

## SERMON AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

JANUARY 24, 2024

MATTHEW 4: 12-17

### “THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN BREAKING THROUGH”

This last week we have been celebrating the Great Feast of Theophany (Epiphany)...celebrating the Baptism of Christ in the Jordan River. Today is the last day of that celebration. And today's gospel reading moves on to what happened after Christ was baptized at age 30 and began His three years of public ministry. He traveled throughout the land preaching. Can you imagine what it would have been like to be there to hear His sermons?

What did Jesus Christ preach about? Many things, as we see in His sermons in the four gospels. St. Matthew tells us in today's assigned gospel lesson the *main* theme of His preaching—he records it in Matthew 4: 17-----“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” The Lord calls on the people then, and us now, to repent. Why? The kingdom of heaven is “at hand”. “At hand” means the kingdom is right here with us, it has arrived! Heaven had come down because the King of heaven, Jesus Christ the eternal Son of God, had come down to earth to be with us. The King had come and so His kingdom had come, too---it was “at hand”.

Of course, the Lord ascended back to heaven 40 days after His resurrection. So is the kingdom now gone? No, because although He ascended, the King is still with us. As He told the disciples just before He ascended right at the end of the gospel of Matthew-----“I will be with you always, even to the end of the age.” The King is still with us.....and so His kingdom is also still with us.

And sometimes---His kingdom especially breaks through into our midst. Sometimes heaven on earth even now is an especially real and powerful thing. The number one way this takes place is in the Holy Eucharist----Holy Communion----in the Divine Liturgy. Sometimes we forget about this reality that the kingdom of heaven is at hand, it is with us----and then at the liturgy bread and wine are changed by the Holy Spirit into the Body and Blood of the King---our Lord Jesus----and the kingdom of heaven breaks through to us big time!

As we commune of the Lord's Body and Blood, heaven comes down to us. The King of heaven reveals Himself to us in His Body and Blood. For what we eat and drink here is not bread and wine anymore----God changes it into the Body and Blood of the King of heaven.

Most of our Protestant friends and relatives think there is no specific miracle with Holy Communion. They believe the bread and wine remain bread and wine and that they are given to us to remind us of our Lord's death on the cross. But the Bible teaches us that there is so much more than that going on. It's not just a reminder, it's a life-giving miracle.

In the Bible----Jesus said as He gave the disciples the first Eucharistic meal on Holy Thursday evening, the night before He poured out His life on the cross----“This is my body.....this is my blood.” And in John 6:55, the Lord said, “For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed.” Jesus said it.....so we believe it. And so the Church has always taught, from its very beginning, going all the way back to the earliest Saints and Fathers.

In the Eucharist, heaven breaks through. And if we eat and drink in faith and repentance, good things happen! Let’s look at a few of them.....

**#1** We receive forgiveness of our sins. On Holy Thursday night, Christ said—“Take, eat; this is my Body which is broken for you for the remission of sins.’ Receive in faith and repentance and your sins will be forgiven.

A father and his son had a bad falling out. The son said he was leaving for good and got on a train and was gone..... Starting right away, the father would go down every day to the train station at the scheduled time for the train to come to his town-----hoping his son would be on the train, coming home to him. Every day.....for years and years and years. Finally, when he was quite elderly, his son stepped off the train and they were joyfully reunited. A friend asked the old man---“How much longer would you have kept going to the station?” He answered—“Until the day I died....I never would have given up on him.” God’s love for us is like that. We may have wandered off through our sins but He is still eagerly awaiting our return. He won’t give up on us. In every Eucharist, God is waiting eagerly for us to come back to Him for forgiveness.

**#2** This is a big one! Long-lasting, forever! In the Holy Eucharist, we receive eternal life. In the pre-Communion prayer that we sing once and recite once just before receiving, it says that receiving the sacrament is “unto life everlasting”. Would you like to live forever? Then, in repentance and faith, receive the sacrament and you will! As Jesus Christ said in John 6:51—“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whosoever eats of this bread will live forever.” Our ancient Church Fathers had a favorite way of describing the Eucharist----they called it “the medicine of immortality”. Believe, repent, eat and drink----and live forever!

**#3** Holy Communion strengthens our unity as brothers and sisters in Christ. As we eat and drink together, our unity grows. St. Paul wrote about this in I Corinthians 10:17---“Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.” One bread, one body, one spiritual family---united by Christ in the Holy Eucharist.

This is very important because it is easy for people, even in churches, to let little disagreements turn into big disputes. One reason there are so many congregations of all kinds all over the place is because of little disputes becoming big disputes!

Once at Thanksgiving two elderly widowed sisters were having all the relatives over to the house for the big meal. Before anyone came they were getting everything ready. They had a

special stuffing recipe which they carefully prepared. And once the turkey was stuffed and ready to cook it was time to cover it with aluminum and put it into the oven. And then the disagreement began-----one sister said the shiny side of the foil should be next to the turkey and the other sister said the shiny side of the foil should be on the outside. That little disagreement evolved into a quite heated argument! Feelings were hurt, harsh words were spoken. Finally, one sister gave in and the turkey was stuck in the oven---after all, they had to get it roasting so it could be done when all the relatives showed up. As the guests arrived they could sense something was wrong-----there was an obvious coldness between the two sisters. They weren't yelling but they were still angry all day. A rather gloomy holiday for the whole family.....

In churches, like everywhere else, some disagreeing is inevitable. Sometimes it's about at the level of bickering about aluminum foil. Sometimes it's bigger disagreements---about how to manage the parish, what ministries to focus on, etc. So if in the midst of not all thinking exactly alike, disagreements arise, it's important that we remember that when we partake of the Eucharist together, it strengthens our unity with each other in Christ---and enables to rise above disagreements.

Something I've mentioned before-----a good thing to do if you and another parishioner have had some tension between you due to some kind of disagreement. Walk up to that person and say, "Brother, can we walk up together when it's time for Communion today and receive together to draw us closer to one another?" Things like that, remembering the unifying power of Christ's Body and Blood, can protect and strengthen our unity as people of the Lord.

**#4---** Sanctification. This is a fancy word for getting holier. In the Fraction Prayer later in the liturgy the prayer says that the Eucharist "sanctifies those who partake thereof." Receive in faith and repentance----and you will become holier and godlier. Christ will sanctify you----not all at once but gradually. Gradual and real sanctification takes place in our lives when we, over and over again, receive the Eucharist in repentance and faith.

Well, it's time for this sermon to end. Time to quit talking and start praying and singing to God together.....Time to offer the bread and wine to God so that the miracle can happen before us. Time for those 4 wonderful results I talked about to happen again. It's all part of heaven breaking through in our midst in the Holy Eucharist as the king of heaven again reveals Himself to us.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus Christ said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The king of heaven, Christ, brought heaven to earth when He came. And He is still with us. And His kingdom breaks through to us in a very special way at every liturgy when we partake of His Body and Blood.

So we will now proceed to offer the holy oblation of bread and wine to the Father and then

the Holy Spirit will come down upon our oblation and transform it into the life-giving Body and Blood of the Son. Let us rejoice with great joy as heaven breaks through to us this morning one more time---right now, in this room, and in our hearts. Let us give thanks unto the Lord!