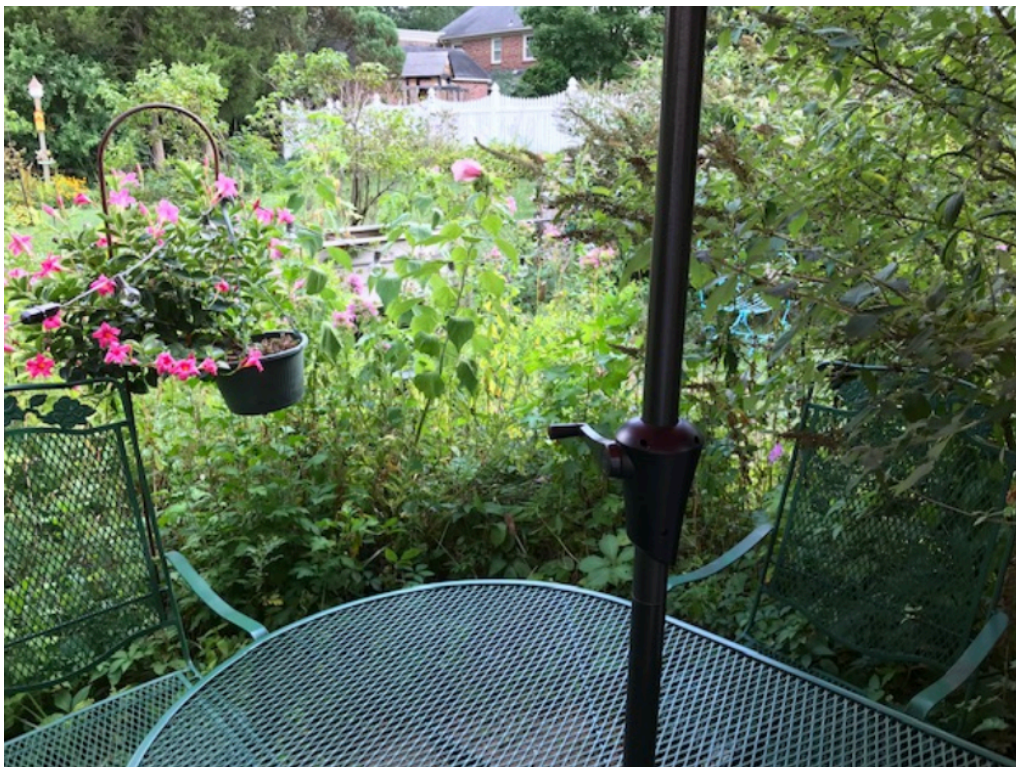


Sermons on Stewardship

Notes from the Sunday Sermon on November 6, 2022

***When We Know the Name of Something We Start to See it Everywhere:
Thinking More About “Ministry-centric and Soul-centric” Financial Discussions***



While recovering from COVID this summer I spent as much time outside, near a large butterfly bush - just reading and thinking. One of the things I realized was that I didn't know much about the flowers and plants all around me – I didn't even know what to call them. So, I put it on a list of things to get around doing and recently that became possible: I'm currently taking an online class all about plants.

Gradually, I've started to learn the particular and specialized horticultural vocabulary (much of it coming from Greek, Latin, and other languages) and the clues for identifying one plant from another. All of this recently led to a remarkable discovery: Once I began to know the names of the plants I have been studying– the more often I now see and recognize them over and over, wherever I go – and sometimes in places where they have been for years.

The simple discovery is that: **When we know the name of something, we start to see it everywhere.**

Throughout November, I'll be sending out passages on most days from the book by Dr. Andrew Geleris entitled, "***Money and Salvation: An Invitation to the Good Way.***" In sections sent out

last week, Dr. Geleris stated that the purpose of his book was not “to raise money for the church or the needy poor.” Rather, “it is to lead each of us to a place where giving is a joyful experience primarily motivated by a sense of gratitude for God’s goodness to us and desire to grow in our experience of his love.”

In developing this goal, he “named” two approaches to financial stewardship. The first, while having the honorable goals of providing for the needs of the local parish and individual people, still “primarily focused on the need to raise money for the purpose of ministry,” and he called it, “**ministry-centric.**” The second, modeled by Jesus himself, emphasized that “charitable acts were essential for the salvation of the donors” and therefore, was referred to as being “**soul-centric.**”

In hearing these two approaches so clearly identified, we have the opportunity to see how these same conversations have taken place regarding the support of our own parish.

Today’s Gospel connects us to an essential point: Jesus is surrounded by people and a woman who has had a flow of blood for 12 years comes up and touches just the hem of his robe:

And Jesus said, “Who touched Me?” When all denied it, Peter and those with him said, “Master, the multitudes throng and press You, and You say, ‘Who touched Me?’” But Jesus said, “Somebody touched Me, for I perceived power going out from Me” (Luke 8:45-46).

