

**Our 50th Anniversary Sermon Collection:
Notes from the Sermon on Sunday, September 24, 2023**

Our Anniversary and Where We Go From Here

Scriptures:

2 Corinthians 6:1-10

Luke 5:1-11

1) INVITING, OFFERING, AND SHARING: During last week's Anniversary Banquet, I shared the conversation with a parish priest that I had as a seminarian during a choir trip in the 1970s. In response to the question, "What do you do?" – the priest responded: "I simply invite and welcome people to join me on the journey to God's Kingdom. I offer and share – as St. Paul said – what I've received and come to love. Some are interested and others are not – but that's all I do."

Over the years I've thought about his response and talked with other priests – and that's usually what they all say – and what, I as well have tried to do.

But inviting, offering, and sharing what we've received and come to love are not just my responsibilities: They are the opportunities that we all have as a community. The last section of the story and the icon over our entranceway of the "Encounter with Jesus on the Way to Emmaus," describes how Luke and Cleopas returned to Jerusalem and told the other disciples "what had happened on the road/on the way, and how Jesus was known to them in the breaking of the bread" (Luke 24:35).

As we think about all that has "happened to us on the way" and what was said both in preparation and in celebration of our Anniversary – and as we consider – "Where Do We Go and What Do We Do Next" – today's Scriptures provide us with some helpful images.

2) WORKING TOGETHER: This is from today's Epistle from St. Paul's 2nd Letter to the Corinthians:

"Working together with him, then, we entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, 'At the acceptable time I have listened to you, and helped you on the day of salvation.' Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:1-2).

In Greek, the expression **"working together"** comes from the word, **"synergy,"** to share one another's "energy." I am so grateful for the cooperative and creative sharing that took place among all those who coordinated our Anniversary celebration. We moved patiently but progressively through a variety of questions and challenges, always asking, "What about this? Can we try this?"

It would be wonderful if we can continue this effort of cooperation and creative sharing of energy, talent, and encouragement.

St. Paul wrote to the Romans, "I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you, that is, that we may be **mutually encouraged by each other's faith**, both yours and mine" (Roman 1:11-12).

3) "INTO THE DEEP": Despite working through the night and catching nothing, Simon Peter is willing to follow Jesus's instruction to **"cast out into the deep,"** where they discover an overwhelmingly abundant catch of fish.

Sometimes we tend to do the same things because they have previously worked. But perhaps these efforts can sometimes lose their energy and become stale. It takes courage to “cast out into the deep,” to ask different and challenging questions, and to try things another way.

It would be wonderful if we would consider what “deep” might mean for us at this time.

3) THE ACCEPTABLE TIME: In today’s Epistle, St. Paul said that **“Now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation.”**

During the Banquet, I shared the story of Professor Jaroslav Pelikan, the renowned historian of Church history and doctrine, who though being very familiar with Orthodox theology and many Orthodox theologians remained a Lutheran throughout most of his life. I had a conversation with him after he eventually converted to Orthodoxy and he admitted that he had been “circling” around the Orthodox Church as if in an airplane for many years – trying to find the right time and place to land.

For all of us – whether we have been raised in the Church or are on the path as inquirers – there will be the right and acceptable time to respond and act.

During the recent Great Feast of the Nativity of the Theotokos, we heard within one of the hymns for Vespers:

“She (the Virgin Mary) alone admitted Christ into the universe.”

I have always been startled by this statement because it would seem to limit God’s ability to act: Why would the responses of a human person be so significant for the plan of salvation? But I’ve come to feel that this, in fact, is the way God acts – He is always coordinating His plan with those who are freely choosing to cooperate and “work” with Him. On Christmas Day we hear within St. Paul’s Epistle from Galatians: “At the fullness of time, God sent forth his son, born of a woman...” (4:4). There was an acceptable and right time in history for the birth and formation of a woman, Mary, who freely cooperated with God, longed “to hear His word and keep it” (Luke 11:28).

It might be a recent intuition or discovery or perhaps it has taken 50 years, but why can’t the current moment be the acceptable and saving time for us as well?

4) CONCLUSION: WHAT CAN WE ALONE ADMIT INTO THE UNIVERSE – AT THIS TIME?: As we journey forth from our Anniversary (our “exodus”) let’s ask the questions:

What are the things at this time – working together with God and with one another, casting out into the deep – that we alone as a community and as individuals can “admit into the universe”?

What are the small, but consistently offered experiences and acts of love that we can share? What can we offer and what invitations can we provide?

**Our 50th Anniversary Sermon Collection:
Notes from the Sermon on Sunday, August 27 2023**

***On Sunday's Gospel Lesson that Empowered our Parish:
Thinking also about St. John the Baptist and King Herod***

Scripture Readings:

Gospel: Matthew 19:16-26

Epistle: 1 Cor. 15:1-11

Several weeks ago we heard the words of **St. Tikhon of Zadonsk** on the day of his feast:

“Whenever you read the gospel, Christ himself is speaking to you. And while you read, you are praying and talking to Him.”

1) **IMPOSSIBLE AND POSSIBLE:** Over 50 years and within the Gospel lessons of approximately 5,000 Divine Liturgies, Christ has been speaking in ways that have been specific and appropriate to us as individuals and as a community. For me, no doubt the most direct way He spoke to our community came about 25 years ago in the context of our process for deciding our building process.

