

Homily For Sunday, September 30, 2012

Epistle: II Corinthians 6:16-7:1

Gospel: St. Luke 6:31-36

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. One God, Amen.

St. Paul said to the Corinthians, “Brethren, we are the temple of the living God.” I would like to continue the theme of being healthy Orthodox Christians that I began two weeks ago, and reflect in more depth what this means.

This week I received an email about a scholarship program sponsored by the Music Center in downtown Los Angeles. It is open to high school students who are studying music, drama, dance, and visual arts. On their web site are videos of the 2012 winners and a video biography of each one. Additionally, there is roster of the past winners for the past 15 years. It was really interesting to see where many of the past winners have ended up. Many of them went on to places like Julliard in New York, or Curtis Conservatory in Philadelphia. Some made it to Hollywood like Adam Lambert, and others even made it to Broadway.

What I found to particularly joyous were the interviews with the winners. One young dancer said that she couldn’t imagine doing anything else in her life. Her very breath, as she said, “is filled with dance.” I thought of my own life experiences. I have done a lot of different jobs over the years: I pumped gas at a gas station, I delivered newspapers as a kid, I worked at an answering service answering phones, I even played in an orchestra conducted by Jerry Lewis once. But the

thing that has meant the most to me over the years has been God and the Orthodox Christian Church. It has been the single constant in my life since I was in the 4th grade. I didn't know it when I was in the fourth grade but I do now: God had a plan for me.

You know, God has a plan for all of us. He waits patiently for us. I believe He sends us signs when we have lost our way. He sends us signs of His love and encouragement and helps along the path of life – if we want it.

There is no other place I would rather be than in Church praying to God. I never once thought about being a priest before the age of 30, but I knew that I wanted to be in God's house. Do you feel that way? I know some of you do. I know that the Church is the most important part of your life. For others, I know that this just isn't so. Church is a burden and an inconvenience. Some you are already saying to yourself, I hope he's almost done. Why such a difference in perspectives? I'm afraid I don't really have a very good answer for it. Why do some people eat and drink in a healthy manner and others eat and drink to their condemnation? I don't really know.

Why are some people more successful in their life goals and objectives than others? A lot of it just comes down to how much passion you have for the subject. I love people who have passion. And I don't mean just a little passion, I mean a LOT OF PASSION. Do any of you know Kh. Krista West? She is the wife of Fr. Alban West in Seattle. She is an Orthodox vestment maker and believe me, this woman has passion. She can tell anything you would ever want to know about Orthodox vestments. What was the style of vestments in the 15th century? She's the person to go to. How about Orthodox Liturgical music. If any of you have the chance to go Fr. John

Rhieman's church in San Diego, strike up a conversation with Mr. Vladimir Morosan. He is the choir director and one of the world's leading authorities on Russian Liturgical choral music. There is almost nothing that he doesn't know about Orthodox liturgical musical.

In preparing for last Tuesday night's class here at St. Luke's, I came across something interesting. I decided to look at the origin of the Orthodox liturgy. The word Liturgy comes from the Greek word Litourgia. It is commonly defined as the "work of the people." But in actuality its roots go back even further. Historically it meant the obligatory work. It was the work that certain select people were obligated to perform. I mention this because I know that it is sometimes difficult to get to church. Sometimes people in your family are moving a little slow, sometimes the cars in front of you are moving a little slow. Sometimes you just have other obligations that you need to juggle. But have you ever thought of it as an obligation before?

I believe that it is fair to say that this is a dogma of our church: no one is compelled to do anything. Everything you do, you do by your own free will. But there is nothing to say that you can't make your own obligations.

I have been truly blessed to know some fantastic people over the years. I have known great musicians and dancers, doctors, and theologians. And they all have one thing in common: a kind of self-willed obligation. You know why I didn't continue on to be a professional musician? I didn't want to work that hard. I remember being at Chapman University and playing my bassoon until around 10:00 some nights. A friend of mine who was in the practice room next men would

practice sometimes until midnight. He went on to Curtis Conservatory. I did not. But if you told me that you wanted to join me for Divine Liturgy at 4:00 a.m. I'd be here for you.

In terms of the Church, I believe that God wants us to be passionate as well. He wants us not to be lulled into thinking that nothing matters or that the cares of this world are more important. He wants us to be strong in our faith, to be courageous in our faith, and to be knowledgeable about our faith.

In the gospel of St. Mark it says (*Mark 8:27-33*):

27 And Jesus went on with his disciples, to the villages of Caesare'a Philip'pi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do men say that I am?" 28 And they told him, "John the Baptist; and others say, Eli'jah; and others one of the prophets." 29 And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Christ." 30 And he charged them to tell no one about him. 31 And he began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32 And he said this plainly. And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him. 33 But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter, and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men."

Who is Jesus for you? In our Orthodox tradition, when a priest is hearing someone's confession, he is supposed to ask a variety of questions related to each of the commandments. I came up with my own list of questions that I would like you to think about today in answering this question of "who is Jesus for you?"

