

FEBRUARY 12, 2017

ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

Luke 15: 11-32

“COMING HOME TO GOD”

Somewhere down south, at Guyandotte Methodist Church, there was a break-in a few years ago. The burglars stole from the church about \$5000 worth of sound equipment and office equipment. Of course, the parishioners were quite upset. And then a few nights later, there was another break-in. This time, the fellows that broke in the first time returned and brought everything back that they had stolen! (in “Preaching”, Vol. 22, No. 6, May/June, 2007, p. 20)

Why? No one ever found out----they just brought it all back! We call that repentance---a change of heart that led to a change of behavior.

A more famous example of repentance is in today’s gospel lesson from Luke 15. It’s the most famous of all of Jesus’s parables----the story of the Prodigal Son. Just a brief recap of the story-----

The younger of a man’s two sons demanded his share of the family inheritance from his father. The father gave him the money and he went far away. Quite quickly, he blew all the money by falling into degenerate living. Once he ran out of money, he got hungry. And in his desperation he ended up getting a lousy job feeding pigs. He made so little money and was still so hungry that even the pig slop looked appetizing to him! He was as low as you could go—especially for a Jewish man, that was not a nice job.

And then when he was at his very lowest, he repented of his sinfulness. He changed his mind. He changed his heart. He now wanted to be back home. And that change of mind led to a change of behavior. He left the pigpen behind and made the long walk back home.

On that long walk home, he must have been worried. How was his father going to respond? Would he beat him? Would he throw him out? Would he barely take him back but always be angry at him? He figured the best he could hope for was that his father might allow him to live at home as a servant. Yes, he must have worried a lot while walking.

But he didn’t need to worry, because his father was a very loving father. When he saw his prodigal son coming down the road towards home he ran out to meet him, to greet him, to embrace him. And then he threw a party in celebration of the return. It was a happy day!

We all “go prodigal” sometimes. Maybe dramatically like in the parable. Or maybe more quietly and gradually. But we all sometimes go wrong, and distance ourselves from our Heavenly Father. Hopefully, like the Prodigal Son, we decide to repent and come home to God. When we do so, we may worry---Will God forgive me? The answer of the Lord’s parable is very clear----Yes, God will forgive you! Like the father in the parable, He will embrace you, forgive you, and love you.

The normal way for us to go home to God is through the sacrament of Confession. I

began explaining this sacrament in last Sunday's sermon and will finish explaining it today. Last week, we looked at what the sacrament is all about and about how often to go. Today we will look at how it works and how to go about it. So let's dig in.....

First, preparation. This involves some self-examination. Maybe the night before, maybe the morning of the day you go. The basic thing is to ask yourself—How have I sinned against God? What should I confess to Him in the sacrament? Some prayer books have lists of detailed questions to ask ourselves for this purpose. That's a good way to go. Some people like to use the 10 Commandments as a guide for self-examination. That's also a good way, as long as we remember that Christ, in the Sermon on the Mount, spoke of how we need to go beyond just the literal meaning of the 10 Commandments---for example, in Matthew 5: 21-22, Christ says that being angry at our brother violated the commandment that says, "Thou shalt not kill".

Or you can do self-examination in a less formal way, not using a written guide, but just looking deeply into your heart and soul---"what do I need to be forgiven for?" Think about your sins. Be sorry for your sins. To be aware of our sins is a very important step. It's a big accomplishment. St. Isaac of Syria, about 1500 years ago, wrote—"The man who sighs over his soul for one hour is greater than someone who raises the dead." (The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian, Hilarion Alfeyev, Cistercian Publications, 2000, p. 132) To be aware of your sins, to sigh over them---that is no little deal!

So take some time "sighing" over your sins. Make your list---most do the list mentally, some prefer to put it on paper. There might be some "big" sins, there might be some "little" ones. (In reality, of course, there are no "little" sins, but some sins do disrupt ours, and others', lives less than other sins.)

Sometimes people come to Confession with no specific sins to confess---just words like "I have sinned, I'm a sinner". Well, if you come to the sacrament a lot, that may *sometimes* be okay. But if you always go to Confession in that very general way, it's decreasing for you the spiritual value of the sacrament. You really need to get specific! Otherwise, it's as if you went to the doctor and said, "I'm sick." When the doctor asks for symptoms, you say, "Well, I'm just sick." Tough for the doctor to know if you need an aspirin or open heart surgery! Same thing in Confession---the priest is at a loss to know what advice to give if you don't ever give any specifics.

Second, avoid a common mistake..... Be sure to confess *your* sins, not someone else's sins. This is a common mistake. Your spouse, your co-workers, your boss, etc.---sure, they have their sins. But they should come and confess them themselves.