To “touch” Jesus and be “empowered” by that experience, can be the start of the encounter which Dr. Geleris claimed is the goal of his book: “to lead each of us to a place where giving is a joyful experience primarily motivated by a sense of gratitude for God’s goodness to us and desire to grow in our experience of his love.”

Over the next month, we’ll want to consider some different names for the familiar topics of financial stewardship and hope to learn if learning these names will enable us to see this subject in a broader and more comprehensive way than we ever have before.

Sermons on Stewardship

Notes from the Sunday Sermon on November 20, 2022

***When We Know the Name of Something We Start to See it Everywhere:
Thinking More About
the Temple and Whole Burnt Offerings***

Scriptures:

Ephesians 2:4-10

Luke 12:16-21



Several weeks ago I discovered that in learning the names of plants, I began to see them more frequently - everywhere.

This realization has broad applications: when we start to know the names of all kinds of things, especially that which we hear in Church and about ourselves, we can recognize that they have implications and consequences.

Yesterday, we began the celebration of the Feast of the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple, which officially is celebrated on Monday, 11/21. This is not one of the Church's "common sense" Feasts for the Virgin (Feasts that celebrate her birth or death); it is not Scripturally based (as are the Meeting of the Lord in the Temple and the Annunciation); rather it is a Feast of the Church's theological intuition about Mary. The details, which we do not have to accept historically, come from the Protevangelium of James which – though it is not a canonical text found in the Bible – nevertheless, provides infancy narratives of the Virgin Mary which the Church considers worthy at least of reflection and consideration. The texts share that Mary's parents, Joachim and Anna, vowed to God that if they could have a child they would commend that child to God's service and care. At the age of three she was brought to and raised in the Temple.

It is possible to come to know the word, "temple," and realize that it has at least two significant implications for us as well every time we hear it mentioned.

First, though the events as described might not have been historically possible, yet it's important to recognize the Festal intuition that the Virgin Mary was raised by God in the Temple to become herself the temple of the living God. In a way, this is a Feast of vocation, of fulfilling one's calling. Like Mary, each of us is also meant to hear – especially during Advent – that we are to become the dwelling-place of God, to have "Christ formed within us" (Gal. 4:19) and "to put on Christ" (Gal. 3:27).

A second way of hearing the word, temple, is not just as a dwelling for God's presence, but as a place of function, especially for the reception of "whole burnt offerings" which took place on an altar in the temple. Throughout November, on the weekdays I have been sending out passages from Andrew Geleris's book, "Money and Salvation: An Invitation to the Good Way." This past week's texts considered the Old Testament concept of the "whole burnt offering," which the author claims is the "foundation for understanding the relationship between mercy giving and salvation." He also notes that it is by far the most commonly used expression for offering in the Old Testament, mentioned over 300 times. But its significance can be confusing because in being offered and completely burnt by fire on the altar, it would seem to have no purpose.

But here he goes on to explain, "However, the frequent occurrence of apparently useless whole burnt offerings undoubtedly kept the fundamentally sacred nature of all offerings at the forefront of the consciousness of the people of God in a way that we have perhaps entirely lost. For them, offerings constituted an integral part of worship, an opportunity to tangibly express love and gratitude to God. For us, offerings are often little more than a means to pay parish bills or fund important ministries. Paradoxically, therefore, the practical wastefulness of the Old Testament whole burnt offerings spiritually enriched their donors, while the practical uselessness of our offerings often spiritually impoverishes us. Their donations elevated their minds to mystery and wonder. Our donations tend to drag our minds down to anxieties about spreadsheets" (pp. 42-43).

The important words above are that these offerings provided "an opportunity to tangibly express love and gratitude to God" and "spiritually enriched their donors." We briefly contrasted this perspective from that presented in the Sunday Gospel where a certain rich man decided to

build greater barns to store all of his crops and goods and to say to himself: “take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry” (Luke 12:16-21).

Each Divine Liturgy allows us to consider as well how the way and what we offer can be given not just for the sake of pay bills and providing resources for ministries, but can be “spiritually enriching” for us:

“Every Divine Liturgy clearly epitomizes the profound transformation that such giving enables. For the Liturgy to take place, the parish has a God-ordained need for an offering of very ‘ordinary’ bread and wine to be brought to the Proskomedia. This parallels the occasional God-ordained needs that arise in our parishes and in the lives of the needy poor whose we occasionally meet. In the case of the Divine Liturgy, this bread and wine are subsequently returned to us as the most valuable gift any person could possibly receive: the Body and Blood of Christ. This is precisely the paradigm, the model, for what happens to every ‘ordinary’ sacrificial offering we give for the sake of the love of God. This is the transformation Jesus teaches us will occur when he describes how a seed that falls into the ground ‘wastefully,’ so to speak, dies and subsequently bears much fruit (see John 12:24). It is the transformation that occurs through a life that becomes ‘obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross’ (Phil 2:8), so that it then achieves the ultimate place of intimacy at God’s right hand.

