all kinds of different locations over the next several years while we built our current church. Geography was no hindrance to our prayers!)

For Jesus Christ, as we learn from John 4, real worship is not about “where”. For Jesus, as He said in verse 23, real worship means to worship God “in spirit and in truth.” Hear what our Lord says in verses 21 and 24—“Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, or in Jerusalem, worship the Father..... God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth.” This “true worship” has been going on now for 2000 years since Christ spoke those words at the well. True worship has been handed down to us from the Apostles. Even our name shows this fact---“Orthodox” means “true worship”. So if you tell someone, “I am Orthodox”, you are actually saying to them, “I am a true worshipper.”

Yes, our Orthodox worship is the true worship of God. That is a very important fact, but let us move on to another important matter-----you might call it the million dollar question. Orthodox worship is the true worship, but..... Do I myself, do you yourself, truly worship God? Sure, our church has true worship, but am I a true worshipper? Remember that geography doesn't matter, so just being here in the building when true worship is happening does not make me a true worshipper. There are so many things that could be said about this very important fact, but I'll just mention two today.....

FIRST---True worship is not a spectator sport. It should not be like going to a Browns game to watch someone else play football. We do not (hopefully!) come here to watch the priest, the deacons, the chanters worship God. We come here to *ourselves* worship God.

True worship is not to observe, but to work. The definition of the Greek word “liturgy” is “the work of the people”. Not “work of the priest” but “work of the people”. That's you! It's true having a priest is essential for a liturgy. No priest, no liturgy. But you, the people, are also essential---no people, no liturgy. Priests are not supposed to do “solo liturgies”, just all by themselves. Now you may wonder how that could happen---no one come to church for liturgy except the priest? Yes, perhaps rare! But let me set up a “hypothetical” for you to help realize that it really is essential for there to be people, not just priest.

Fargo people, like me, are often rather obnoxious in that we complain a lot about Fargo winters, but it's obvious we are actually in some perverse way proud of them. I'm sure you have heard me go on about how I've lived here for 34 years but have never seen a *real* blizzard. Fargo people mock at Cleveland snow storms. So here is my hypothetical situation. Imagine it's a January Sunday and there is a snow storm---let's say a foot of snow in Cleveland. Because I'm from Fargo, of course my reaction is “Well, it's not *that* bad, not like Fargo” And so, I don't cancel liturgy because I don't consider it a real blizzard. It's a tough 7 mile drive but I make it here. I go in and get things ready, light the candles, etc. But I notice no one else is showing up because the parishioners are smarter than the priest and realize the weather is just too bad, even if not quite as bad as Fargo. At 10 a.m., there is still not one other person here---so what am I supposed to do? Go ahead and do a solo liturgy? No. So I say some prayers, blow out the candles, and go home. No people, no liturgy.

Your presence is essential and required. But that means more than just being “geographically present”. It means “work”, because the liturgy is “the work of the people”. The work is to praise God, to pray, to receive Holy Communion. Lots of work---and it requires full concentration. Liturgy is not a time to relax, to make plans for Monday, to daydream---it’s time to go to work. And that means really concentrating on the worship service. Then you are truly worshipping in spirit and in truth. And this leads to point 2.....

SECOND---Truly worshipping means focusing on *God*, not on other people or anything else. Resist all the possible distractions---one of the altar boy’s shoes is untied, the man 2 pews ahead of me is falling asleep and it’s amusing to watch him nodding off, one of the chanters just messed up a word, the priest is off-key for that hymn, Aunt Mabel’s new dress is so nice, and “I’m hungry! I hope there’s lots of food at coffeetime today!”.

Yes, many possible distractions! Ignore them all. Instead, focus on the words of the hymn we are singing; follow along silently with the prayer the priest is praying; read with attention and meaning the prayers the people pray. And especially---stay focused on the most important person at the liturgy----not the priest or the deacons or the chanters---but Jesus Christ Himself. He is here at every service. Give Him your attention----then you will be truly worshipping.

There’s a story going around that I doubt the truthfulness of because the details seem different every time you read it....But, never the less, it’s a good story. Here’s one version: The President is traveling around the country. There is one city he will be in for a weekend, and it’s thought he will be attending church on Sunday morning. But which church is what everyone is wondering. A priest gets a phone call from a man who says, “Father, I heard a rumor that the president will be at your church tomorrow. Is that true? If so, I am attending.” The priest replied, “Well, I don’t know---no one has called to tell me. But you know what---why don’t you attend anyway? There will be someone attending tomorrow more important than the president.” The caller replied, “More important than the president! That’s hard to believe! Who?” The priest answered---“Jesus Christ. He will attend tomorrow’s liturgy.”

Yes, the Lord Himself is here for every liturgy---so focus on Him. Make the words of the hymns and prayers to Him in the service *your* words, not just some noise going on. Focus on Jesus Christ in the liturgy and then you are worshipping in spirit and in truth.

In today’s long gospel reading from John 4, the Lord told the Samaritan woman what true worship is. It doesn’t matter what city you are in. What matters is that we worship God in spirit and truth.

Our Orthodox Church has had true and apostolic worship for 2000 years. Do we as individuals truly enter into that worship? Or just show up and go through the motions? Be a true worshipper of the one true God. Give all your attention in the liturgy to the most important person in attendance---our Lord Jesus Christ.