

**HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH
SUNDAY, MAY 7, 2023**

ST. JOHN THE APOSTLE OF LOVE---MAY 8TH

Tomorrow, May 8th, is the day Orthodoxy commemorates St. John the son of Zebedee, one of the best known of Christ's 12 Disciples. He is known by several titles---"the holy Apostle", "the Evangelist" (because he wrote one of the gospels), and "the Theologian" (He is one of only 3 official theologians in the Orthodox Church---himself, St. Gregory Nazianzen of the 300's A.D, and St. Symeon the New Theologian in the middle of the Middle Ages. He is given this title because his gospel contains more "theology", more teaching words from Jesus than in the other 3 gospels. If you have a Bible that has the actual words of Christ in red, you'll see more red than in the other 3 gospels.)

And St. John also has an unofficial title---"the Apostle of Love". More on that in just a bit.....

He lived the longest of the 12 Disciples---most likely into his 90's. He is the only one who was not martyred, who was not killed for his loyalty to Christ. He went through many sufferings, beatings, imprisonments, etc. but did finally peacefully fall asleep in Christ. He wrote 5 books in the Bible---the gospel of John, I, II, & III John, and the book of Revelation.

In his earlier years, he was known as the "son of thunder". He and his brother James were the members of the 12 remembered for urging Jesus to call down fire from heaven on a town that rejected Him. The Lord rebuked them for that. Eventually John was transformed by God from the son of thunder to the apostle of love. It seems the Holy Spirit transformed his personality. And his 2 most famous verses in the 5 books of the New Testament that he wrote are both about love. In John 3:16, he wrote, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." And his other most famous verse is I John 4:16---"God is love."

Not everyone agrees with John that God is love! Oftentimes people say, "All religions are pretty much the same---no real differences." Wrong! Back in 1989 it became evident that this common saying wasn't true....You may remember the author Salmon Rushdie (he's still writing). He wrote a book called "The Satanic Verses". Rushdie was Muslim, but this book veered away from usual Islamic teaching and caused a big uproar. Many considered it downright blasphemous.

Ayatollah Khomeini, the ruler of Iran, issued a “fatwah” (an official proclamation) about what Muslims should do about this situation. He urged Muslims to hunt down Rushdie and kill him in punishment for his writings. He was asked by a reporter about what should be done if Salmon Rushdie sincerely repented and openly apologized for his book. Could mercy then be shown to him? The Ayatollah responded in these words, “Even if Salmon Rushdie repents and becomes the most pious Muslim of all time, still every Muslim must employ all he has, his life and wealth, to kill Rushdie and send him to hell.” What a response! If Rushdie repents, hunt him down to kill him anyway! (The Parables, Gary Inrig, Discovery House, 1991, p. 56)

No, the different religions are not all the same! The Ayatollah’s religion was a lot different than that of St. John who wrote, “God is love.”

Everything God does is motivated by love. Even when He punishes evil and sin, He does it out of love, to help the sinner. You who are parents can understand this truth-----When you punish your child, it is out of love, it is for the child’s own good.

God is not selfish. He did not create us so that He could have someone who would love Him. He created us so that *we* could be loved by Him. When we rebelled against Him and sinned against Him, He didn’t abandon our human race and forget about us. No, He came down in Jesus Christ to forgive and bring us back to Him.

And St. John was so holy that he was like Jesus Christ----he also wanted to bring back to the Lord those who had fallen away from God. There is an ancient story (not in the Bible) about this. It happened late in John’s life---he was still doing some missionary work but also spending long periods of time with the church in the city of Ephesus, located on what is now the western edge of Turkey. (Ephesus was a large city but it’s been gone a long time---too many earthquakes!) While ministering in Ephesus he brought to faith in Christ a young man who became very close with St. John---a disciple to the Disciple. And then the apostle left for some years for missionary work in other areas. He came back to Ephesus and was surprised the young man wasn’t at the Sunday liturgy. He asked people if they knew if he perhaps was ill. And he found out the truth—the young man had totally rejected God. He was up in the hills near Ephesus and was the head of a band of robbers. He had become a very wicked man, indeed. John was horrified and said he was going to go right away into the hills and bring him back home and back to Christ.

The church people were horrified at the idea. They told their beloved leader that it was far too dangerous to do that. The young man was so far gone that he would not even listen to the Saint and, indeed, might harm John even if he was now elderly. The apostle would not listen to them and quickly walked out of the city and up into the hills. When he was in the right area, he began to loudly call out for the robber by name. Eventually, the young man emerged and John put all of his heart into telling him how he was still loved by John and by God, and that he needed to repent and return to life in Christ, willing to take whatever consequences would fall upon him for his crimes. At first the fellow rejected the idea and was rude towards the old man. But John persisted and gradually the man's attitude changed. And after some time, he changed his mind and heart. He left the hills and went back down with John to town---and back to Christ.

We have all fallen in our own ways----and what is God's response? Like John's. God continues to love us. When we wander away, He wants us to return to Him. And our response to His love should, of course, be to love Him. And also to love each other.

One more story handed down about St. John at Ephesus----it's some years after the story I just told you. The Apostle is now very old and not well---no more missionary trips. And he couldn't walk as far as to the house where the liturgy was done. So every Sunday the Christians of Ephesus would come to his house and put him in a litter and carry him to the liturgy. It developed into a procession where many of the believers would walk alongside to show their love for him. And every Sunday---on the way he would take one minute to teach them. And it was always the same brief teaching---"Little children, love one another!" Every Sunday the same words. After quite a while, one man said, "Father John, why do you always tell us the same thing?" And the Saint replied, "Because if you love each other, all will be well."

Tomorrow, May 8th, is St. John Day. Use the day set aside to commemorate the Apostle of love to honor him by deciding to become more like him. By deciding to show more love and kindness to others. Think about it---Who do you usually show no love to among people you know? Maybe you just don't care enough about them to get around to it. Maybe there are some you don't show any love towards because you just really don't like them. Go out of your way---a kind word, a friendly phone call or email, a good deed. Do you love God? Then show love to His people. In this simple way you also show gratitude to God for all His love for you---.by passing on

God's love to others. It's a start to obeying a command from God that St. John passed on to us in I John 4:21----"This commandment we have from God, that he who loves God should love his brother also."

Through the intercessions before God of St. John, may God help us to be more like the Holy Apostle.