We had been considering several options throughout the 1980s and 90s and finally we needed to decide a path which would require selling the church in which we had been worshipping and buying different property and building a new church. On the day of the Meeting we heard today's Gospel.

Jesus's response to the young man who wanted to know what he needed to do to have eternal life – “If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me” - was specific to him and others have heard this message and followed it literally (see the life of St. Anthony the Great of Egypt).

But the message I believe that our community needed to hear that day came at the end of the Gospel when in response to the disciples' question to Jesus about, “Who then can be saved?” - He replied:

“With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

The Greek word for possible, “**dynatos**,” means to have the ability, to be able or to have the power to do something. It was important for us that day to be convinced that though the project might have seemed overwhelming and beyond our human limits, with God's help we had the ability, the power – as suggested by one of our community members – to “just do it.” We voted to move forward and and we did it!

In Greek, the addition of a single letter, “a” (called – the “alpha privative”) expresses negation, absence, or the opposite. In this case, “**adynatos**” means – “impossible.”

2) **BAPTISM, CHRISMATION, AND GOD'S GRACE:** Yesterday the Sacraments of Baptism and Chrismation – the personal opportunities to receive the mysteries of new life and God's grace – were offered to a young baby boy. It was said by Saints Kallistos and Ignatios, that “**the aim of the Christian life is to return to that perfect grace of the Holy and Life-giving Spirit, which was given to us from the beginning in divine baptism.**” During

the Service we prayed that he would “increase the measure of grace” offered to him. In today’s Epistle, St. Paul was hopeful that God’s “**grace toward me was not in vain**” (1 Cor. 15:10).

One might say that Baptism, Chrismation, the Eucharist and all of the Sacraments God offers through the Church always assume the gift of God’s grace which empowers and makes life possible in all of its richness.

3) **WHAT TO DO WITH THE POWER:** But ability and power can build or destroy (as in the word, “dynamite”). Peter Bouteneff in his book, *How to Be a Sinner*, describes his experience of visiting Hiroshima:

While I was living in Japan in the 1980s, I visited Hiroshima. I spent hours wandering through the memorials and exhibits that recount the events and aftermath of August 6, 1945, when the US dropped an atom bomb on the city in one of the last events in World War II. I came across a life-sized replica of the bomb that laid waste to the city and destroyed hundreds of thousands of lives. As I looked at that murderous piece of metal, I had a sudden, momentary vision of that bomb, in a tiny form, inside my own heart. I saw the specter as a gift from God, a fledgling insight that there is no sin that I am not capable of doing or rationalizing. There is no sin that I am not capable of committing within the recesses of my heart or potentially in reality. It is still hard for me to say, with complete commitment, that I am the foremost of all sinners. But I know how it is possible to say it and mean it”(58).

Perhaps we have also realized that we as well contain within ourselves the potential and power to cause great destruction to ourselves and others, to “go nuclear.”

3) **KING HEROD: PERPLEXED, GLAD, AND VIOLENT:** Today we also anticipate and remember the Beheading of St. John the Baptist (which will be celebrated with a Vespertine Liturgy on Monday evening). In the festal Gospel lesson from St. Mark (Mark 6:14-29) we heard how the Jewish King Herod has been told by John that it was “not lawful for you to have your brother (Philip’s) wife, Herodias.” She had a grudge against him for saying this, and wanted to kill him. But could not, “for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and kept him safe. **“When he heard him, he was much perplexed; and yet he heard him gladly.”**

This is such an interesting observation about Herod. As St. Tikhon explained and we as a community have discovered the words of Christ in the Gospel or the message of the saints (like St. John) can be both perplexing and yet make us glad: however, the question becomes – what do we do?

One thing led to another, but due to his pride, King Herod ended “going nuclear” and calling for the beheading of John (read the whole Gospel account to learn why this happened).

CONCLUSION: In considering our summer-long questions related to our 50th Anniversary:

Who is Jesus and What Have We to Do with Him (and Him with Us)

we can add today’s themes:

- Jesus is the one who in filling us with His grace grants us the ability, the power to do things that might humanly be impossible. In Greek, just the addition or subtraction of a single letter, “a,” transforms an impossibility into that which is possible with God (and vice versa).

- In speaking to us in every reading of the Gospel, Christ offers us words which might at times seem perplexing, but hopefully, they are messages that we receive with gladness.
- Yet, though our life – both personal and as a community – can be offered through the Sacramental gifts of Baptism, Chrismation, and the Eucharist for “increasing the measure of grace” given to us, these gifts can be received “in vain” and can lead to the use of power that corrupts and destroys.
- It all depends on how we hear and receive the message.

Our 50th Anniversary Sermon Collection:
Notes from the Sermon on Sunday, August 20, 2023

*On the Dormition: Mary, the Mother of Life, Translated to Life /
Who was Mary and What Have We to Do with Her?
"Rise Up"*

Throughout the summer, we have been asking each Sunday:

"Who is Jesus and What Have We to Do With Him (and Him with us)?"

On the Feast of the Dormition, which we continue to celebrate over this weekend, it was noted that the development of Mary's veneration and liturgical services in her honor emerged from the questions related to Jesus's humanity and therefore from those who asked:

"Who was His mother and What Have We to Do With Her?"

1) **MARY AS THE THEOTOKOS:** We speak of Mary as the "Theotokos" – she "who gave birth to the one who is God." The hymns for the Dormition call her, "The Source of Life" and we could hear that in the same way:

She is the one "who gave birth to the one who is the Source of Life."

