

Playing God

Sunday, March 11, 2018

3rd Sunday of Lent

Adoration of the Cross

Good morning all.

In her book, *Who is God, Who am I, Who are you*, Dee Pennock has a chapter called "Everybody plays God." Our teen group has been reading this book, but it is not just for young people. This is a book that every Orthodox Christian should read and re-read. Everybody plays God. Do you believe that? Do you know what she is talking about here? What does it mean for a person to "play God"? Is it really true that we all, even us good Orthodox Christians do this? Here at Mid-Lent I am hopeful that we have been spiritually strengthened enough to consider this as a real and recurring problem. A problem that we all must learn to deal with.

What does it mean to "play God"? To play God does not mean thinking that we are the Creator of the Universe or anything silly like that. Rather, playing God is simply going about the business of our lives without seriously asking for, expecting, or even really wanting, God's guidance, direction and active empowerment. It is expecting to be good without God. Ms. Pennock writes, "Now look at yourself and see whether you have been expecting something from yourself that really only comes from God, that he has to put in us before we can have it. Were you expecting to be fair and

just to other people? You can't until God shows you, in your personal life, how real justice works. Were you expecting to be friendly and kind to others? You can't until God has delivered you from certain fears and insecurities, until his Holy Spirit has strengthened you, and until you have recognized God's kindness in your own life. Were you expecting to love someone with all your heart? You can't until Jesus first comes into your heart and teaches it what love really is, and gives you the power and understanding to love someone else.

Now I can just hear my own mind telling me, "Hey man, you're an Orthodox Christian, you've done all that." And that's true. But, have I done that lately, like today? Because Christian life is not something that we can acquire, like an object or even a philosophy or belief system. Christian life is a daily struggle to keep God's Grace, His very Presence and Spirit, alive and active in our hearts. But our pride doesn't like that at all and none of us are without pride, without vanity and ego. I heard a great definition of ego not long ago. E.G.O. -Edging -God -Out. That's exactly what the ego does, what pride does, what vanity does. That's what playing God is all about. And everybody plays God.

One of the biggest and most common mistakes that we make as Christians is to actually try and use God to build up our Ego. We want Him to "fix" what we don't like about ourselves so that we can be more pleased with ourselves. God is not a crutch for the weak, but many people try to deal with him that way. After 9/11 the churches were full for a while. People felt the need for God. After a while, after they had recovered somewhat from their shock and fear, they edged themselves out of church. They didn't

think that they needed God anymore. This also happens to people who "come to the Lord" because of gross personal sins. Often once they are "cured" and "don't do that anymore" they lose interest in God - they don't "need Him" anymore. These people are playing God - with God; trying to use God for their own egoistic reasons. They also, after a time of self-correction, begin to edge themselves away from God.

However, Scripture and experience teach us that God is "a consuming fire." His Grace consumes pride, vanity and egotism just as fire consumes dry wood. He is the God who tells us in Isaiah 'My thoughts are not your thought, neither are your ways my ways'? This is the same God who also tells us in today's Gospel, "Whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it." These are "hard sayings"; hard to hear, hard to understand and hard to do. Jesus likens this to dying, and a cross.

The cross Jesus is saying that we must "take up", is not a one-time cross, or even a sometimes cross. It is a daily cross of conscious, deliberate, prayerful effort to submit our lives to Christ; to die to our proud, egotistical attempt to run our lives by our own rules and our foolish high opinion of our opinions. Referring to this St. Paul says "I die daily." This is really, really hard to do, and, to quote The Princess Bride, "anyone who tells you something different is trying to sell you something" It is so hard in fact that we cannot do this on our own. We need help from Christ himself, and from each other. If there is one foundational realization that we must always try to remember, it is this; we cannot do this without help.

The most effective way of getting that help from Christ is sincere, heartfelt Prayer. We have been taught that the three spiritual exercises of Great Lent are Prayer, Fasting and Alms giving, but the greatest of these is Prayer. It is also the most difficult. All of the Fathers and Teachers agree on this. This is because our pride, our vanity and our egos hate prayer. These are the three great spiritual "diseases" of the human heart and mind. I am also afflicted with these diseases, as are we all. I know first-hand how hard it is to maintain a personal prayer life. I have tried to manage without that, but it doesn't work. Prayer is still hard for me but I have learned that the only way to keep from "edging" God out, is to keep inviting Him in. That is prayer.

A great prayer that can help us do this is the Lenten prayer of St. Ephraim the Syrian. The first line tells God what we don't want; a wasted life, ego driven plans for happiness and misery when those plans fail (or succeed). The second line asks God for a new and different kind of life altogether, a life that only Christ can give us. The last line is the kicker. Here we ask God to help us mind our own business. Think about it first, though. There is no magic here in just saying the words of the prayer. Is this what you really want? Or do you want to keep on playing God? Jesus tells us to "ask", but we must ask honestly. If we do, this is a prayer that He will always answer.

I want to thank all of you who have discovered the power of prayer and are keeping a rule of daily prayer. Don't let up. We need you. Most likely you are already using the Prayer of St. Ephraim daily. May God Bless your labors with success, and He will. For those who still find personal daily prayer difficult or even impossible, I want to invite you to make a new effort.

Think about it. What is it you really want from God. Will you take up a little cross of prayer? I can promise you this. If you will say this prayer daily, with sincerity, for the rest of the fast, Christ will answer your prayer. Then you will know a relief beyond your greatest imaginings. The relief that all people discover when they stop playing God. Amen.