

MAY 14, 2017 MOTHERS DAY

ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

JOHN 4: 5-42

“ST. PHOTINI----AN EXAMPLE FOR MOTHERS”

I'm starting this morning with a story borrowed from Father Jack Sparks of blessed memory. Some of you knew him---his first ministry for Christ was street preaching in San Francisco and Berkeley in the 1960's, bringing hippies and radicals to Christ. Then years later he came into the Orthodox Church and was ordained to the priesthood. He served faithfully until the Lord took him home a few years ago. I heard him tell the following story in a sermon in Indianapolis about 35 years ago....

Once upon a time a woman dreamed she was standing at the pearly gates to heaven talking with St. Peter. She was trying to convince him that her children should be admitted to heaven. She told him that she had raised her children to be very nice folks. Peter answered, "That's nice!". "I always kept them well-fed, well-clothed, and healthy and gave them a good education." "Very nice!", answered Peter. "They grew up well-rounded---active in sports, music, and cultural activities.....". "So nice!", said Peter. "And they are very polite!". "How nice!", replied Peter. "Over-all, I have raised them to be successful adults and very good citizens!" "That's all very nice!", Peter answered. "But I must tell you-----everything you've told me won't help them at all getting into heaven. You didn't mention doing anything that would lead to the salvation of their souls. And that is not so nice!"

It's all a matter of putting first things first.

Today is Mothers Day. Being a mother is a many-sided calling. Many, many responsibilities. Mothers do it all. And they do it all out of love. Of course, fathers love their children. But there is something unique about a mother's love.

But mothers (and fathers!) can get their priorities concerning their children mixed up, out of order. As St. Peter let that mother at the pearly gates know, the real priority needs to be our children's salvation. I think all Christian mothers would agree with that in principal, but sometimes priorities get out of order---and other things end up more important in reality.

What needs to be the most important thing as we raise our children is to lead them into a life of living for Jesus Christ. Some years back in Kansas a woman was pushing her baby down the sidewalk in a stroller. She came upon some workmen putting in a new sidewalk--the cement was still wet. She asked if she could make a temporary imprint of her baby's feet in the cement, knowing the workers would soon smooth it over before it hardened. The workers said it would be fine so she picked up her little one, took off the little girl's shoes, and put her feet down into the cement. As she did so, she made sure the feet were pointing in a particular direction----pointing to a church just down the street. She was making a statement that day----she wanted to always point her child to the Lord. (in "Our Daily Bread", 3/31/92)

Mothers (and fathers)---I assume you hope to go to heaven by the grace of God. And if

you think about it, obviously you are going to want your children to be there with you! So as a mother, that should be far and away your top priority with your children---that their souls be saved.

Today's gospel reading from John 4 is about a mother who got her priorities right (after a while!). She is often called "the woman at the well" or "the Samaritan woman". After she became a follower of Christ, she took the name Photini. You see her on the large icon on the side wall of the nave and on the small icon right here in front. We don't often think of her as a great mother as there is no description about that in the Bible. Until she met Jesus Christ she was a very immoral woman, fallen low, low, low. As Christ told her in verse 18 of today's reading she had lived out of wedlock with 6 men in a row. But Jesus was able to lead her to faith in Him that day when they talked at the well in Samaria. She repented of her sinful ways and immediately, even that day, began to bring other people to Christ. And later she became a traveling missionary, traveling to many areas of the Roman Empire spreading the Christian gospel. She went through much hardship and much suffering but was happy to do it out of love for Jesus Christ.

That sinful woman at the well became a Saint—St. Photini. Church Tradition tells us she had two children, two sons named Victor and Joses. And they traveled with her and shared in her missionary work. She mothered her sons in such a way that they both ended up strong Christians with a deep and abiding love for Christ, happy like their mother to dedicate their lives to being missionaries for the Lord. St. Photini had her priorities as a mother right---and it showed in how faithful to God her sons were.

After years of missionary work (*we don't know how many years as we don't know when she started traveling; and we don't how old the boys were---from the date we do know {the date of their trip to Rome} we can tell they must have born at some point in time after John 4 when Photini must have been married. We know this because Tradition says they were still young, no more than teenagers apparently, when the trip to Rome took place*) Photini and Victor and Joses went to the capital city of Rome to do missionary work. And Photini decided to try and convert the emperor himself. It was 66 A.D. and guess who the emperor was? The infamous and notorious Nero, one of the wickedest emperors ever. But Photini figured no one was hopeless. Anyone could be forgiven and accepted by God. So she and her children managed to get an audience with Emperor Nero.

She told Nero about Jesus Christ, but Nero, famous for killing Christians, had no interest repenting and converting. Instead, he had St. Photini and her sons arrested and decided to force them to denounce the true God and worship pagan idols instead. And the way to do that, he decided, was to torture them until they broke and renounced Christ. To make it as hard as possible for St. Photini, she had to watch as her two sons were tortured horribly. She encouraged them to stay faithful and reminded them that this short time of pain would be nothing compared to the eternal joy of heaven---and she told them she wanted them all to be in the next life together----so stay faithful to Christ. They did stay faithful and eventually were executed, leaving this life as holy martyrs. Then it was St. Photini's turn--Nero had her put through tortures as well, hoping that even if the boys wouldn't give in, their mother would. But she wouldn't...and finally Nero gave up and had her killed. And she joined her sons Victor and Joses in heaven. And now they are together forever.

Mothers love to be with their children. And mothers, of course, wish for themselves and their children to be together forever in the life to come. And so mothers (and fathers!) need to live in such a way as to raise their children to be faithful followers of our Lord Jesus Christ so this eternal togetherness will take place.

Once there was a mother who was a believer in Christ but not very serious about her faith. She only occasionally went to church but did frequently send her young son to Sunday School. One Sunday afternoon, he said to his mother, “Mom, my teacher said today that we should want to live totally for Jesus. I want to do that, but how can I know how to do it?” The mother didn’t answer for a bit, but silently thought for a moment or two, realizing her answer could be very important for the life of her son. After a while she said, “Watch me and I will show you how to live for Jesus by how I live.” On the spot, she had decided to become a much more serious follower of the Lord. And she followed through with that and dedicated her life to Jesus Christ. Her son did watch her and he followed her example and grew into a dedicated servant of Christ. The years went by and illness and impending death came the mother’s way. Her son, now a grown man, stood at her side as her time of departure drew near. And the mother reminded him of that conversation long ago when he was a little boy and she asked her son---“Did you watch me?” He replied, “Yes, mother---and thank you for showing me how to live for God.” (in “Our Daily Bread, 7/11/05)

Congratulations, mothers, on your special day—I hope it’s a happy one for you! And, of course, as I mentioned earlier, today is St. Photini’s special day, too. So take a little time today to think about her. And then, with God’s help, follow her example. Raise your children as she did---with the overwhelming priority that they grow into faithful disciples of the Lord. And then you can have the joy of being together with them forever in the life to come.

And remember to ask St. Photini and her holy sons, St. Victor and St. Joses, to help you by their prayers to God for you. Of course, they are not dead. They are alive in the presence of God and in company with each other. Ask them—and they will pray for you that you might follow St. Photini’s example.