2) **SHE WAS TRANSLATED TO LIFE:** Today we'll ask the questions about Mary from the perspective of the word, "translate," and what it means that she "was translated to life" and what that can mean for us.

Here again are the important texts we'll consider:

Tone 1 Troparion

In giving birth you preserved your virginity.
In falling asleep you did not forsake the world, O Theotokos.
You were **translated to life** O Mother of Life, //
and by your prayers you deliver our souls from death.

Tone 2 Kontakion

Neither the tomb, nor death, could hold the Theotokos,
who is constant in prayer and our firm hope in her intercessions.
For being the Mother of Life, //
she was **translated to life** by the One Who dwelt in her virginal womb.

We usually think of "translate or translation" as the act of moving or "transferring" something (such as a text) from one language or place to another. Within Orthodoxy one hears of the "Translation" of a saint's relics - the transfer from one place to another.

For Mary – her death – is the movement from the human experience of giving birth to the One who is the Source of Life to being united with Him in the “land of the living” (Psalm 27:13).

3) **THE HUMAN VOCATION OF BEING A TRANSLATOR - the story of ST. NICHOLAS OF JAPAN:** Probably most of us have taken language classes and have some knowledge of translating texts either from another language into English or vice versa.

Fr. Nicholas Kasatkin, a young Russian priest, was sent in 1861 to serve the Russian consulate in Hakodate, Japan. His ministry was unfocused and floundered until he received a visit from the great Orthodox missionary, Innocent – who formerly served in Alaska. Innocent encouraged him to put aside his study of Western literature and learn Japanese. The result was a transformed ministry and the establishment of a strong Orthodox ministry in Japan. Nicholas was eventually canonized and given the title of St Nicholas – “Equal to Apostles.”

Here’s more about this story:

<https://charlotteriggle.com/what-archbishop-innocent-of-alaska-told-father-nicholas/>

Whether we are called to be actual translators or missionaries, we all have the vocation of “translating” – of putting into words and actions the essential message of our life-giving faith in Jesus Christ.

4) **THE ROLE OF ARTISTS, MUSICIANS, AND POETS – AS TRANSLATORS:** Throughout history the finest artists, musicians, and poets have tried to convey in their work to explore the possibilities of healing, hopefulness, and life.

Several years ago I had the opportunity of briefly meeting Bruce Springsteen and had the chance to share with him two things.

First, I thanked him for his song, “**My City of Ruins**,” which was written about his beloved city of Asbury Park, but was quickly utilized in the context of the destruction that occurred on 9/11. Springsteen opened the commemorative concert, “*America: A Tribute to Heroes*,” on September 21, 2001 with the song and called it, “a prayer for our fallen brothers and sisters.”

Here is the “bridge” section that leads back to the chorus:

I pray for the strength, Lord,
I pray for the faith, Lord,
We pray for your love, Lord,
We pray for the lost, Lord,
We pray for this world, Lord,
We pray for the strength, Lord
We pray for the strength, Lord
Come on, Come on, Come on,
Rise up.

Second, he has admitted in various places that despite his incredible performing energy, he has struggled and worked on overcoming depression. I thanked him for “taking care of yourself.” He looked at me and said, “Thanks, man!”

5) **CONCLUSION:** On the Feast of the Dormition we celebrate Mary’s translation from being the human Mother of Life to her “rising up”, her experience of celebrating life in its fullness with her Son. The festal text speaks of “the tomb as “a ladder to heaven.” The experience of life, of healing, of “rising up” is what artists, musicians and poets explore – each in their own ways. This vocation – of learning to translate our Faith into the language and imagery of own times – is offered to us and our community.



“My City of Ruins”

by Bruce Springsteen

With These Hands

by John Shimchick

*“They brought to Him a paralytic lying on a bed - then He said to the paralytic, ‘Arise’”
(Matt. 9:1,5)*

Sitting at the piano for the first time in over three hours, Bruce Springsteen began the third of his four sets of encores with the song, *“My City of Ruins.”* Originally dedicated to his beloved town of Asbury Park but never recorded, it became synonymous with the events of 9/11. Springsteen opened the commemorative concert, *“America: A Tribute to Heroes,”* on September 21, 2001 with the song and called it, “a prayer for our fallen brothers and sisters.” He moves back to center stage during the encore as the song builds and takes on a new intensity. “Now with these hands, with these hands, with these hands, I pray Lord,” he sings and the refrain is picked up by his band and thousands in the stadium. Then while everyone sings the refrain, he adds:

I pray for the strength, Lord,
I pray for the faith, Lord,
We pray for your love, Lord,
We pray for the lost, Lord,
We pray for this world, Lord,
We pray for the strength, Lord
We pray for the strength, Lord
Come on, Come on, Come on,
Rise up.

When Springsteen says, “rise up” - is it directed to a city, to departed souls, to people broken and paralyzed both physically and spiritually? Perhaps it’s to them all. The Sunday after his album, *“The Rising,”* was released during the summer of 2002 the assigned reading in our lectionary was from the Gospel of St. Matthew quoted above. This describes Christ’s encounter with the friends of the paralytic, holding in their hands the one they cared about, and Christ “saw their faith,” forgave the man’s sins, and called him to rise up.

Could we see ourselves as friends not just of a particular man, but as those who bring to Christ their concerns and love for a paralyzed world, maybe even for a paralyzed Church?

