

AUGUST 28, 2016

HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

I CORINTHIANS 4: 9-16

THE STORY OF ST. MOSES THE BLACK

In our epistle lesson for today, St. Paul tells the Corinthian Christians that he is their father. Hear again just a couple of verses---I Corinthians 4: 15-16---“For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. I urge you, then, be imitators of me.”

St. Paul is here specifically referring to his role as spiritual father to that early parish in Corinth, Greece. Because he was their father, they should follow him, obey him, and imitate him.

But verse 16 can be applied in a larger way. Since God has blessed His Church with growth since the time of the Apostle Paul, and since He has blessed us by making many people holy---into Saints---we now actually *do* have many spiritual fathers, and spiritual mothers. I am referring to all the Saints who have gone on before us over all the centuries since Christ. Truly holy men and women, made holy by God. And if we imagined them all together as a group addressing us, they could possibly use verse 16 with a slight modification. St. Paul wrote, “I urge you, then, be imitators of me.” The Saints all together could say, “*We* urge you, then, be imitators of *us*.”

There are many important things about the Saints. One of them is the examples they set for us. We should imitate them, just as St. Paul told the Corinthian Christians to imitate him. With God’s help, and through the power of their prayers of intercession for us before the throne of God, we can imitate the Saints, our spiritual fathers and mothers.

And in order for us to imitate them, it is very important for us to learn about them and know about them. So today we will look closely at one Saint. His Saint’s Day, his day of death (or birth into heaven) is August 28, today. He is the subject of one of the large icons on the side wall of our nave, so you’ve seen his picture many, many times. But perhaps you don’t know that much about him....

The St. Moses we commemorate today is not the more famous St. Moses in the Old Testament (his day is actually next Sunday!). This St. Moses lived in the 300s and 400s A.D. He was a native of Ethiopia. He was not a Christian. He was a slave. He was a huge and strong man---very, very powerful. He was so strong that when he decided he wasn’t going to be a slave anymore, no one could stop him from escaping. He just ran away.

To put some distance between him and possible pursuers he went north to Egypt. And there he quickly took up a life of crime. He became a highway man, a robber----and a particularly cruel and violent robber. A gang of 70 other criminals formed around him and they terrorized sections of Egypt. Because of his size and strength, and because he was a black man in white Egypt, he became well known as “Moses the Black”.

His success as a criminal, and the fact that many looked to him as their leader in crime, led to his becoming an extremely arrogant and proud fellow. Everyone was afraid of him,

and he liked that. He himself was afraid of no one.

One night he decided to let his 70 fellow robbers sleep and went out prowling around by himself. He came across a monastery out in the desert. The monastery was locked up for the night and had tall walls. To a criminal mind like that of Moses, that meant it was a good place to rob---tall walls meant there must be good things inside that the inhabitants wanted to protect.

So Moses managed to get over the wall and rummaged around inside but found very little of any value. After all, the monks had taken a vow of poverty! All was dark, all were asleep, except there were a couple of candles burning in the monastery chapel. Moses went in there and saw the abbot of the monastery. He was still awake in the middle of the night, praying all by himself in the church.

There was something about this holy monk that was different than anyone Moses had ever known. The monk was not at all afraid of Moses. Everyone else always was, but not this man. He expressed no fear whatsoever, only love and concern for Moses. He told the robber, "There's no reason for you to steal anything from us. If there is anything you need, we'll give it you in the name of Christ." And they began to talk----and talk and talk and talk. The monk told Moses all about the Lord—and it went right to Moses' heart. And before dawn came, Moses was kneeling before the abbot who was praying for the criminal, asking God to forgive him and save him.

Moses came to the light of Christ that night and eventually was baptized. He left behind his old criminal ways and soon became a monk. He adopted an extremely strictly ascetic way of life in the Egyptian desert as a way to battle against his old temptations which still sprung up in him. Much prayer, very strict fasting...and then he took on some hard physical work.

