

SERMON AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

NOVEMBER 26, 2023

EPHESIANS 4: 1-7

“THE POWER OF HUMILITY”

You are a wonderful congregation! I have had the blessing of being your pastor for almost 34 years now---God has been good to me. One reason I have been here so long that is I never looked to get transferred---I didn't want to go anywhere else! I have joked with parishioners that if I ever saw on the church answering machine a message from the bishop saying he needed to talk with me about possibly moving that I would not return the call but go hide in the woods for a few days, surviving on bologna sandwiches, until the heat died down and the bishop forgot about a possible transfer! He never called!

So many good things here. A big one is that we have a very varied group of people. And they all get along! Many different nationalities and geographical backgrounds---you can hear quite a few different languages and accents here. And many different religious backgrounds---life-long Orthodox, former atheists, Muslims, Jews, former Catholics, former Protestants of all types..... And they are all friends---no fistfights between the Greeks and Romanians, or ex-Catholics and ex-Protestants!

What holds us all together? God's love for us. And our love for God, because that leads to our love for each other. What will keep us together? More love....and another big factor: **humility**. St. Paul talks about humility in today's assigned epistle lesson in Ephesians 4: 1-7. He writes in verses 1-3--- "I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all humility and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." He says we should live with each other "with all humility and gentleness".

Christ is the ultimate example of humility. He is divine, yet He became a baby. He is the king of the universe, but lowered Himself to be born in a stable. We should strive to be humble like He is. And such humility will strengthen our unity as a congregation. If we are humble, even though we are all so different from each other, we can live in unity in Christ Jesus.

But if we get proud, whether as individuals or as a parish, then we will have huge problems. You know the old and very true saying----"Pride goes before a fall." St. John Cassian, about 1600 years ago, wrote these words-----"Pride darkens the soul completely and leads to its utter downfall." (Philokalia, Vol. 1, p. 92)

The nation of Japan experienced such a fall back in the 1940s. Their December 7, 1941 attack on the American fleet at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii went well. They pulled it off as a surprise attack, they greatly damaged the fleet by sinking many ships, and they got away easily.

When it was all announced in Japan, the whole nation erupted in a spasm of pride---they had defeated mighty America! On December 8th, the people rejoiced in the streets. News reports all day long on the radio gave the details which everyone wanted to know. So all who did not have radios or whose radios didn't work, flocked to the radio stores to buy new ones or get old ones fixed. The stores were overwhelmed and everyone listened to the news that day with great happiness. But in 1945 there were few radios in Japan broadcasting the news of how Japan was now rapidly losing the war----because most of the buildings containing radios had been flattened by American bombers. Pride had most dramatically led to a very big fall! (Eric Hutton, Japan, 1941, Knopf, 2013, p. 6)

Are you striving to be a better Christian, a more godly disciple? Wonderful! But be careful---don't be like the Japanese on December 8, 1941, because pride really does lead to a fall. And if we become proud it will become much harder for us to work together as a parish that stays united in the Lord.

So how can we avoid pride and instead be humble?---as directed by Paul in our epistle today. The Bible and the Saints teach us lots about this. Certainly no time today to go through long lists of how to be humble. So I will just make 3 quick points.....

#1---Go regularly to the sacrament of Confession. It is certainly a humbling experience, to speak our sins out loud! I know because I go, too---in fact, I'm due to go soon, sometime in the next couple of weeks or so.... Time to get humbled! So to beat down pride, to become more humble---go regularly to Confession. It is where we speak our sins out loud to God through the ears of the priest (no one else's ears, of course!). That humbles us, and God in His mercy forgives us. All Orthodox should do this during the Advent season we are now in.

#2—Learn to accept criticism. Maybe this is harder than Confession..... But it is good for us, because it humbles us. Every Vespers service we sing Psalm 141 where it states that criticism “is an excellent oil which shall not break our head.” Criticism helps us, it doesn't break us. It helps us because as we learn to accept it gracefully without resentment, it teaches us to be humble. So to get humble--- accept criticism without getting angry.

#3---We should realize and accept that we can't always get our own way. This is a general truth in life, but it's especially true in churches. Lots of people, lots of ideas on how to do things.....And we don't always agree on everything. Sometimes we have to give in even though we “know we are right.” If my idea doesn't get accepted, I need to swallow my pride and keep working peacefully together with every one else for the common good. That increases our humility. I've seen this work out many times in our parish's history---especially a few years back after our church went up in flames. Just think of all the decisions that had to be made over the next couple of years-----absolutely gigantic decisions and literally hundreds of smaller

ones. Sometimes that's all we did-----decide, decide, decide! We didn't always all agree—how could we? But people went along with the decisions made and we worked together. Even now, sometimes someone will say to me, "Father, you might remember I definitely disagreed with the decision to--- (you can fill in the blank here with whatever decision you remember from those years)--- but, you know, it's all worked out and I'm content!" When we react like that to disagreement on a decision, we have become more humble----and St. Matthew's has become stronger.

So 3 ways to become more humble---regular Confession, accept criticism, realize we can't always get our way. Live by them and your humility will grow.

Some people may think becoming lowly and humble is a strange goal in life. But for Christians it is a great goal. For humility increases spiritual power. There is a very old story from about 1800 years ago about a Desert Father who was involved in very intense spiritual warfare. The demons frequently came against him to tear him away from God. One day, he ended up in a conversation with a demon—"Demon, I plan to defeat you. I fast very strictly, I pray all the time, I sleep very little so as to have more time to pray, I live in total poverty-----you will be defeated by me." The demon ---"None of those things you mentioned frighten me----fasting, poverty, prayer----those won't defeat me." The monk was surprised and asked what would defeat the demon? The demon said, "Humility. If you ever get really humble, I have no chance against you!" (Benedicta Ward, The Desert Christian, Macmillan Press, 1980, p. 84)

So if you wish to be spiritually powerful in Christ, get more humble. Go to Confession, learn to accept criticism, realize you can't always get your way. And ask God's mercy and help. And as your humility, and that of your fellow parishioners, grows, our church family will be more strongly united in our Lord Jesus Christ.