Springsteen, raised a Catholic, may not be “practicing” yet seems haunted by the words, images, and experiences he still knows something about. Tom Moon, reviewing his album for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* wrote: “Having spent decades assuring millions that almighty rock and roll is their deliverance, he’s now beseeching God for the miracle he can almost taste, the faith he’s had trouble finding and the rising up his heart craves.”

**Our 50th Anniversary Sermon Collection:
Notes from the Sermon on Sunday, August 13, 2023**

St. Tikhon of Zadonsk - On the Ways Christ Talks to Us and on Depression

Gospel: Matthew 17:14-23

1) **IN READING THE GOSPEL CHRIST SPEAKS TO US AND WE TALK TO HIM:** Perhaps we have come across notes or letters from loved ones that we have preserved and keep returning to and reading. St. Tikhon of Zadonsk (1724-1783), who we remembered last Sunday, once said:

“If an earthly king, our emperor wrote you a letter, would you not read it with joy? Certainly, with great rejoicing, in careful attention.” But what, he asks, is our attitude towards the letter that has been addressed to us, by no one less than God himself? “You have been sent a letter, not by any earthly emperor, by the King of Heaven. And yet you almost despise such a gift, so priceless treasure.” To open and read this letter, St. Tikhon adds, is to enter into a personal conversation, face-to-face with the living God. “Whenever you read the gospel, Christ himself is speaking to you. And while you read, you are praying and talking to Him.”

2) **PRAYING AND FASTING AND “WORKING THE ANGLES”:** In today’s Gospel, the story of the epileptic boy whose father has been unable to get the disciples to cure the boy. When asked why they were unsuccessful, Jesus said that “this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.”

The pastor, Eugene Peterson, in his book, “Working the Angles,” suggests that the visible aspects of what one does (either as a pastor or a lay person) are similar to the lines of a triangle and are maintained by the integrity of three angles – in this case, prayer, the reading of Scripture, and spiritual direction.

One might say as well that these are the ways or the kind of discipline, as suggested by St. Tikhon, through which God speaks to us: in prayer, through the reading of Scripture, and through our willingness to allow ourselves to be held accountable to another person (either one’s spiritual father or a trusted friend or spouse).

3) **ST. TIKHON ON DEPRESSION:** St. Tikhon was honest about his own struggles with depression. In writing to another monastic about this, he recommended getting into a “habit” which incorporated praying, reading, and other activities:

I see from your letter that you have been assailed by the spirit of dejection or depression. This is a grievous passion, against which Christians seeking salvation must struggle fiercely. Dejection assails even such as have bread and other objects of necessity ready at hand.

How much more, then, does it attack those who live in solitude? I commend to you the following practices:

Exhort yourself, force yourself, to prayer and every good work, however contrary be your inclination. As a lazy horse, driven by a whip, is compelled by man to walk and to trot, even so must we coerce ourselves into performing every kind of labor, and how much the more, to pray. God, beholding your efforts and your labor, will grant you zeal and inclination. Habit of itself creates the inclination, and, it might be said, attracts us towards prayer and good deeds. Learn to acquire this habit, and it will draw you to prayer and good deeds.

Zeal is also acquired by variety in our occupations—that is, by turning from one task to another. And so you must do as follows: pray, then perform some manual task, then read a book, then meditate on your spiritual

condition, on eternal salvation, and so on. And do these things alternately. If dejection grips you fiercely, leave your room, and walking up and down, meditate on Christ; lift your mind to God and pray. Thus dejection will leave you.

The thought of death, which perchance may cross your mind, the thought of Christ's judgment, of eternal torment and of eternal bliss, turns away dejection. Meditate on these things.

Pray and sigh, pleading with God Himself to grant you zeal and inclination: for without Him we are good for no task whatsoever.

4) **CONCLUSION:** Our efforts as individual Christians and a community are formed and guided through the reading of the Scriptures by which Christ speaks to us and us to Him. Christ speaks to us as well through the habit of prayer and by our willingness to be open to the guidance and encouragement of others.

Tuesday, August 9, 2023

On The Transfiguration and the Feast of St. Herman / Notes from Sunday's Sermon

Good morning and best wishes on the Feast of St. Herman!



**Fr. John and Fr. Sergious Gerken in
Kodiak and St. Herman's Cross**

On Sunday as we celebrated the Feast of the Transfiguration we heard in the liturgical texts how Jesus not only revealed the overwhelming power of His presence, but in doing so also expressed the true beauty and nature of human life.

We heard more of this in the texts for Feast of St. Herman which still reminded us of the Transfiguration:

Rejoice and exult with reverence, O honorable Church,
as we celebrate this precious and most radiant feast;
for the Master of all now transforms the disfigurement of man,
shining with a brilliance of ineffable glory, //
and radiantly emitting a brightness more dazzling than the sun in splendor!

St. Herman is a wonderful example of how the true possibilities of human life can be revealed by the transfigured presence of Jesus.

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Notes from the Sermon on Sunday, August 6, 2023:

The 50th Anniversary Collection:

***The Transfiguration:
What Do Moses, Elijah, and Jesus Himself Tell Us About Him
and What Have We to Do with Him?***

Gospel: Matthew 17:1-9

Each week as we prepare for our 50th Anniversary we continue to explore two basic questions about Jesus:

“What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?” (Mt. 8:21-27)

“What have we to do with you, Jesus, You Son of God?” (Mt 8:29).

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Transfiguration when Jesus in the presence of His disciples – Peter, James, and John – “was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light” (Mt 17:2). Moses and Elijah were also there and spoke with Him.