- On a scale of 1 to 10 (ten being the most important), how important is the Orthodox Church to you?
- Do you believe in Christ as King and Lord?
- Do you desire to live a life according to the commandments?
- On a scale of 1 to 10, how much of a commitment are you willing to make to the Church?
- How much time are you willing to give to God every week?

- When was the last time you read a book by an Orthodox Christian writer?
- When was the last time you participated in an event to help someone less fortunate?
- If you have children or are contemplating having children, how important to you is it that your children be raised and educated in the faith?
- Do you believe that you have an obligation to be a part of the Church and be present when we gather as the Church?
- How many people have you brought to Church in the past year who are not Orthodox?
- How many people have you helped sponsor to enter into the Orthodox Church?
- How many services outside of Sunday have you attended in the past six months?
- How many people do you know in this Church?
- When was the last time you sat down and read any part of the bible?
- When was the last time you sat down and read any part of the bible with your children?
- Do you give financially to the Church?
- Do you give financially to the ministries of the church?
- And finally, on a scale of 1 to 10, how much passion do you have for the church?

With a great deal of passion, you can do a lot of things, you can literally move mountains or land on the moon. How on earth did the Christian faith make it through the first three centuries, the fall of communism, and the horrors of the world wars? The answer is passion.

Unfortunately though, there is a great deal of apathy and cynicism in our world today –and yes, sometimes even here at St. Lukes. I am saddened by the fact that many of you do not feel a deep and abiding passion for Christ and the church. You have more important priorities.

I told you when I began that I wanted to talk about health. Believe it or not, there is a very strong correlation between health and a passionate love for God. Do we have any athletes among us? Any swimmers, golfers, basketball, football, lacrosse, or tennis players? I don't know anyone who is seriously into any sport who doesn't think about the food they eat. Proper nutrition is essential to performance. When you eat properly, you are much more in tune with your body. Your life in Christ works in much the same fashion. If you are stuffing yourself with the Kardashians and Honey Boo Boo, you aren't really nurturing your soul. Instead it's like

loading up on junk food. What did St. Paul say to the Corinthians in today's epistle: " Therefore, come out from them, and be separate from," says the Lord, " and touch nothing unclean; then I will welcome you." We have to clean up our lives and live in the light of Christ, and we must share this message with the world around us.

We touch many people's lives each and every day. We meet people in school, at work, in the gym, in the supermarket, etc. You have the power to transform lives, but you have to live it, believe it, and be passionate about it yourself. According to St. Theophan the recluse, "A Christian without zeal is a poor Christian."

How did the early Church do it? They had no internet, no marketing budget, no photocopier and no phone. Talk about the olden days. They did it because they felt commanded by God to go forth and proclaim the Good News. They were filled with passion and love for Christ and felt that His message should be shared with the world. Sometimes I think we feel that all of this has been accomplished. The world already knows about Christ so what else is there to do. Sorry to tell you, but this just isn't so. Almost 40% of the world doesn't identify with any particular religion and only 21% of men and 36% of women believe that God is personal. In the United States 15% have absolutely no religious affiliation and that number is expected to rise to almost 20%.

One thing that has come out of the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, is that you have to look at things multi-generationally. When it comes to the Church and the teaching of Christ, yes the world has changed considerably since the 1950's. In the 1950's for instance, there was a strong Judeo-Christian belief system. Today it is a Judeo-Muslim-Christian-New Age – Agnostic belief system. You can't assume anything when it comes to faith.

But if we are not strong in our own beliefs, if we are not strong in our own church, how can we possibly expect it to grow? Who among you is going to be the next pastor here? Who among you is going to be the next head of the choir? Who among you is going to be the next church school director? We need another deacon; who is going to be the next deacon? Who among you is willing to teach an adult religious education class?

And what will visitors find when they actually come to our church? Will they meet people who are filled with the zeal and confidence to bring them to Christ or will they find an empty pew because it really didn't matter to you? The question from Christ is direct: "But who do you say that I am?"

On March 13, 1955 a column called the "The Wit Parade" by E.E. Kenyon wrote the following which I'm sure many of you are familiar with:

The absent-minded maestro was racing up New York's Seventh Avenue to a rehearsal, when a stranger stopped him. "Pardon me," he said, "can you tell me how to get to Carnegie Hall?"

"Yes," answered the maestro breathlessly. "Practice!"

If Christ really matters in your life, you must practice what you preach! Our collective goal is something much greater than Carnegie Hall, it's the kingdom of heaven. I ask you and encourage you to have passion. Guard your mind, body and soul from harmful things. Put away things that are not well-pleasing to God. Put holy icons around your house and your work so that you can be constantly reminded of holiness and God's presence. Be still and pray, listening intently for God's will in your life. Read to yourself and to your children from the lives of the saints and the Holy Bible. Prioritize your life so that you can come for services, not just on Sunday morning.

Eat and drink properly and avoid the junk food of television and the internet. In this way, you will transform your own life and the lives of the people around you from one that is ego-centric into one that is Christ-centered. Amen.