One important thing to note, however, is that because God’s love for us is fully incarnation, if we do not bring any bread and wine to the Proskomedia, then there is nothing for God to transform into the Body and Blood of Christ. Similarly, if we do not bring truly sacrificial offerings to the church, or if we do not help the poor, then there is nothing for God to transform into the experience of resurrection life in our hearts and the circumstances of our lives” (pp. 45-46).

CONCLUSION: In coming to know more about the Temple on this Feast of the Virgin Mary, we are reminded of how we like her are called to be dwelling places of God’s presence and how our own sacrificial offerings of resources and time can provide us with an “opportunity to tangibly express love and gratitude to God” and how that can be “spiritually enriching.”

Notes from the Sermon on Sunday, November 27, 2022:

Thanksgiving or Joy - Which Comes First?

Readings:

Ephesians 2:14-22

Luke 13:10-17

Saturday, November 26 was the birthday of the American author, Marilynne Robinson. She is probably best known for her series of books that explore the characters first presented in her Pulitzer awarded novel, *Gilead* (2004) which was organized around the unlikely theme of an elderly pastor's biographical letters written to a son he had later in life.

Here's a passage from one of her essays:

"I have spent my life watching, not to see beyond the world, merely to see, great mystery, what is plainly before my eyes. I think the concept of transcendence is based on a misreading of creation. With all respect to heaven, **the scene of the miracle is here, among us.**"

As we've just celebrated Thanksgiving sometimes one hears the question raised over which comes first – thanksgiving or joy? In other words, must one first be happy or joyful to give thanks or do these come after being thankful?

The theme of Sunday's Sermon began with the exploration of that which is here, the miracle of that which is already "among us."

I have been interested over the past few months in learning about and then noticing all around me the plants that I normally just passed by. In particular, I have slowly been observing not just plants, but have come to think of them more as small evolving worlds - almost as lives.

So, here is a piece taken from an aloe plant that is surviving – for now – in a container, over small stones, being nourished only by the light, some water, and O₂.



Here is a monstera plant which just “gave birth” to a new leaf, on the right side - which started like a clenched fist and then seemed to open up over a day or so.



The marvels of beauty whether through plants, music, or relationships that revive, strengthen, and support us can all be the very sources of thanksgiving and joy.

In today’s Gospel (Luke 13:10-17), we heard the story of the woman Jesus encountered while teaching in the synagogue “who had a spirit of infirmity eighteen years, and was bent over and could in no way raise herself up.” Some of us may know the physical limitations caused by back or other pains or the emotional challenges that have prevented us from moving forward, from fully living.

When considering the significance of the eighteen years of her infirmity, St. Ambrose suggested that it could be looked as Jesus entering and transforming the nature of what appeared to be the normal perception of life. “The perfection of the Law is expressed in the ten words (commandments), while in the number eight the resurrection (to life in the kingdom which is to come) is represented.”

In today’s Epistle, St. Paul stated that Jesus entered into a broken world. He has become our peace and “has broken down the middle wall of separation” and become the “chief cornerstone” of our lives (Ephesians 2:14-22).

Whenever we hear references to peace throughout the Liturgy, we can be assured that they always bring us back to Jesus and his efforts to bring together that which is broken and needs to be healed.

The Liturgy, in fact, is always, “the scene of the miracle...among us,” affirming that Jesus is our peace, our foundation, and the reception of His Body and Blood is the experience in this time and place – to the extent possible – of the world and life to come.

Here’s a hymn from our Paschal/Easter Service that is sung at every Liturgy following the reception of Holy Communion:

“O Christ! Great and most holy Pascha! O Wisdom, Word, and Power of God! Grant that we may more perfectly partake of You in the never-ending Day of Your Kingdom.”

So, which comes first – Thanksgiving or Joy?

Fr. Alexander Schmemmann in his final Sermon delivered on Thanksgiving Day, 1983 affirmed that they are essentially bound together:

“Everyone capable of thanksgiving is capable of salvation and eternal joy.”