In this feast, Jesus reveals something deep about Himself – at least as much as those around Him could understand.

Let’s ask our two questions to each of them and imagine their responses.

1) **MOSES** would probably say something like this:

I have now come to know that everything important I learned about God along the way out of Egypt – the Exodus – was also true about Jesus. In fact, each time I was in God’s presence I now realize that it was really Jesus talking with me. It first started when I saw a bush burning with fire that was not consumed (Exodus 3). Then, when I asked God to tell me His name He replied: “I AM the Existing One” – this is what is written inside the halo of every icon of Jesus. As I was directed by God to where we would speak more I travelled to higher places where I experienced more light and then more clouds and the deepest darkness: yet God was present even in the darkest places. I knew that God talked to me as a person would talk with a friend, yet, I learned that the higher I went the more I learned that it is impossible to know everything about God and I kept learning all along the way.

I once said to Him: “If I have found grace in Your sight, reveal Yourself to me.” He replied, “I Myself will go before you and give you rest” (Exodus 33:13-14). On the mountain, Elijah and I spoke with Jesus not about my Exodus, but about His Exodus – His journey forth – “which He was about to accomplish in Jerusalem” (Luke 9:31). Jesus is the one who was always going before us.

I also remember that God would never accept my excuses or reasons for feeling that I could not do His will or would fail. He wanted me to speak to the Egyptians and my own people and I tried to tell Him that I “am weak in speech and slow in tongue” (Exodus 4:10), but He said “Is not Aaron the Levite your brother? I know he will speak for you” (Exodus 4:14). Later once Pharaoh let us go, I tried to tell Him that the people were always complaining and even wanted to go back to Egypt – but He wouldn’t accept it.

2) **ELIJAH** also had a close relationship with God. Yet, he learned once that God was not in a great and powerful wind, or earthquake, or fire, but in a still, quiet voice (1 Kings 19:12). He once felt so alone that he said to God: "It is enough, now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors...I have been very zealous for the Lord; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life to take it away." God said, "Go return on your way to Damascus and I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to the foreign god, Baal" (1 Kings 19:4-18).

3) **PETER, JAMES, AND JOHN** were around Jesus at special times like this throughout His ministry and would be with Him at the end in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mt 26:37). They would probably say:

We were with Him frequently, yet we cannot say that we often understood the things that He said and did. Especially on this feast, we beheld His "glory as far as we could bear and see it" (the Festal Troparion and Kontakion).

There was always more to understand about Him.

4) **WHAT WOULD JESUS HAVE SAID ABOUT HIMSELF?** Jesus might have said:

On this day, I showed you something about myself. But in doing so I also showed you what it is like to be really human. You are aware of dark places both within yourself and in the world. But that's not the way people were created, nor is that the way things will ultimately be.

When you become really human, when you come to maturity – then you will shine like me.

5) **MATURITY AND THE BLESSING OF FRUIT ON THIS FEAST:** We are encouraged to bless fruit today both because it is a seasonal and cultural thing to do, but because it reminds us how under the "right" conditions – provided by life within the Church community we ourselves can come to maturity and ripen:

O Lord, bless this new fruit of the vine (and other fruits), which through the wholesomeness of the air and drops of rain and temperate weather, You have been well-pleased to let attain in this hour to maturity" (Prayer for the Blessing of Fruit).

6) **CONCLUSION:** As we celebrate the Feast of the Transfiguration we learn more about Jesus – as much as we can experience – and also what it can truly mean to be human, to be a mature person in Jesus.

Notes from the Sermon on Sunday, July 30, 2023:

The 50th Anniversary Collection:

Who is Jesus? The One who Knows Us from the Depths of His Being and Calls Us to Be Part of His Healing Ministry

Gospel: Matthew 14:14-22

Throughout this summer as we approach our parish's 50th Anniversary this September, we continue to explore two Biblical questions raised several weeks ago in the Sunday Gospel:

“What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?” (Mt. 8:21-27)

“What have we to do with you, Jesus, You Son of God?” (Mt 8:29).

1) **Jesus is the “compassionate one”** – He cares for the world from the “depths of His being.” In today's Gospel, it is said that Jesus “saw a great multitude; and He was moved with compassion for them, and healed their sick” (Matt 14:14). The Greek word for compassion in this case, “*splanchnon*,” does not mean just to “suffer with” another person, but implies caring for someone from “the inward parts” of one's body, from the depths of one's existence.

R.S. Thomas in his poem, “**The Coming**,” describes a conversation between God, the Father and His Son, which took place before the creation of the world: “And God held in his hand / A small globe. Look he said. / The son looked.”

Thomas continues that the Son sees physical and human suffering and destruction and at the end says:

“Let me go there.”

Jesus entered into the world and human existence as deeply as possible.

2) **Jesus called the disciples to be part of His healing ministry.** Jesus heals people in various ways: sometimes He simply knows what is wrong and brings healing. Other times, as in last week's story of the blind men, He acts “according to their faith” or to the request and faith of other people. But He can also bring and direct people to work with Him in His healing ministry.

When the evening had come, the disciples encouraged Jesus to send the people away so that they could go and buy themselves food. Everyone contains within themselves a deep hunger: for food and other physical needs, but also for companionship, support, and encouragement from others.

In today's story, Jesus could have simply said that He Himself would feed the hungry people. Instead in a series of commands He calls and utilizes His disciples – transforming both them and what they have in the process.

