

Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee 2007 & Parish Assembly

A sermon by the Rev. Fr. David G. Subu
delivered on January 18, 2007

⁹Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: ¹⁰“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹“The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. ¹²‘I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’ ¹³“And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’ ¹⁴“I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Christ is among us!

Today our parish will hold its annual assembly. Such events are often greeted by the membership (and that may even include the clergy) as a necessary evil, something we are obliged to do not because we are Christians but because we function in the world as an incorporated entity with a Constitution and By-laws. Just as in public elections and meetings, generally only a fraction of the voting population will attend. This is unfortunate. Why? There is a deeper meaning and purpose to our gathering together for a Parish Assembly than the mere conducting of business. There is in the history of the Orthodox Church great honor in the calling of councils. We are after all, the Church of the great Councils, the Church of Sobornost, of conciliarity, not dictatorship. The church of the Apostles gathered in Jerusalem in council to work out by the Grace of the Holy Spirit the pressing questions of their day. We should honor the spirit of the Church’s work and the historical precedents for assemblies and not be too quick to assume today’s work is merely a requirement of the modern world.

After all, what is the meaning of the word “liturgy” but literally, “the work of the people?” Our assembly this afternoon is not separate from the Divine Liturgy which we celebrate this morning but a natural extension of it. Protodeacon Peter told me a story of a priest

he knew who on the day of the Parish Assembly would preach no sermon, because, as he would say, “the sermon today is what you have to say.” He would also not even dismiss the adults from liturgy but the parishioners would stay in the church, going right into the meeting, not leaving until it was done. Of course, besides the spiritual meaning of this, this approach also had the benefit of not only edifying the faithful but also expediting their work, and everyone could go home on time!

For my part, I’d rather have a little break in between, and make sure everyone has a little food in their stomachs for the sake of good spirits. And you can see, I am already sermonizing, God forgive me. Yet it is absolutely vital that we all understand that the Assembly is truly a continuation of the Divine Liturgy. How we conduct ourselves in the Assembly should be no different than how we conduct ourselves inside the church during services. Just as we pray for those enter the church with faith, reverence, and the fear of God, we should take those things with us into our deliberations. Each of us bears a witness of our faithfulness by how we conduct ourselves.

Likewise today’s Gospel shows exactly how we must conduct ourselves before the Lord. The message of the Publican and the Pharisee is central to our Christian life. The prayer of the Publican is the basic prayer we should both begin and end with on a daily basis. The message of the Parable is clearly stated: “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” But this is also for us true not only as individuals but also as a congregation on the level of a whole community. We should be careful as a community never to lose sight of God’s grace. Never to take credit for the blessings He has granted us. Someone once told me of a bad dream they had which has since stuck in my mind as image of this problem. In the dream, the people were all gathered together for services. But there was no sound, no singing,

no praising and thanking God. Instead, everyone was patting each other on the back and congratulating each other for how beautiful and wonderful their church was. They all felt quite satisfied that they had somehow made it, accomplished something noteworthy. Brothers and sisters, this is an image not of the Church but of the assembly of Satan! Yet it is all too easy for parishes to fall into this trap when things are going well—to become complacent, self-satisfied, even contemptuous of others. We must, as a community, never forget who we truly are, publicans and harlots, sinners and exiles desperately in need of the mercy and forgiveness of God.

Let us therefore approach with faith, love, and the fear of God, and give our thanks to God in the spirit of the Publican and not the Pharisee. “God be merciful to us sinners!”