

HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

AUGUST 21, 2022

“THE BEATITUDES, PART 7: BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS--MATTHEW 5:9”

Right about 200 years ago, in the European city of Danzig, a boy was walking home from violin lessons. Danzig had a problem with packs of wild dogs roaming around---and one of them came after the young fellow. They cornered him, barking and growling and nipping at him. He waved his violin at them to chase them away, but it didn't work. Then he had an idea. He quickly grabbed his bow and began to play a concerto he was learning. As he played, the dogs gradually calmed down---and in a few minutes they totally quit bothering him.

That boy was Arthur Schopenhauer who would become one of the most influential philosophers of the 1800s. And what happened with the dogs that day apparently left a big impression on him. He wrote about how important music was and later in life, we see that he hadn't forgotten about the dog episode because he wrote---“How wonderful music is----it could bring peace to the world.” (Schopenhauer and The Wild Years of Philosophy, Rudiger Safranski, Harvard University Press, 1990, p. 17)

However, it seems his idea of music bringing peace works better on dogs than on people. There has been lots of music in the last 200 years. I don't hear about problems with wild dogs, but music sure hasn't stopped all of our wars!

Not much peace in our world, because peace is hard to accomplish. That's true both on the world level and in our own dealings with other people.

This summer I am taking a period of Sundays to preach a series of sermons on the Beatitudes as taught to us by our Lord Jesus Christ in the 5th chapter of the gospel of St. Matthew. Today we are up to Beatitude #7---in it the Lord tells us in Matthew 5: 9---“Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the sons of God.” It is a very big thing to make peace! And so there is a big reward for doing so. Hear again the 7th Beatitude----“Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the sons of God.”

Jesus Christ is the greatest peacemaker. St. Paul writes about Him in

Ephesians 2:14---“He is our peace.” And if we share in Christ’s work of making peace, we also get to share in His title and we will be called sons of God.

St. John Chrysostom, our Church Father from around 400 A.D. and the author of the prayers we are praying in our liturgy this morning, wrote hundreds of sermons that we still have today. In his sermon on this 7th Beatitude, he says that peacemaking can be broken down into two categories.

The first category is making peace between myself and someone else that I am not at peace with. Christians, as people of God, are supposed to be at peace with all. St. Paul tells us this clearly in Hebrews 12:14---“Strive for peace with all men.”

But what if we are on “the outs” with someone? Perhaps there is someone with whom there is tension, someone we avoid contact with, someone we are “not talking with”, someone we are angry with (or they are angry with us). Do you wish to get the blessing of this 7th Beatitude? Then you will have to try to make peace with that person that you are not at peace with. How? St. Chrysostom says to start by forgiving that other person.

But forgiving can be very hard. How should we go about it? Let me share with you three brief pieces of advice about forgiving from two Saints.

First, St. Maximus the Confessor from about 1400 years ago---a brave man who suffered horribly to defend true belief. St. Maximus said that there was something we should do with the person we are not at peace with-----“Pray for him sincerely to God.” (St. Maximus, Selected Writings, Paulist Press, 1985, p. 77) Pray specifically (and a lot!) for the person you are not at peace with.

The second piece of advice comes from a Saint earlier than St. Maximus. St. Barsanuphius, in the 500’s A.D., lived live as a very isolated monk in the Gaza area of Palestine. You could call him the Orthodox Ann Landers, because he gave advice to people who wrote him letters. His holiness and wisdom were so great that people wrote him for help and guidance. And many of those letters and responses are in a great book (I’m sure it’s in our church library).

One man wrote him because of a feud he was in with another fellow---he wanted to know how he could show forgiveness and perhaps bring peace. St. Barsanuphius wrote him a very short reply----a four word epistle. All it says is “Be good to him.” Show goodness to “that person”. It will help him and it will help you become more forgiving. (Letters From the Desert, Saints Barsanuphius and John, St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 2003, p. 178)

For the third piece of advice, we will jump back to St. Maximus. He says

peacemaker----making peace between myself and some one else. I will close by looking (more briefly) at the second category he writes about---making peace between 2 other people who are in a dispute. Not easy! Probably usually harder than category #1.

Do you know 2 people who can't get along with each other, who are involved in some kind of feud or grudge? Well, if you wish to follow the seventh Beatitude, you have to give it a try!

First, of course, and ongoing----pray hard! And then try to mediate.

Try to convince each person that the other person is not all that bad. Emphasize some good things about them. And remind them of what Jesus said-----we have to forgive others in order to receive for ourselves forgiveness from God.

You may not succeed. After all, they have free will and you can't make decisions for them. But give it a try, praying all the while.....

And I think that even if you fail God will bless you for trying. I like to think that there could be a "Beatitude #7 and a half"----"Blessed are those who *try* to be peacemakers...."

So try to make peace with others. God will bless you for trying.....and it just might help!

Do you wish to be called a son of God? Then Christ says we should be peacemakers. Strive to make peace with the person you are not at peace with. And strive to bring other people to peace and harmony with each other.

If you do become a peacemaker, there will be two good results: More peace in our world! And you will be called a son of God.

that a way to bring peace and forgiveness to some kind of dispute is this—
“Think of *yourself* as the cause of the problem.” Taking the blame on
yourself can be the key to forgiveness and peace. (St. Maximus, Selected
Writings, p. 73)

So to work on bringing forgiveness and peace with others, remember these
3 Saintly recommendations-----1. Pray for the other person; 2. Do good to the
other person; 3. Take the blame. Do those things and perhaps peace will
break out!

But what if the other person just won't budge, just stays upset with you?
Then just keep on forgiving and keep on trying. Maybe someday they will
see the light and also want peace. And peace and unity being restored is such
a sweet thing!

We know from the book of Acts that the first of the 12 Disciples to die for
Christ was St. James (not the brother of the Lord, but the brother of St. John,
the disciple). In the early years of the Church, he was arrested and killed in
Jerusalem. There is an old story (written down by Clement of Alexandria) that
says this was a set-up job. There was a man who greatly hated St. James and
refused to be at peace with him, although the Apostle had no anger towards
him. The man told the authorities who St. James was so that he would be
arrested. At his trial the man came and mocked St. James-----James was
quickly convicted of being a follower of Christ and was sentenced to die.

As he was led away to the place of execution, this enemy walked alongside
and mocked James. But as the long walk continued, he quieted down. He had
been watching the Apostle's behavior at the trial and during the walk to death--
and he came to realize that the Apostle was good and holy and that he was
wrong to hate him. And he came to believe that whatever a good man like St.
James believed must be true----and during that walk he came to faith in Christ.

At the execution site, he walked up to St. James and apologized for his evil
behavior. He then turned to the Roman officials and told them that he was
now also a Christian----and they quickly decided he would be decapitated
along with St. James. St. James told the man that he, of course, forgave him.
They kissed each other and then were killed together. And now they live
forever with God in unity and joy together ! (Persecution In The Early
Church, Herbert Workman, Abingdon Press, p. 19)

How sweet when peaceful reconciliation occurs! If there is someone you
are not at peace with....keep trying to make peace.

So we have looked at St. John Chrysostom's first category of being a