– He said to the disciples: They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat” (14:16).

– And they said to Him, “We have here only five loaves and two fish (14:17)

– He said, “Bring them here to Me” (14:18).

– Then He commanded the multitudes to sit down on the grass. And He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, He blessed and broke the loaves

– and gave the loaves to the disciples; and the disciples gave them to the multitudes (14:19).

–So they all ate and were filled (14:20)

He called His disciples to feed the hungry people. They tell Him that they “only” have a little bit of food (five loaves and two fish). He commanded them to “bring them to me.” He takes their little bit and in Eucharistic language “blesses and breaks the loaves.” He gave them to the disciples and they gave them to the people.

Everyone ate and was filled!

3) Jesus has been calling us as well: Jesus likewise has called us for 50 years to cooperate with Him – to be His hands and presence – in feeding the deepest hungers of the people we encounter.

He has asked us to bring forth what we can – no matter how flawed or limited – which includes ourselves! He has worked with what we have and who we are – transforming both. This is what we hear at every Liturgy shortly after the singing of the Lord’s Prayer:

Attend, O Lord Jesus Christ our God, out of Your holy dwelling place, from the throne of glory of Your Kingdom; and come to sanctify us, for You sit on high with the Father, and are here invisibly present with us; and by Your mighty hand impart to us Your most pure Body and precious Blood, and through us to all the people.

Jesus consecrates and transforms the bread and wine into His Body and Blood – His Presence – “imparting” these through the clergy to the people and as we “depart the church in peace” allowing us to bring His presence into the world.

4) CONCLUSION: Jesus is the physician – the one who heals our souls and bodies. Being the “compassionate one” He is always attempting to heal us in every way possible because He knows and cares about us from the “depths” of His being. He also calls us to work with Him in this ministry of healing, the work of feeding the deepest needs of those around us. He invites us to bring whatever we have and can, so that He can take and transform every bit of it and us into that which feeds and fills each person.

Notes from the Sermon on Sunday, July 23, 2023

The 50th Anniversary Collection:

Who is Jesus? The Healer of our Senses

Scriptures:

- **Romans 15:1-7**
- **Matthew 9:27-35**

Throughout this summer in preparation for the celebration of our parish's 50th Anniversary, we're considering each week the implications of two questions we heard raised several weeks ago in the Gospel of St. Matthew:

“What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?” (Mt. 8:21-27)

“What have we to do with you, Jesus, You Son of God?” (Mt 8:29).

1) **IN TODAY'S GOSPEL** we hear the stories of several people who were healed of various afflictions – two men who were blind and another who was mute and demon-possessed. But, in the last line we are reminded that these are the kinds of things that Jesus came to do – it's the revelation of who He was and is – the physician and healer of our souls and bodies, the healer of everything about us.

“Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people” (Mt 9:35).

2) **JESUS HEALS THE BLIND AND CAN RESTORE OUR VISION – DO WE BELIEVE THAT HE IS ABLE TO DO IT?”** Jesus asked the blind men who followed Him, crying out and saying, “Son of David, have mercy on us! – **“Do you believe that I am able to do this?”**

At every Divine Liturgy we are asking him to perform the same miracle and He, no doubt, also wonders if we believe that He can do it?

Here's the Prayer Before the Reading of the Gospel:

Illuminate our hearts, O Master who loves mankind, with the pure light of Your divine knowledge. Open the eyes of our mind to the understanding of Your gospel teachings. For You are the illumination of our souls and bodies, O Christ our God, and to You we ascribe glory, together with Your Father, who is from everlasting, and Your all-holy, good, and life-creating Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.

3) **HE ALSO OPENS OUR MOUTHS, BUT WHAT WILL COME OUT?** Jesus cast out the demon and opened the mouth of the man who could not speak.

In Sunday's Sermon I shared several examples of how God at times enables those who cannot or have lost the ability to speak due to an illness or dementia to have moments of clarity. Here's a short summary of how this

was possible in the life of the recently deceased Tony Bennett, who despite having memory loss, was able to still perform songs that were deeply imbedded within him, songs he had long loved:

I shared similar experiences with parishioners who could respond appropriately to the Paschal Greeting – “Christ is Risen,” with “Indeed He is risen” – even when they could say nothing else.

The question which we might consider: What would come from our mouths – automatically, in a sense – if we could no longer coherently respond? What are the words (or songs) that are most deeply planted within us?

4) ACCORDING TO OUR FAITH – WHAT MAKES FAITH POSSIBLE? Jesus said to the blind men: “**According to your faith let it be to you**” (Mt 9:29). What are or have been the aspects of our life in the Church and in our particular parish that have nurtured or provided a foundation for our Faith?

Malcolm Guite in his book, “*The Word Within the Words*,” suggests the following:

What is Faith?

We might find it already set out in any of the four gospels,
or analysed and expressed in golden passages in the letters of St. Paul.

We might find it beautifully summarized and gathered together in the Creed;

We might find it shaped, expressed, and sung in that interactive poem, which is the church’s liturgy,
and especially in the sacrament of the eucharist.

We might find that it shines most clearly to us in the lives of the saints, living and departed.

Any of these living sources of faith might be the starting point for our journey.

I expect that for most people who “profess and call themselves Christians,” there is amongst all these interwoven texts and traditions, one particular strand that calls and draws them more than others and helps to make sense of the rest.

[Malcolm - the priest and poet –found it especially in the opening of the Gospel of St. John: “In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God.”]