There were quite a few hermits living in various isolated spots in that part of Egypt. And what was their biggest physical need? Water. So Moses got a big bucket and spent most of each day going to the one spring in the area. He would fill the big bucket and carry it to a few hermit's huts and fill their little buckets so they'd have enough water for the day. But he had to go back and forth to the spring quite a few times each day to keep everybody supplied. Very, very hard work, but then he was still a very, very strong man.

And there were a couple of spiritual benefits to this work. First, lots of time to pray! As he struggled along with that heavy bucket of water, he talked continually to the Lord. And second, it helped, by the grace of God, with his beating back his strong temptation to still be proud and arrogant like he had been when a criminal. Serving all the other monks, by labor tougher than a slave would have to do, helped to humble him. And he became very humble, indeed---and walked very closely with the Lord.

He gradually changed from a rough man to a gentle man, from a proud man to a humble man, from an angry man to a non-judgmental man.

One time there was a monk in the area who got himself into trouble in some way. The other monks felt it was necessary for there to be a monastic council to decree some punishment upon him. Moses was sent a notice but answered back that he was such a sinful fellow that he couldn't take part in passing judgment on anyone---he was just too bad to participate. Well, the bishop disagreed and sent word that Moses was required to attend. So out of obedience, he went. He took his big water bucket, filled it with sand, and poked a hole in it near the bottom. He carried it to the meeting and entered the meeting carrying the

bucket with sand pouring out of it. The other monks asked him why he was doing this. He replied, “The sand in the bucket stands for all the sins in my life. As I walk along my sins pour out behind me just like the sand pours out of the bucket. So how can I pass judgment on anyone?” The monks were moved by his answer---and cancelled the meeting! (I don’t know what the bishop said! Maybe he was there...)

Moses died at age 75. By then, he had been a Christian many years and was very close to God. A warning was sent to him and some of his disciples that a fierce barbarian tribe was sweeping through that part of Egypt. This tribe had no respect for churches or monasteries or monks. And they commonly not only robbed, but also killed their victims. Most of the monks in the area ran for their lives. Moses told his companions, “I am staying. Jesus said, ‘He who lives by the sword will die by the sword.’ When I was young, I lived by the sword. So I have always expected to die by the sword. Perhaps that time has come. If it is God’s will that this happen now, I accept it.” So he stayed put along with some of his disciples. The next day the violent tribesman arrived. They stole what little the monks had (almost nothing!) and killed them all. St. Moses’ death took place on August 28, 405 A.D.

Moses was a wicked man who was called by Jesus Christ. He then began to lead a holy life as God changed him. And he died a holy death.

To conclude with a few quick lessons for us from the life of St. Moses.

First---Anyone can change. Anyone can be changed by God. Don’t write off anyone as a hopeless case, even the nastiest person you know or the criminal in prison. The worst sinner can become a true Saint.

Second—We should be encouraged. You can change. I can change. Perhaps our sins aren’t like those of Moses. But we all have sins that are hard to leave behind, that tend to pull us away from God..... Look at Moses and be encouraged by how God changed him. That means He can change you and me, too.

Third---Don’t judge others. Remember that bucket of sand with a hole in it! Like Moses, let us pay attention to our own sins, not to others’ sins. As Christ told us plainly---“Judge not so that you will not be judged” Follow Moses’ example.

Fourth---This should be so obvious it wouldn’t even be necessary to mention it among Christians. But with all the racial tension of recent years in America, maybe it’s good to mention it anyway. The story of St. Moses the Black helps to remind us that the color of someone’s skin doesn’t matter. There is only one race in this world---the human race. God doesn’t care at all what color someone is. And, as God’s people, we shouldn’t either.

Remember St. Moses of Ethiopia, St. Moses the Black. Follow his example. And remember he is very alive and in the presence of God. And there he is praying to God like he did on those hard days carrying that bucket of water. So ask him to pray for you to God.

Through the prayers of St. Moses, may Christ have mercy on us and save us!

