

SERMON AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH-----SEPTEMBER 10, 2023

GALATIANS 6: 11-18

“GLORYING IN THE CROSS OF CHRIST”

Harold Stassen was called the “Boy Wonder” of politics back in the 1940s. While still very young, he won the election, as a Republican, to be governor of Minnesota. He did a great job as governor and the whole country noticed. It went to his head----and he decided when still quite young to try to get the Republican nomination to run for president. He didn’t get very high in the delegates count, but it still made a bit of a splash with the public. So he decided to run again four years later---he did poorly. But he ran again, and again, and again..... Every four years up until in the 1970’s. It became a joke to the country because he was so proud he wouldn’t quit! The boy wonder had become a laughing stock. But his pride made him think he would some day still succeed. In one of his later campaigns there was a joke about him going around-----it went like this: This campaign, there is actually one well-known politician who does think Stassen will get the Republican nomination. Who is that well-known politician? Harold Stassen! (The Best Years, Joseph Golden, Atheneum, 1976, p. 375)

Because of his pride Stassen turned himself into a fool by running for president for almost 30 years. Pride causes problems!

Pride can cause problems in churches, too, not just in the political world. Our epistle reading today is from St. Paul’s letter to the Galatians. There were several parishes in an area called Galatia (in central Turkey in modern times). In those parishes, there was a group St. Paul calls the “circumcision party” or the “circumcisers”. The circumcisers insisted that new male converts to Christianity not only had to be baptized---they had to get circumcised, too!

The law given to Moses in the Old Testament said that all Hebrew boys should be circumcised when 8 days old. And that if a man wished to join the Hebrew people and religion, he had to get circumcised, too. The Circumcisers in the early years of Christianity said that rule should still apply when a man wished to join the Christian Church.

St. Paul and the other Apostles disagreed. They said circumcision had been a temporary practice before the coming to the world of Jesus Christ. In the book of Colossians 2:11-14, St. Paul clearly taught that Christian baptism had now replaced circumcision. Not that there was anything wrong with circumcision---it was okay to still do it but it no longer had any religious meaning.

The circumcision party went up against this teaching of the Apostles and insisted the law of circumcision was still in effect. Imagine what our churches would be like today if their

teaching, not the Apostles' teaching, had won out. Imagine a man visits our church and decides he wished to become an Orthodox Christian. The priest would say, "It will be great to have you with us. Now there is one thing I should schedule with you---will next Tuesday evening be alright for your circumcision?" And remember---there were no pain-killers 2000 years ago!

Sometimes we talk about how we've grown as a parish and that maybe some day we will run out of room. Well, we can easily avoid that ever being a problem if we just start having that circumcision requirement---that will slow things down some!

So this was the dispute going on in the parishes in Galatia---and so Paul addressed the problem in today's epistle reading from Galatians 6.

And we see in that passage that the underlying problem was the great pride of the circumcisers. They apparently had been able to persuade some adult men to get circumcised. And they saw that as a great accomplishment! They became proud of how influential over others they were---no little thing to have that kind of pull! St. Paul saw right through them, and knew pride was the driving force for them. As he wrote in verse 13---"they desire to have you circumcised so that they may glory in your flesh." They got glory within themselves by successfully persuading men to get circumcised!

Paul stands up to these folks. Not out of some pride of his own. He, unlike them, does not glory in power over others or being in charge. He tells us in verse 14 what he glories in---"Far be it from me to glory except in the cross of Jesus Christ." His only glory, the only thing in which he takes pride, is Jesus' cross!

Obviously, we should be like him. Not glorying in ourselves, but in Christ and His cross.

In 1134, the Eastern Roman Emperor John Comnenus led the Byzantine armies to a very important victory over the invading Moslem forces. Before the battle began he spent much time kneeling before an icon of Christ, praying that God would grant the Christian forces victory and thus preserve the Christians' freedom from Islam. He prayed hard---and God answered his prayers and the victory was won.

The tradition then was to have a victory parade in the capital after such events. So a few days later the parade took place. The central focus of such parades was a beautiful chariot in which the victorious emperor would ride as the crowds cheered. But it was different that day. Emperor John was not interested in glory for himself, only in glory for Christ. So he didn't ride in the chariot that day. Instead, that icon of Jesus was put in the chariot and he walked humbly alongside like a servant would. He only wanted glory for Christ, not for himself.

Have you been blessed by God to do some good works for Him and for others? Wonderful---but don't brag or show off, don't pat yourself on the back, don't glory in your accomplishments. Instead, be like Emperor John. Give God the glory! The circumcisers, on the other hand, gloried in themselves. Don't be like them!

But it is so easy to become like them when we do accomplish something. It is so easy to become prideful about something good we have done.

THREE DANGER SIGNS that we are falling into the sin of the circumcisers—glorying in ourselves.....

One---If we easily notice others' sins and faults, but not our own.

Two—if we really enjoy it when people notice the good we have done.

Three—if what really motivates us to do good is so that we get recognized and praised by other people.

If we see these danger signs in ourselves then we need to repent of glorying in ourselves, not in Christ. Then we need to become more like Paul and less like the circumcisers.

So don't be like those old circumcisers. Don't glory in yourself, but only in Christ and His cross. Don't look for praise and thanks from others. Care only about what God thinks about you.

Do good and live in a holy way---but only to please God, not to glory in yourself.

May St. Paul's words in Galatians 6:14 become our own words-----“Far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.”