Back in the years after World War II, when the Communists took over Romania, many Christians suffered greatly. Many were killed, many were locked up for years in horrible prisons. And many became saintly through all of that experience. One priest, Father Surianou, was greatly loved by his fellow prisoners. A holy man, a kind man, a gentle man---people were attracted to him and went to him for advice and encouragement in the horrible conditions they lived in. And many went to him for Confession. One day, Father Surianou was hearing Confession from a man who had suffered first under the Nazis around the end of World War II and now was suffering under the Communist jailers. And in his confession he went on and on about how evil the Nazis were, and about how evil the Communists were. After a while the priest said, "I wish to thank you for being so kind to your enemies. The Nazis haven't been coming for Confession. And the Communists

haven't been coming for Confession. So you have helped them out today by confessing all of *their* sins. But now, son, it's time for you to stop confessing their sins and go ahead and confess your *own*." Richard Wurmbrand, "With My Own Eyes," in "Again", Vol. 23, No. 2, April-June, 2001, p. 24)

Follow that priest's advice. Confess your own sins, not someone else's.

Some details-----

-- At St. Matthew's, the **most common times** for Confession are after Vespers on Saturday evenings, and during the last part of Matins (starting about 9:40) on Sunday just before liturgy begins. And you can come before (or maybe after) other services, too. And, as well, you can make an appointment to come at any time you wish.

-- There is an **icon or crucifix of our Lord Jesus** in front of you when you confess at the Confession kneeler. It is there for you to see as you confess to remind you that it really the Lord you are confessing to. The priest hears you, too, but he is there just as Christ's representative.

-- While you are confessing, the priest will put his **epitrachelion, or stole**, over your head. Remember how, in today's gospel, the father embraced his prodigal son when he came home to be forgiven and restored? It's because of that that the stole is put over the person confessing. It stands for the arms of God. You come to God to confess your sins---how does God respond? Does He hit you, rebuke you, throw you out? No, He hugs you and welcomes you back---that's what the stole stands for in Confession.

--Confession is **the most informal sacrament**. Oftentimes, it's a discussion between priest and the person confessing. If you think you may need a long discussion, you may wish to come to Confession outside of the usual times, so you will have time to talk things over....

--**Confidentiality**---It's totally confidential. You don't have to worry about the priest telling your husband, your parent, or any one else!

-- I may have mentioned this already in last week's homily. **Priests go to confession, too**. We don't perform the sacrament on ourselves! So I'll be contacting my father confessor pretty soon---Lent is coming fast!

Penance---This is the term commonly used for the direction and encouragement given by the priest to the one confessing in Confession. It is not a rule that penance is given every time, but it usually is. If, as I did earlier, we compare going to confession to going to the doctor, then penance can be compared to the medicine the doctor prescribes. It is spiritual medicine to get spiritually healthier.

The carrying out of the penance does not in any way earn absolution for sins. There would be no logic to that idea because the penance is explained during the sacrament, usually just before absolution is proclaimed. That means the penance can't be done until *after* the absolution---so absolution is given before the penance can ever carried out at all. This is a good reminder that we cannot earn forgiveness from God by what we do. Forgiveness comes because God is merciful, not because we carried out penance.

Penance is something we do to try to grow in Christ and to sin less. It is often prescribed in specific connection to the sin being confessed as a way to stop committing that sin. Penance vary greatly depending on the type of sin involved, the "type" of person confessing, and on the priest. Two different people who committed the same sin may be given penances that are different from one another. Just like a doctor may not always

prescribe the same medicine for two different patients with the same diagnosis, because a medicine that's just right for one person may have bad side effects for someone else....

Absolution-----The priest does the absolution, the declaring of God's forgiveness of sins, at the end of the sacrament. As he speaks the words of God's forgiveness, he uses his hand cross to make the sign of the cross over the head of the person confessing. This is a reminder that forgiveness is given to us because of Christ's death on the cross. And then the person being absolved stands up, clean of sin and guilt. What a great feeling---to know that we have been forgiven, absolved by God, cleansed. We may have "gone prodigal" but our Father has happily embraced us and welcomed us back home

And now we walk away from the confessional kneeler, hopefully determined to carry out the penance and, by God's grace, leave that sin behind us.

But sometimes (oftentimes!) we fall and we fail. Then back we go to Confession again.... A monk was asked once, "What do you monks do in that monastery?" The monk replied, "We fall and get up, we fall and get up, we fall and get up again." (Father Anthony Coniaris, Eastern Orthodoxy: A Way of Life, Light & Life Press, p. 115) And so we keep going to Confession throughout our life, hoping God grants up the opportunity for a last Confession on our death bed.....

That is just a brief overview of the sacrament. If you still have questions, please feel very to ask me.

Maybe you haven't been going to Confession. Maybe it's been a long, long time..... Well, we are all supposed to go during Lent and that is now just 2 weeks away. So it's a good time now to decide to go during Lent and to start preparing to do so.

Yes, even though we love our Lord, we are sinners. Yes, we have our sins! And so we should bring them to God in Confession. He will forgive us. The sins will be gone. He will not hold them against us.

You will rejoice. And so will God, just like the father in today's parable of the Prodigal Son. Give God joy! Come to Confession.

