

26th Sunday after Pentecost

November 29, 2015

We have been talking about how the Orthodox Church can be understood as a house of healing, a spiritual hospital that offers an effective program of medicines and restorative therapy for people whose inner world, whose hearts have been infected and wounded by evil. That's us. Today's Gospel lesson is an excellent scriptural portrait of this idea. Many of our Orthodox elders, interpreting this parable in an allegorical way identify all of humanity with the man who is beaten by robbers and left for dead. The good Samaritan is Christ Himself, the true friend of man, who rescues us, patches us up a bit and brings us to the inn, which is the Church. This inn is the place where healing can deepen and continue until, as it says "He comes again".

Of course Christ does not "go away" in any absolute sense. He is Himself both the Great Physician and the life giving medicine. This medicine is imparted to us most directly through the mystery of Holy Communion and the other Sacraments of the Church. In addition, just as in most physical healing, we teach that a certain amount of 'physical therapy' is needed, exercises to help the weakened and wounded soul recover and acquire healthy strength. In the Church hospital these spiritual exercises are what is called asceticism – principally the disciplines of prayer, fasting and alms giving. These are things that we can and must do to co-operate with the Lord's efforts to help us. But just as with most physical therapy people do not seem to be very keen or consistent about this part.

There is one further dimension of the healing process that is much more important in spiritual healing than physical healing and that is the subjective attitudes of a person. With physical healing the patient is given a medicine, say an antibiotic, and it works regardless of the patient's faith or lack thereof. In the Church, however, the effectiveness of the medicine, for example, Holy Communion, is very much conditioned by the patient's spiritual attitude. We saw this so clearly in last week's Gospel of the woman who was healed by touching Jesus' robe. Remember how many people were touching Him but it was to her

that His healing energies went out. In explaining this miracle Jesus rolls up all of the subjective attitudes needed for healing into one word – faith.

Over the next few weeks I hope to unroll this word, faith, so that we can examine some of its component parts and acquire a better understanding of what faith really means for us as Christians. We will be looking at five spiritual attitudes that our teachers say are essential for effective spiritual healing: faith itself, repentance, prayer, hope and the willingness to follow Christ's Commandments.

First, faith itself.

Mr. Webster tells us in his dictionary that faith is, among other things "a firm belief in something for which there is no proof". This would apply equally to belief in God and to belief in no God. The word that qualifies any belief as faith here is the word 'firm'. To qualify as faith, belief must be held with strong conviction and fidelity. Lots of people, for example, may say they "believe" in God but such belief seems to have no real impact on how they live. The scriptures tell us that the demons also believe – but they have no faith. Mr. Webster continues, defining faith as "allegiance to duty or a person – loyalty, fidelity to one's promises and trust".

To be faithful is to be steadfast in affection or allegiance, loyal, firm in adhering to promises or in obedience of duty, conscientious. Synonyms are "loyal – a firm resistance to any temptation to desert or betray". Staunch – fortitude and resolution to adherence coupled with imperviousness to influences that would weaken it. Stead-fast implies a steady and unwavering course in love, allegiance or conviction. Resolute – implies firm determination to adhere to a cause or purpose. This last synonym I find to be quite intriguing. It is constancy which stresses continuing firmness of emotional attachment – without necessarily implying strict obedience or vows. This is something of a puzzle but perhaps a hopeful puzzle for many of us.

These definitions can help us recognize two distinct features of faith; something or someone is believed and that belief must be important enough to be acted upon and when necessary, defended. Christian faith, I think, will require

more than rational acceptance of doctrines, although that is important also. I'm afraid I'm going to say this very imperfectly, but an appreciation of beauty, the beauty of goodness, love of beauty is so important. That's why we try to make our worship services as beautiful as possible and why we sing our theology to beautiful melodies. The heart must be fully engaged for it is the heart that has been set upon by robbers and left bleeding out by the road of life.

This is why I tell people who ask "how can I become Orthodox?" just soak it up. The Church services are like healing waters for the soul. There will come a time for study but at first most people just need a good bath – and we have that.

The one other thing that I encourage people to begin doing as soon as possible is fasting. Fasting is one of the best practical ways of building and sustaining faith. It strengthens the will while at the same time humbling it (and we are all going to need strength of will if we are to stand faithful to Christ) and it also helps deepen our love for Christ by sensitizing us to the awesome beauty of God's love for us. It also helps us gain wonderful glimpses and moments as the mysteries of Christian truth begin to reveal themselves to us.

Amen