

10th Sunday after Pentecost 2006

A sermon by Rev. Fr. David G. Subu
Delivered on August 20, 2006

1 Corinthians 4:9-16 & Matthew 17:14-23

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, amen.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, today we consider the fourth gift of the Holy Spirit that St. Paul spoke of in Romans 12: exhortation. Exhortation is of course a word that we don't use or hear to frequently in today's American English. Not surprisingly it has several levels of possible meaning. An exhortation might be a sermon, a homily, or a lecture in its form. It might also be a simple warning, such as "Watch out! Danger ahead!" To exhort someone might be that we are giving them advice, suggestions, even opinions. Or we might be trying to persuade them towards some certain point of view. In all cases, exhortation has as its goal to motivate people. And this is what we are really talking about in regards to the gift of the Holy Spirit: motivation. We can understand what exhortation is as well by first examining what it is not. Exhortation is not criticism. Exhortation is not judgement. Exhortation is not conditional. Each of these points is critical if we are going to know how to exhort our brothers and sisters properly to turn their lives towards Christ whenever and however they might turn away from Him.

Exhortation is not criticism: How many people, including ourselves, when we begin to hear someone speaking to us about their faith or about religion, immediately begin to cringe inside, and begin to fear the onslaught of criticism about our own way of life, our own faith--strong or weak as it may be? This has been exacerbated by a militantly secular society where any talk of religion is considered at least a social blunder and at worst a violation of one's most sacred civil rights (for those who hear you)? Our culture has become so sensitive to anything that

sounds like criticism that we have become afraid to speak at all. Thankfully, the kind of exhortation that St. Paul is speaking of is not interested in being critical in fact it is the opposite.

In the Epistle to the Corinthians that we read today, he describes his own lot as an apostle, "*Being reviled, we bless, being persecuted, we endure, being defamed, we exhort.* As we see, he contrasts exhortation against defamation-- that is, "to be spoken of evilly," from the Greek Word that means as well to blaspheme. Blasphemy does not just mean speaking evilly about God. We can also blaspheme each other by speaking evilly of each other. Likewise, exhortation, being the opposite, does not seek to point out the evil in another person, but rather, the good in them. Thus St. Paul, who excelled in sainthood above countless others, would speak humbly, saying only, "¹⁰We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are distinguished, but we are dishonored!" And so by speaking only well of us who are sinners, he is able to move us to repentance and inspire us to become worthy of such compliments.

Next then, Exhortation is not judgment. How very often are we afraid to speak of our faith and to motivate others to faith because they might think we are judging them? It is easier nowadays to just say, "You believe what you want, as long as it makes you happy. I won't judge you, and I won't try to tell you any different." Who here can say that they have never done this? How many of us feel this temptation? We need to realize that our duty as Christians to reach out to others and share the gospel does not mean a) that we are to judge anyone, of course not, but also b) that we are not to just accept everything as of equal value or truth. Maybe it is because we are so accustomed to or afraid of responding to others with criticism and judgement that we end up choosing not to respond at all.

Exhortation is not judgmental. But then, what is it? The word in the original Greek New Testament for Exhortation is *Parakleseis*. You might have seen or heard this word before. The Holy Spirit is called the Paraklete, or comforter. During the first two weeks of August we

celebrated every week night a beautiful service called the Paraclesis. Paraclesis is Greek for "comfort," but in the sense of "exhortation" or "entreaty." When we exhort according to the Holy Spirit, we do not badger, criticize, or judge. We comfort through kind words. Now if someone is sick, there is no comfort for that person if we say to them. "You're not sick, you and your body just have a different definition of being healthy than me. Let's agree to disagree." Would that make anyone here feel comforted, really? Likewise, if someone has strayed from the gospel of Jesus Christ, they too have become spiritually sick. It will not comfort them to say "What ever you want to believe is fine." (Indeed, is it because it is the same thing to say, "because it doesn't really matter?") But it will comfort them to say, "I love you. God loves you. There is a better way for all of us with Him. Let us seek Him together."

Lastly, exhortation is not conditional. It is unconditional because God's love is unconditional. As St. Paul said, *"Being reviled we bless, being defamed we exhort."* We must not hold back this gift of comforting exhortation, even from those who frankly, don't deserve it or have done everything in their power to hurt us. We must not hide the lamp under a basket, as the Gospel teaches. We must be ready to share the comfort of Christ with anyone and everyone we come into contact with, even if they revile, persecute, and speak evilly against us. Is this not what we hear in the Beatitudes given by Christ at the Sermon on the Mount? *"Blessed are you when you suffer insults and persecution and every kind of calumny for my sake?"* St. Silouan of Mt. Athos, a saint of the early twentieth century, spoke that the true mark of a Christian, the true mark of one who had acquired the Holy Spirit, was the ability to love one's enemies and pray for them.

Likewise, we must not sit back and wait for a person to come around and ask us to exhort them. By then, they don't need to be motivated, they are ready to go. We must risk being

misunderstood by others, resented by those who love us, if we are going to speak the truth in our daily lives. After all, we have but a limited time on earth. If we continue to put off saying the things we ought to say to those who need to hear them, the time will come when it is too late, the damage will have been done, the opportunity passed. God forbid that this happen to any of us, for it is truly one of the greatest tragedies.

Certainly each of us can think of someone we need to share the gospel with. Very often, they are the individuals in our own families. Maybe we have a brother or sister, son or daughter, who needs to be reminded that the only needful thing in life is Jesus Christ, the Word of God. Maybe we know someone from this very parish who has fallen away and needs to be exhorted to return and restore themselves to spiritual well-being in Christ. If each and every one of us made it our personal responsibility to bring back one person to Jesus Christ, that would double the size of the parish. Do any of you think it impossible? Well, if we put our faith in the people we are trying to restore, then it is impossible. If we put our faith in ourselves, a few might return out of love for us. But if we put our faith in God, and ask for the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth to fill our exhortations, then it is more than possible, it's going to happen.

Let us pray then that each of us receives from the Holy Spirit those gifts of speech, comforting, and exhortation that we need in the calling that each of us has been given to reach out to others. Whether it be to a whole community or to a single individual in our lives, may we each receive the grace to heal and help. For you, O Christ, did say to your disciples, *"If you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you."*