

**MARCH 26, 2017**

**ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH**

**Hebrews 6: 13-20**

**“THE MOST IMPORTANT THING”**

Sometimes, maybe in catechism classes or in discussion with already Orthodox folks, a question comes up---“What is the most important thing we do as Orthodox Christians?” There are lots of important things, of course! But what is number one? Today I will focus on the answer to that question.

And so you know where I’m going with this before I get there.....  
You know what a jail break is---when a prisoner busts out of jail to get free. Your spiritual ancestors, the Orthodox Christians in the earliest centuries of Christianity, sometimes carried out “reverse jail breaks”. Not breaking out of prison, but breaking *in!* Not sneaking out of jail, but sneaking *in!* Here’s how it happened. The Church was illegal and Christians would often get locked up for their faith. If, in a particular jail, there was neither a bishop or priest among the incarcerated, that clergyman would somehow manage, probably in secret, to have a liturgy and have the Holy Eucharist so all the imprisoned Christians could partake of the Body and Blood of Christ.

But if there was no bishop or priest locked up with the Christians in some particular jail, then there could be no liturgy, no Eucharist. And that was horrible for the Christian prisoners as they wanted so badly to have liturgy and Holy Communion. So, sometimes when that happened, clergy would break into the jail. They would somehow get in if they could, bringing along a little bread and wine, and secretly perform a liturgy and distribute Holy Communion. What great joy this brought the prisoners! And what high risk it brought to those who did the reverse jail break. For if you get caught trying to pull off a reverse jail break, guess what? You have to stay in jail yourself---and I’m sure some of those reverse jailbreakers were put to death. Very dangerous—but the early Orthodox thought it was worth it in order to have the Holy Eucharist. (The Shape of the Liturgy, Dom Gregory Dix, Continuum, 2005, p. 152)

So now you know what the early Christians thought was the most important thing to do. Now you know what they considered the most important thing in life and now you know where I’m going with this sermon.....

The human race is sinful. If left to ourselves, we face misery and eternal death. But there is a God, a good God. And that God wants to forgive us, heal us, and save us. And so the Second Person of the Godhead, the eternal Son of God, came down and became one of us in Jesus Christ----to save us from death, to die on the cross for us. His death and resurrection are an offering He made to His Father that brings us forgiveness and eternal life.

In the Old Testament, Israel always had a high priest. He was the only person who could ever enter the innermost part of the temple, the Holy of Holies. And he only went in there once a year on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. And there, on that day, he would offer up animal sacrifices asking for forgiveness of his sins and of the sins of all Israel.

In the book of Hebrews, from where today's epistle reading is taken, we learn that there is a better high priest than the ones in the Old Testament. Jesus, the Son of God, is the ultimate High Priest. And He offers up a better offering than the sheep and goats that were offered up in the Old Testament. He offers up Himself on the cross.

Through His offering of Himself, He enters into the heavenly Holy of Holies for us. We see this in today's epistle lesson, in Hebrews 6: 19-20---“We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf...” Through His death and resurrection, Jesus has entered behind the curtain into the inner shrine, the heavenly Holy of Holies.

And here we come to the heart of it all, to the heart of life itself. God allows us to join in with that offering Christ made on the cross. He allows us to enter into the heavenly Holy of Holies along with Christ. As we just saw in the words of St. Paul---“Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf...” A forerunner leads the way for others to come along---we get to go into the inner shrine of God's presence right along with Christ.

This happens in the divine liturgy, in the Holy Eucharist. At every liturgy, Christ's offering becomes *our* offering. We offer Christ, *and ourselves*, to the Father. And so, along with Him, we enter the Holy of Holies. This happens through the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, as we read later in the book of Hebrews, in chapter 10, verses 19-20-----“Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the *blood of Jesus*, by the new and living way which He opened for us through the curtain, that is, through *His flesh...*” It is through Christ's blood and flesh that we enter heaven. In the Holy Eucharist we are brought by Jesus into the heavenly sanctuary---into the very presence of the Father. We are united to God.

***Doing this, making Eucharist, uniting ourselves to the eternal offering of Christ—this is the most important thing about being Orthodox.***

This is not at all some abstract thing, just some nice belief. We have actually have to *do* something for it to take place. Somebody bakes the bread. Someone makes the wine. They have to be physically carried to the church and then into the altar in the liturgy. Then they are lifted up to become the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.

And as we lift up these gifts to God, we are also lifting up ourselves to God. We, too, are offered up. We are offered to the Heavenly Father.

That is what being Orthodox is about. This is what we live for---to come here for liturgy to join together to offer up Christ---and offer up ourselves to God the Father.

Talking about Jesus? That's a good thing. Believing in Jesus? A very good thing. But we must do more than talk and believe. We must wish to be *united* with Him. That begins in Baptism. And it is deepened in the Holy Eucharist.

