

## HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

SEPTEMBER 12, 2021

GALATIANS 6: 11-18

### “GLORY ONLY IN THE CROSS”

Pablo Picasso was the best known artist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And he was an egomaniac---very proud and very boastful about his artistic genius. He loved to have guests come to his home and he would talk to them...and talk to them...and talk to them. They could seldom get a word in edgewise as he went on and on about his successes, his upcoming projects, etc.

He had a pair of turtledoves for pets. They would sometimes get very loud with a sort of screeching laugh. And it seemed that quite often when Picasso was just getting to the main point of some bragging about himself the two birds would break out in their raucous laughter, preventing Picasso's guests from hearing his boasting.

The artist would get very upset about this except that sometimes he would say---“That's good the birds do that....it's their way of reminding me not to be so proud!” Those birds took him down a notch....and if you know much about Picasso, you know that was not a bad thing! (Life With Picasso, Francois Gilot & Carlton Lake, Signet, 1965, pp. 139-140)

Smart birds! It seems they knew what was good for their owner. Something like those turtle doves might be good for most of us, too! Something to take our pride down a notch----because most of us struggle with the sin of pride. It's the worst sin of all and it causes so many problems.

St. Paul, in today's epistle lesson from Galatians 6, has to deal with a pride problem in the new little parishes of Galatia. Galatia was an area in what is now Turkey. St. Paul had been there and started parishes and now, in this epistle, he is writing back to them. And he needs to speak with them about a problem some of the parishioners are having---a problem with pride.

In Galatia, in the new congregations there, there was a group of people we call “the circumcision party”. That may be a phrase you have never heard before----“circumcision party”. And you might be thinking to yourself----“Well, I have been to baptism parties. I have been to wedding parties. But I've sure never attended a circumcision party.” And you're probably glad you never got an invitation to such a celebration!

But, no, “circumcision party” doesn’t refer to a rather unusual celebration! The word “party” here means a group of people---similar to how we use it in such phrases as Democratic party or Republican party.

The circumcision party in Galatia were some Christians who believed that the Old Testament law on circumcision of males should still be in effect. So if you were a man and converted to Christ from Gentile paganism----guess what? Sure, you would get baptized. But this group said that wasn’t enough--you had to get circumcised! Oh, my---and no pain killers 2000 years ago!

This was not the teaching of our early Orthodox Church, but just of this group of people called the circumcision party. The Church taught, through the Apostles (check out Acts 15) that circumcision as a religious practice, was only for the Old Testament. The coming of Christ had done away with it—it had been replaced by Holy Baptism. Since that time, if Christians wish to circumcise their babies it is only a medical or cultural decision. It has no spiritual value or meaning.

But these circumcision folks were very stubborn and proud of how stubborn they were! They didn’t care what Paul and the other Apostles taught----they were going to push for circumcision for adult male converts anyway! (You wonder if they could really have had many takers, but who knows?)

A big motive for the circumcision party must have been pride. Think about it---if you can convince a man to get circumcised, you have lots of influence. Try it sometime, you’ll see it’s not easy to talk someone into that! So if you succeed at that, you’ve got some pull! And so those pro-circumcision fellows fed their pride by convincing men to go under the knife. They gloried in it, according to Paul in verse 13-----“They desire to have you circumcised so that they may glory in your flesh.” They got glory by seeing others circumcised. They were proud that they had so much influence!

But St. Paul says there is something far better to glory in than circumcision. As he wrote in verse 14----“But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul glories only in Christ’s cross.

He was a great apostle, but he was humble. He wasn’t proud and self-righteous. He willingly admitted his own sins and weaknesses. Every Sunday, we both speak and sing what we often call “The Pre-Communion Prayer” before we receive the Holy Sacrament. You know the prayer well, the one that starts “I believe, O Lord, and I confess.....” As we pray that we are, in part, quoting what St. Paul wrote about himself in a different epistle, in

I Timothy 1:15. In the prayer, we say that we are the “chief of sinners”. Those words come from St. Paul’s words in that verse in I Timothy----“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.”

St. Paul was not like the circumcision party-----proud and glorying in themselves and in their own power. Instead, as the chief of sinners, Paul gloried only in Christ and Christ’s cross.

So we should be like St. Paul, not like the circumcision party. Don’t be like the circumcision pushers and focus on other people’s failings, sins, and what they lack. Instead, we should be like Paul, focusing on our own sins and weaknesses, saying like he did that we are the chief sinners.

One last point---those circumcision fellows thought they were brilliant, more intelligent than even the apostles. They thought they understood better the relation between the Old Testament and the new Christian Church. The apostles had goofed, these men thought, about the issue of circumcision. But they thought they were the smart ones who had everything figured out.

Again, we should not be like them, thinking we know it all. Instead, we should realize that we don’t know much!

There is an old story about an abbot in a monastery who was very well educated and very intelligent----and very aware that he was! He was starting to think that he was getting close to really knowing and even understanding everything about God. One night he decided to stay up all night and go walking----and meditating about God in order to finish figuring everything out about the Lord.

As he was walking under the stars in the hills near his monastery, the abbot came across a shepherd with his sheep also out overnight in the hills. And the abbot noticed the shepherd doing something unusual. He would stare up at part of the sky for a few minutes, very intent on something, and then he would bend down and, with a stick, scratch a number in the dirt. Then he would do this again....and again....and again. The abbot watched with curiosity and finally said, “My good man, what are you doing staring at the sky and scratching numbers in the dirt?” The shepherd replied, “Father, I have assigned myself a project tonight. I am counting the stars and writing the new total down in the dirt from time to time so as to not forget the number. I plan to have this done before sunrise.” The abbot said, “But that’s impossible to accomplish! There are so many stars---how could you ever count them all or even have any understanding of how many there could be?” The shepherd answered, “Well, Father, it’s more likely that I will succeed in counting all the

stars than that you will succeed in totally understanding God!”

The abbot was struck to the heart by this answer. He walked back, with head held low, to the monastery. He went into the church there and spent the rest of the night on his knees begging God’s mercy for his pride.

(Experiences During the Divine Liturgy, Stephanos Anagnostopoulos, Gelberis Publishing, 2008, p. 46)

Don’t take glory in how great your intelligence and knowledge is, or in how good you think you are, or in how much power and influence you think you have. Don’t be like the circumcision party. Instead, be like St. Paul----and glory only in the cross of Christ our Lord.