CONCLUSION: Jesus came to preach the gospel of the kingdom and to heal every sickness and every disease among each of us. This can come as the direct response to a particular sickness or disease. But at other times it is revealed more broadly in the healing of our senses and the restoration of our ability to see and speak, to experience, respond, and participate in all that is brought together by, but also affirmed by the renewal of our Faith.

Notes from the Sermon on Sunday, July 16, 2023:

The Fiftieth Anniversary Sermon Collection:

2) Who is Jesus? – The Physician and One Who Listens

[For our 40th Anniversary, celebrated in 2013, we prepared 3 videos that were gathered into “**The 40th Anniversary Collection.**” They can be found at:

<https://vimeo.com/showcase/3347198>

For our 50th Anniversary celebration, we welcome everyone to share their thoughts about being part of our community. These will be video recorded in the church following the Divine Liturgy throughout the rest of July and longer, if necessary.]

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2) Who is Jesus? – The Physician and One Who Listens

Gospel Reading:

Matthew 9:1-8

1) **THE TWO BASIC QUESTIONS FOR US:** Throughout the summer as we prepare for the celebration of our parish’s 50th Anniversary we want to continue to explore the two questions that were introduced in last Sunday’s Gospel.

As Jesus was traveling back and forth with His disciples across the Sea of Galilee, we heard them ask in the midst of their journey:

“What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?” (Mt. 8:21-27)

And then we later heard the 2 demon-possessed men ask Him:

“What have we to do with you, Jesus, You Son of God?” (Mt 8:29).

As we consider these questions we also want to look at them from the perspective of our own and our community’s journey of faith and how Luke and Cleopas recalled that they came to know Him on the “road or **the way**” to Emmaus. What have we come to know about Him along the way of our own life’s journey?

2) TODAY: WHO IS JESUS and WHAT HAVE WE TO DO WITH HIM AND HIM WITH US?

Jesus – the Physician of our Souls and Bodies

Today’s Gospel begins with Jesus first returning by boat to the current base of His ministry, the city of Capernaum (Matthew 9:1 – the verse that ended last Sunday’s reading). Then we hear the story of the

paralytic who was brought to Jesus by the man's friends and forgiven his sins and healed of his illness (we hear the same story on the 2nd Sunday of Great Lent from the Gospel of St. Mark 2:1-12). Jesus provided the paralytic with both physical and spiritual healing.

As Jesus was for the paralytic – so He can be for each of us – what is said about Him in the Divine Liturgy:

“You are the physician of our souls and bodies”

3) **JESUS IS THE ONE WHO LISTENS:** In a remarkable verse from today's Gospel it is noted that Jesus **“saw their faith.”** He understood their commitment and concern for their friend, the one who was paralyzed. We don't know anything about the man Himself, but Jesus responded to their love for Him.

We also believe that He is **always listening** and **always hears** each person's cry for help for themselves and others, for the particular brokenness and paralysis within each of us. AND we believe that He responds in the way that is most appropriate for each person, recognizing the broad possibilities of healing which can lead to our salvation that only He – as the Physician of our souls and bodies – can provide.

Here is what we ask in the Liturgy:

- “Fulfill now, O Lord, the petitions of Your servants **as may be expedient for them;** granting us in this world the knowledge of Your truth, and in the world to come, life everlasting.”
- “Distribute these gifts here offered, O Master, to all of us for good, **according to the individual need of each;** sail with those who sail, travel with those who travel by land and through the air; heal the sick, **O Physician of our souls and bodies.”**
- Holy Communion is also received for "the healing of soul and body."

R.S. Thomas, who while serving St Hywyn's ("Howen's) Church in Aberdaron, Wales, compared prayer to the repetitive movement and sounds, the "breaking" of waves that he heard throughout the night (and both outside and inside of his church) and that God Himself – who is also awake – hears and lets "our prayers break on him, not like this for a few hours, but for days, years, for eternity."

CONCLUSION: In considering more deeply the questions: **Who is Jesus and what do we have to do with Him (and He with us)** – let us:

- welcome Him as the **Physician of our souls and bodies** and
- believe that He **eternally hears and can respond** to the deep concerns of our paralyzed lives and for those we care about and will provide that which is **“expedient”** for us and for **“the individual need of each.”**

The Other

R.S. Thomas

There are nights that are so still
that I can hear the small owl
calling
far off and a fox barking
miles away. It is then that I lie
in the lean hours awake listening
to the swell born somewhere in
the Atlantic
rising and falling, rising and
falling
wave on wave on the long shore
by the village that is without
light
and companionless. And the
thought comes
of that other being who is
awake, too,
letting our prayers break on him,
not like this for a few hours,
but for days, years, for eternity.

Notes from the Sermon on Sunday, July 9, 2023:

The Fiftieth Anniversary Sermon Collection:

Two Questions Along “The Way”

Gospel Reading:

Matthew 8:23-9:1

[For our 40th Anniversary, celebrated in 2013, we prepared 3 videos that were gathered into “**The 40th Anniversary Collection.**” They can be found at:

<https://vimeo.com/showcase/3347198>

The following Sermons will be part of our “**50th Anniversary Collection.**”]

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I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.