Remember those reverse jail breaks I told you about? Our spiritual ancestors wouldn't let anything keep them from Holy Communion. Another example took place about 300 A.D. in Antioch, Syria, the ancient home of our own patriarchate. A bunch of Christians had been arrested by the Roman authorities and locked up in a prison. There was a priest in the group named Father Lucian---but he was being severely punished. He was tied down on the ground on his back. His arms were free but he could not sit up or stand up. But he and the other Christians wanted to have liturgy and Holy Communion so badly. Father

Lucian had an idea. They found the cleanest cloth they could find and laid it across Father Lucian's chest. Then they took the little bit of bread and wine they had managed to get and they set them on the priest's chest. And there, lying flat on his back the whole time, he performed the Divine Liturgy and they all joyfully partook of the Body and Blood of Christ together. What commitment! What love for the Lord! (The Shape of the Liturgy, Dom Gregory Dix, Continuum, 2005, p. 152)

The priority our spiritual ancestors had, the Holy Eucharist, should be our priority, too. Nothing should keep us from it!

There are many churches around besides our own Orthodox parishes. We drive by them, we have friends and relatives that attend them, perhaps we have visited them at some time. Many of them seem in much better shape than we Orthodox in many ways. Many of the other churches are much bigger and more successful. More dynamic and more popular, maybe better connected with modern culture. They seem to be more talented than us and just generally better at many things. Spectacular music, all kinds of great programs and ministries, better preachers.....And to our shame (and this isn't their problem, it's *our* problem), sometimes they seem more committed to God than we are. Yet.....there is something we have, something we have hung on to all these years, something we share with Father Lucian and those old reverse jail breakers: we have the Holy Eucharist. It is the most important thing we have. We have been faithfully celebrating it for 2000 years and we, thank God, will keep right on until Christ comes back. We may be inefficient, out of touch, old-fashioned, and not nearly holy enough-----but we do have the Eucharist.

Briefly, what are some consequences of believing that the Eucharist is the most important thing about being Orthodox..... Three things.....

**One**---Treat it in accordance with what we believe it is: the most important thing in life. That means we should be here for it. Remember those reverse jail breaks? Not needed anymore---the church doors are unlocked! But remember the commitment level of those ancient reverse jail breakers---have a similar commitment and be here at each liturgy.

**Two**---The Holy Eucharist is the central thing about the liturgy. It is why our service is the way it is. Knowing that helps us to better understand what goes on in the liturgy. And having better understanding of it should help us to more consciously and truly worship God.

**Three**---The ultimate importance of the Body and Blood of Christ should influence how we live each day. If we receive the Holy Sacrament on Sunday, if we enter heaven by so doing, then we should not live like the devil on Monday. In the liturgy we receive the holiest of all God's blessings-----so we should live in a holy way!

So we have seen what is the most important thing we do as Christians---the Holy Eucharist. If we sometimes forget this, or if the hectic nature of our lives overshadows this, then we should remember the word, "Abilinitina". Abilinitina was a town in North Africa in ancient times. It was part of the Roman Empire and Christianity was illegal there at the time of this story---about 300 A.D. There was a Christian parish in Abilinitina. No church building back then, of course, but they met in a home for the liturgy and to receive the Eucharist. Then a wave of pagan persecution swept over North Africa. The Roman

mayor had no particular hatred for Christians so word got out in town---if the Christians would just lay low for a while, not gather for worship, the local government would just ignore them---probably no arrests and no trouble. And so the Orthodox of Abilinitina decided to have no liturgies until the persecution wave faded away.

But as the weeks went by, this just got too hard for them. They could no longer bear to not gather to pray and receive Holy Communion----they couldn't stand it! So word was sent around to all Christians----they would take the risk of having a liturgy. They would try to keep it secret and discrete, but they would gather on such and such a day to have the Eucharist.

And so they did---with great joy they worshipped God and all received Holy Communion. But a neighbor noticed the crowd that had arrived and figured out what was going on---and the neighbor "called the cops". And so, just as the liturgy ended, the police swooped into the house and arrested everyone present. Soon, they were all hauled before the mayor for trial. The mayor was angry that they had not taken advantage of his willingness to ignore them and had, instead, had a liturgy. They said they just could not wait any longer and had to meet. They knew how high the risk was---a life and death matter---but they had decided that they couldn't live without receiving Christ's Body and Blood. They would rather have the Eucharist and die than not have the Eucharist and live. And they all were executed, dying joyfully together for the Lord that day.

Abilinitina---remember that name, that town, those spiritual ancestors of yours 1700 years ago. They are not dead---they are living Saints in the presence of God. And they are praying for you---that you might love Christ like they did. So the next time you feel like sleeping in on Sunday, or you think you might be too busy to come to liturgy.....remember the Christians of Abilinitina.

The Holy Eucharist, the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ---it is worth living for; it is worth dying for.

And, now, the sermon is over.....let us go ahead and do the most important thing. Let us offer the holy oblation to God and celebrate the Holy Eucharist.