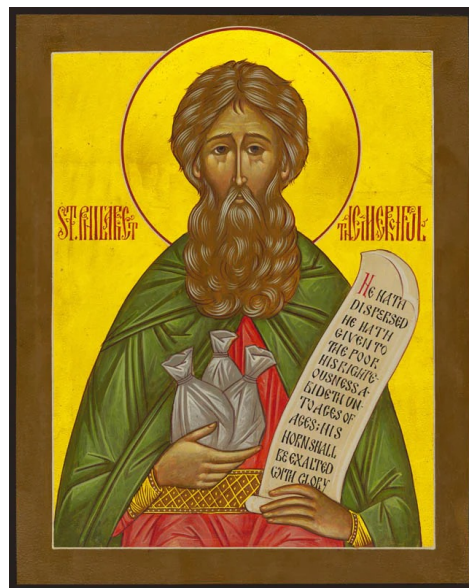
So, in the midst of often so much confusion, sadness, and chaos let’s also not be afraid to look closely not just beyond everything, but at **“the scene of the miracle [which] is here, among us.”**

Sent out on Thursday, December 1, 2022

ONE OF THE SAINTS MENTIONED in the chapter on “Wealth” from “Money and Salvation: An Invitation to the Good Way” by Andrew Geleris is **PHILARET THE ALMSGIVER**.

An incontrovertible fact that receive astonishingly little attention in American Orthodox church culture is that the overwhelmingly majority of our saints have been poor. This should not surprise us, because our Lord himself, whose path we are to follow, divested himself of all the wealth of heaven and became poor on our behalf. We can see this same pattern of divestment among the lives of almost all those Orthodox saints who for one reason or another started out with wealth, such as St. Melania of Rome, St. Anthony the Great, St. Basil the Great, and St. Philaret the Merciful. Each of them gave away most of their wealth long before they died. Even some members of royalty whom we honor as saints, such as St. Elizabeth the New Martyr of the Romanov dynasty, at least partially earned their recognition as saints through sacrificial acts of merciful generosity (p. 26)

**TODAY IS THE FAST OF ST. PHILARET THE MERCIFUL
SAINT PHILARET THE ALMSGIVER**



(from the *Prologue of Ochrid*)

Philaret was from the village of Amnia in Paphlagonia. Early in life, Philaret was a very wealthy man, but by distributing abundant alms to the poor he himself became extremely poor. However, he was not afraid of poverty, and, not heeding the complaints of his wife and children, he continued his charitable works with hope in God, Who said: *Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy* (Matthew 5:7). Once, while he was plowing in the field, a man came to him and complained that one of his oxen had died in the harness and that he was unable to plow

with only one ox. Philaret then unharnessed one of his oxen and gave it to him. He even gave his remaining horse to a man who was summoned to go to war. He gave away the calf of his last cow, and when he saw how the cow pined for her missing calf, and the calf for the cow, he called the man and gave him the cow too. And thus the aged Philaret was left without food in an empty house. But he prayed to God and placed his hope in Him. And God did not abandon the righteous one to be put to shame in his hope.

At that time the Empress Irene reigned with her young son, Constantine. According to the custom of that time, the empress sent men throughout the whole empire to seek the best and most distinguished maiden to whom she could wed her son, the emperor. By God's providence, these men happened to stay overnight in Philaret's house, and they saw his most beautiful and modest granddaughter Maria, the daughter of his daughter Hypatia, and took her to Constantinople. The emperor was well pleased with her, married her, and moved Philaret and all his family to the capital, giving him great honors and riches.

Philaret did not become proud as a result of this unexpected good fortune, but, thankful to God, he continued to perform good works even more than he had before, and thus he continued until his death. At the age of ninety he summoned his children, blessed them, and instructed them to cleave to God and to God's law, and with his clairvoyant spirit he prophesied to all of them how they would live out this life, as once had Jacob. After that he went to the Rodolfia Monastery and gave up his soul to God. At his death his face shone like the sun, and after his death an unusual, sweet fragrance came forth from his body and miracles took place at his relics.

This righteous man entered into rest in the year 797 A.D. His wife, Theosevia, and all his children and grandchildren lived a God-pleasing life and reposed in the Lord.

HYMN OF PRAISE

SAINT PHILARET THE ALMSGIVER

To the merciful one, God shows mercy;
He never ceases to show mercy.
He hears the prayers of the merciful;
He gives gifts a hundredfold.

Philaret the Merciful
Placed himself wholly in God's hands.
By his compassion, he amazed the world;
He was faithful to God, even in suffering.

Philaret did not compete
For honor or precedence.
We use this age to purchase
The Eternal Kingdom and blessedness.

The Lord spoke a wondrous word:
"Trade until I return!
When the time is right,
I will repay you with great riches."

When Philaret became impoverished
Because of almsgiving beyond measure,
Because of truth and goodness--
God visited him from on high:

Visited him and bestowed mercy,
Bestowed mercy and rewarded him,
Just as once upon the faithful Job,
He bestowed mercy and a reward.