John 14:6

1) **INTRODUCTION – The WAY:**

“One of the best known of the Desert Fathers of fourth-century Egypt, St Sarapion, travelled once on pilgrimage to Rome. Here he was told of a celebrated recluse, a woman who lived always in one small room, never going out. Sceptical about her way of life — for he was himself a great wanderer — Sarapion called on her and asked: 'Why are you sitting here?' To this she replied: '**I am not sitting. I am on a journey.**'

I am not sitting. I am on a journey. Every Christian may apply these words to himself or herself. To be a Christian is to be a traveller. Our situation, say the Greek Fathers, is like that of the Israelite people in the desert of Sinai: we live in tents, not houses, for spiritually we are always on the move. We are on a journey through the inward space of the heart, a journey not measured by the hours of our watch or the days of the calendar, for it is a journey out of time into eternity.

One of the most ancient names for Christianity is simply “the Way.” “About that time,” it is said in the Acts of the Apostles, “there arose no little stir concerning the Way’ (19:23); Felix, the Roman governor of Caesarea, had ‘a rather accurate knowledge of the Way’ (24:22). It is a name that emphasizes the practical character of the Christian faith. Christianity is more than a theory about the universe, more than teachings written down on paper; it is a path along which we journey— in the deepest and richest sense, the *way of life*” (Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, pp. 7-8).

2) **TRAVELING – THE WAY OUT OR THE WAY IN:**

- The Greek word mentioned by Metropolitan Kallistos for the “**Way**” is “*hodos*” which is used to describe a “**way, road, or manner of life.**” The Old Testament book, *Exodus*, is a Greek word which means “**the way**”

out.”

- Many of us have, are, or will be traveling this summer, but all of us – whether we go to a geographic place or stay at home like the woman in the story above – will be on a journey: for the Israelite people in the Sinai their journey was the “**way out**” of Egypt – for us it will ultimately be the “**way in**” to a deeper place within our hearts.

3) TODAY’S GOSPEL: FINDING JESUS IN THE MIDDLE OF THE JOURNEY

- Throughout the summer we read from St. Matthew’s Gospel. At this point Jesus has left Nazareth, gone to Galilee, and is living in Capernaum, by the sea.
- The lesson begins and ends with him getting into a boat and heading across the Sea of Galilee from Capernaum to the country of the Gergesenes and then back again to Capernaum, but in between two encounters take place.

“Now when Jesus got into a boat, His disciples followed Him” (Matthew 8:23)

- the Calming of the Stormy Sea
- the Gergesene Demoniacs

“So He got into a boat, crossed over, and came to his own city/Capernaum” (Matthew 9:1)

- While on the sea a sudden storm developed and the boat was covered by the waves. Though his disciples were frightened, Jesus was sleeping and His disciples came and woke Him up. He challenged them for being of “little faith,” but then “arose and rebuked the winds and the sea and there was great calm.”
- His disciples marveled, saying: “**What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?**” (Mt. 8:21-27)
- Once they crossed the sea, they immediately met two men from the area who are demon-possessed. Though the disciples are not sure who Jesus really is or “what sort of man,” the demons certainly do:

“The demons cried out saying: **What have we to do with you, Jesus, You Son of God?** Have You come to torment us before the time” (Mt 8:29).

- These encounters and questions challenge us as well:

Who do we think Jesus is? What sort of person is He to us? Can we recognize Him in our own encounters with the overwhelming storms that we have or will experience? Has He brought peace and calm to us in these situations?

Do we wonder: “**What have we do to with you, Jesus?**”

During the Daily Evening Service of Vespers, there is a prayer which recognizes that we as well can experience thoughts, memories, and “evil imaginations” from which we call upon God for protection:

Guard (us) at all times, both during this present evening and in the approaching night, from every foe, from all adverse powers of the Devil, from vain thoughts, and from evil imaginations.

4) FROM THE ENCOUNTER WITH JESUS ON THE WAY TO EMMAUS:

- On Saturday evening during Matins we heard the story of the Encounter between the Risen Jesus and the disciples, Luke and Cleopas, on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35) – this story is depicted in the icon above the entranceway to our church.

“Beginning at Moses and the Prophets, Jesus expounded to them in all the Scripture the things concerning Himself” and the disciples later remembered how “while He talked with us on the **road/on the way (“hodos)** and opened the Scriptures to us...our hearts burned within us.” At the end of the story, the disciples returned to Jerusalem and told the other disciples “**about the things that had happened on the road/on the way (“hodos”)** and how He was known to them in the breaking of bread.”

5) CONCLUSION: LESSONS AS WE PREPARE FOR OUR 50TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION:

- As we anticipate the celebration of our 50th Anniversary let’s consider:

What have we come to know about Jesus “**along the way**”? What have we learned about Him from the Scriptures? What sort of person is He? What have we to do with Him?

How have we as a community tried to make Him present to others?

If He is especially known in the “breaking of the bread” and the Divine Liturgy itself is a journey to the Kingdom (“Blessed is the Kingdom” is how we begin) what can it mean for us as individuals and as a community to proclaim:

“Unite all of us to one another who partake of the one bread and cup in the communion of the Holy Spirit” (Liturgy of St. Basil).

- See how this theme is expressed in our 40th Anniversary Video entitled, ***From the Beginning.***
- As we consider our place within the 50th year history of our parish, let us consider the journey, the “**way**” which has brought us here.

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The Church gives us not a system, but a key; not a plan of God's City, but the means of entering it. Perhaps someone will lose his way because he has no plan. But all that he will see, he will see without a mediator, he will see it directly, it will be real for him; while he who has studied only the plan risks remaining outside and not really finding anything.

Fr George Florovsky