

HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

OCTOBER 1, 2023

II CORINTHIANS 6:16-7:1


"BE SEPARATE...AND YOU SHALL BE MY SONS AND DAUGHTERS"

In World War II, the Nazis conquered Norway, but for various strategic and economic reasons, did not attack Sweden. So Sweden was a neutral country in the war. Those in the Norwegian resistance to German rule snuck messages across the border into Sweden for the Allies to read---messages about Nazi troop movements, plans, etc. These couriers were brave folks who knew that if the German border patrols caught them, their lives would most likely end quickly. After the war, one of these secret couriers was asked what was in those messages. He said he didn't know and never had any idea. They were in sealed envelopes. His job was to get over the border and deliver it to Allied agents in Sweden. His job was not to know what was in the message and certainly not to in any way change it. He said, "Our task was just to hand on what had been handed to us." (Father Anthony Coniaris, Preaching the Word of God, Light & Life Publishing, p. 10)

That is similar to our role as Orthodox Christians---to hand on the Faith that has been handed down to us.....although we do get to know what the message of the Faith is! It's definitely not in a sealed envelope! Our Lord Jesus Christ gave the truth to the Apostles. Then they handed down to the early bishops....then it was handed on to the Church Fathers and the Saints. And on and on down to us through 2000 years. Handed down to us, but not changed or rewritten.

Sometimes folks think, that because we keep believing and handing on this ancient Faith, that we are too old-fashioned, rigid, out of touch, and irrelevant. And they think that we will shrink and fade away in our modern world. But recently, just the opposite has been happening in many parts of the Orthodox Church. Growing at a great pace, not fading away.

Every so often, I like to fill you in on what's going on in the Orthodox world, so today a bit of an update on our Church in our country. At this summer's archdiocese convention, our new Metropolitan Saba reported that a recent study shows that our archdiocese is currently the

fastest growing Christian body in the nation. We had a meeting of our Ohio Deanery about a week ago—for the Antiochian priests in Ohio. At these meetings we all give a report on our churches. And the strong majority of our parishes are experiencing very good growth right now, especially from catechumens---people from the outside becoming Orthodox. Much of Bishop ANTHONY's talk to us was about how to deal with so much growth! It was obvious that a problem being faced by our deanery at this time is a need for bigger church buildings. And this growth in America is not limited to Antiochian parishes. My wife and I were on a vacation a couple of weeks ago to see her family in Wisconsin. We were happy to find  a new Orthodox parish had begun in the town of Portage, not far from Bonnie's home town. It's a Russian parish in the jurisdiction called ROCOR, the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia. The new parish is booming----all kinds of people from different backgrounds, scads of little children, and many catechumens, mostly young adults. And from talking to priests from various parishes in our country, this kind of growth is happening in many, many churches.

Why? Many are thinking along these lines, and Bishop ANTHONY spoke about this at our deanery meeting, too.—As our society sinks deeper and deeper into darkness, many people are looking for light. The chaos that is happening in so many ways causes many to look for something with stability, something strongly traditional and full of ancient truths. When it gets darker, people seek light. And light becomes more noticeable the darker it gets.

If you step into the church in the daytime, you hardly notice that there are candles burning in the front. There they are burning away, but you may not even notice at all. But if you step into the back of the church at night when there are no lights on anywhere near, the light from the candles burning will seem very strong and beautiful! The darkness in our world has been getting deeper lately. Some of the most obvious ways are “wokeness” and all the transgender commotion, immorality in many ways, abortion, growing crime, much chaos in general. As that darkness increases, many Christians retreat from their beliefs, make compromises, etc. Because we don't, as the darkness increases, our light shines more brightly and is more noticed. And people that want light, not darkness, come to Orthodoxy. People wanting stability and tradition, not constant changing of belief. People wanting truth, not falsehood. And people wanting a loving and close fellowship in Christ.

All this means that we need to be different than the world around us. We need to: not blend in, to not go along with immorality and false beliefs because they are popular, to resist pressure to be just like everyone else, to make being disciples of Jesus and part of His people our #1 identity, to be close with each other. It means to firmly believe that the Apostles and the Church Fathers were given the true beliefs by God and that they did hand them down to us. And, very important, it means to live life together, not in isolation---but together as brothers and sisters in God's family.

Now (finally) moving on to our assigned epistle reason, all of this involves being different, being separate in how we live from the world around us. Our epistle reading today is from St. Paul's second letter to the Corinthians in one of the early churches in Greece, from chapters 6 & 7. Please listen closely as I read a bit from chapter 6---verses 16-18. “For you are the

temple of the living God. As God has said, 'I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be my people.' Therefore, 'Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you shall be my sons and daughters', says the Lord Almighty."

In these verses, God says to us, "Come out from among them." And He says to us, "Be separate"---be different than others. He says, "Touch nothing unclean." Don't go along with a society that now often says that the bad things are good, and that what we always thought was good is actually bad.

If we do "come out" and "be separate" as St. Paul writes, then God promises a big reward-----God says in verse 16—"I will be their God, and they shall be my people." How wonderful---to be God's people! And in verse 17, God says---"And I will receive you." Again, how wonderful---to be received by God! And in verse 18—"I will be a father to you and you shall be my sons and daughters". What could be better than to be sons and daughters of the Lord Almighty! And that means also being truly brothers and sisters in the Lord together.

If Orthodoxy continues to grow as it now is, as so many people come to our churches, will opposition develop? Possibly it will---it sure did in the beginning centuries of our Church back in the Roman Empire. And that led to many new Saints as people suffered and died for Christ---you know the names of many of them: people like St. Thekla, St. George, St. Demetrius..... Who knows if it will happen again? Of course, there would be a bright side---many new Saints!

To close-----Christ's Church has often been compared to a ship, sailing through this world to the kingdom of heaven. Even the room of the church where the laypeople are during liturgy is called the "nave"----you can guess what that word is about. It refers to the church being a ship on a trip to the new world.

I want to use a more specific naval term. Think of the church as not just any ship, but as a life boat in a storm. There is a bad storm going on today in many ways. And our Orthodox Church is God's life boat to rescue those struggling in the waves.

Right now, it seems many, especially young adults, are looking for a life boat to rescue them. And many right now happen to be finding us in many parishes around the country. That means God is calling us, who are already in the life boat, to give them a hand and pull them up on board. And then, by God's grace, we can sail on to heaven together.

So if you know of someone who is hurting, confused, lonely, looking for truth, looking for a home..... Invite them here some Sunday morning. Invite them to come and check out the life boat. And it will be our blessing and great joy to help them climb on board for the trip.