

HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

APRIL 10, 2022

ST. MARY OF EGYPT SUNDAY

“PEOPLE CAN CHANGE”

People can change. Some people doubt that. You’ve heard the old saying, “A leopard cannot change his spots.” Perhaps that is true for leopards, but certainly not for human beings. As a priest (and I’m sure all priests would agree) I have seen people change dramatically for the better! People can change---because God can change us.

Today is the last Sunday of Lent and this day each year is set aside by Orthodoxy to commemorate St. Mary of Egypt. She changed from one of the most wicked of people to one of the holiest of people.

She is a special Saint to our parish because in 2016, the year before our church fire, Bishop ANTHONY kindly brought us a relic of her to our church. And the relic survived the fire. The icon right next to the relic burned up. The reliquary (a fancy little metal display case for a relic) was ruined. But the relic itself was not harmed. It’s usually over on the little table near the iconostas but today we have it right here in front to make it more accessible for veneration. In the Matins hymns earlier this morning, it was mentioned that her “worn bones” were buried in the desert. How nice that a little piece of her “worn bones” is right here with us in our church!

St. Mary of Egypt lived in the 500’s A.D. in Alexandria, Egypt. She had been baptized a Christian but fell far away from God. She was extremely beautiful, notoriously beautiful. And she used her beauty for extreme wickedness and immorality. She became a prostitute, but an unusual one---- often she didn’t even bother to get paid for her services. She had sunk so low that all she wanted in life was to be with as many men as possible, whether they paid her or not. And she also enjoyed blasphemy, mocking holy things. She had fallen very low indeed.

One day she was bored and decided to try something new. She would go along on a ship heading for Palestine carrying pilgrims to the holy city of Jerusalem. She didn’t get on board as a genuine pilgrim, of course, but as an evil experiment: to see how many of the male pilgrims she could seduce on the pilgrimage. She was successful with some of them.

But after being in Jerusalem for some time she decided to attend a service at a church containing the actual cross of Christ on the day of the Elevation of the Cross holy day. While she was there, the Holy Theotokos spoke to her and called her to change and turn to God. And she decided to do so. God touched her heart and she repented. The Theotokos told her to cross over to the east side of the Jordan River and go live alone in the wilderness-----and that in the desert she would find peace and joy.

Mary obeyed. She received the Holy Eucharist and went to the desert with a few little loaves of bread. The bread didn't last too long and she lived the rest of her life on whatever edible plants and herbs she could find. She lived there for 47 years until her death---in complete poverty and total isolation (only two contacts with human beings in all those years). It was very hard for her to change. Her sin of lust was not defeated easily. She went through great agony and intense prayer, but God helped her to find victory. And she went through years of intense holiness and close communion with the Lord. She indeed did find peace and joy in the desert.

She was transformed by God from one of the worst of sinners to one of the most God-filled persons ever. Yes, people can change. And people do change. By God's grace, Mary of Egypt was changed from a wicked sinner to a pure and godly Saint.

Two lessons for us to draw from this story:

Lesson #1---Don't ever assume a sinful person won't change. They can. Don't judge a sinful person. Instead, pray for them. That will be better for you as well as for them!

There is an ancient story about a monk whose name is unknown. He was the poorest monk in a monastery. Not that he was particularly wicked, but he was quite negligent and careless. He was known to sometimes shirk his duties, to not be careful about spiritual disciplines, to show up late for worship services. The other monks didn't hate him, but certainly did not admire him.

Then he became ill and was on his death bed. The monks gathered around to pray for him and were surprised by how joyful he was as death approached. They said to him, "Why are you rejoicing? As negligent a monk as you have been, we would think you would be dying in great fear and anguish?" And He replied---"An angel just appeared to me. He held in his hands a big piece of paper with all of my many sins written on it. I said to the angel---'The Lord said, 'Judge not so that you will not be judged. I know I have been negligent, but in my whole life I have never judged another person.' The angel said to

me, 'Because you have never judged, indeed you will not be judged.' And he tore the list of my sins into pieces." So now I die with joy and peace." ("Judge Not", Father Stephen Rogers, The Word, March, 2000 p. 10)

Most people judged Mary as definitely "hell-bound". They were so wrong. Lesson one---don't judge others!

Lesson #2—If people can change, that means you and I can change. Do you have in your life a sin that you just can't get past? It could be a dramatic sin obvious to others. Or maybe a more secret sin that only you and God know about. And it just seems to you that to change is impossible for you.

The message of the story of St. Mary of Egypt for us is that God can change us!

Changing, getting rid of that seemingly unbeatable sin, will be hard. It was very hard for St. Mary! It will take lots of prayer, fasting, going to Confession---and especially lots of determination. But God can do it. The details will be different for each person but God can do it for you.

The main point I wish to make about this today is that if you allow God to work in you and cooperate with His grace, change can take place.

But like St. Mary that day in Jerusalem, you *have* to make a firm decision to change. Not just a wishy-washy resolution or a desire to do better---but a determination to change no matter the cost.

And you have the freedom, the free will, to truly make that decision. St. Gregory Palamas, a Church Father from the 1300's A.D. wrote these words: "Free will is always part of this present life. And it lies within the power of free will to choose either the road of life or the road of death." (Philokalia, Volume 4, p. 299) It is up to you! A firm decision is the key.

A Wisconsin farm family was relaxing around their fireplace one cold winter evening when they heard a scratching at the door. They opened it up and an old large cat sauntered in just like it owned the place. It jumped up on the sofa and went right to sleep. They were amused at how the cat just "moved in" like it belonged there. They talked about how it resembled their long lost pet cat, Clem, who had run away 8 years ago. Then they looked at the sleeping cat more closely and realized it actually *was* Clem, just 8 years older! After 8 years of wandering, Clem had one day just decided---time to go home! (in "Our Daily Bread", 9/14/01)

Clem the cat made a firm decision and then acted on it. You can be like Clem. Decide and act. St. Mary made her decision and became a Saint. You can also with total determination make a decision and, by God's grace, leave that sin that oppresses you behind.

It's time. Those sins you have..... Like St. Mary, decide. It is time to repent, time to let God change you and purify you.

So decide like she decided. With your whole heart and your whole mind, trusting in God to accomplish great things for you: to make you a more faithful Christian, a holier follower of the Lord. God changed St. Mary and He can change you, too.