

St. Spyridon of Trimythus

Sermon 12/12/2010

In this morning's epistle reading from chapter 5 of The Letter to the Ephesians, we heard St. Paul instruct the faithful to "walk as children of the light," "try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord," "do not be foolish", and "understand what the will of the Lord is." While each one of these quotes could by themselves be the topic of individual sermons, let us say for right now that these are part of the job description for each and every one of us as Orthodox Christians. Far from being abstract concepts, we can actually see these criteria lived out in the lives of the saints that we commemorate.

Today we commemorate St. Spyridon of Trimythous, a bishop of the 4th century Apostolic Church. If I may go off on a tangent for just one moment, it is important that we remind ourselves that Bishops are people too. The Church hierarchy are not a different class of people – Deacon, Presbyter, and Bishop – that have no relation to the laity – the people of God. The Church hierarchy are one aspect of the wholeness of God's people. The clergy come from the people and are ordained to serve the people. And the saints, as I have said many times before, are not the great exceptions, but the great examples. In other words, St. Spyridon is for us a great example of what it means to be an Orthodox Christian. Let's take a look at his life.

Saint Spyridon of Trimythous was born towards the end of the third century on the island of Cyprus. He was a shepherd, he had a wife and children. He used all that he had for the needs of his neighbors and the homeless. For this the Lord rewarded him with a gift of wonderworking and he was able to heal those who were incurably sick and even to cast out demons. During the reign of Constantine the Great (306-337), he was made Bishop of Trimythous, a city on the island of Cyprus. As a bishop, the saint did not alter his manner of life, but combined pastoral service with his ongoing deeds of charity. Here are a few highlights from the events of his life.

Along with such greats as St. Athanasius of Alexandria and St. Nicholas of Myra, St. Spyridon participated in the sessions of the First Ecumenical Council in the year 325.

This simple shepherd turned out to be a great defender of the Orthodox faith against the Arian heresy. He successfully refuted a Greek philosopher who was defending the Arian heresy. As a result of their discussion, the philosophical opponent of Christianity became a defender of St. Spyridon's teachings and also received Holy Baptism.

The saint cared for his flock with great love. Through his prayer, drought was replaced by abundant rains, and incessant rains were replaced by fair weather. Through his prayers the sick were healed and demons cast out. He even restored a dead child to life by his prayers.

St. Spyridon once celebrated a divine service in an empty church with just himself and a few servers. An angelic choir of angels joined and sang the responses. Attracted by the singing in the church, the people who lived nearby hastened towards it. As they got closer and closer to the church, the wondrous singing filled their ears and gladdened their hearts. But when they entered into the church, they saw no one but the bishop and several church servers, and they no longer heard the singing which had greatly astonished them.

One of my personal favorites - especially important during this Advent fast - is an amazing example from the life of the saint on receiving strangers. One time, at the start of the forty-day Fast, a stranger knocked at his door. Seeing that the traveler was very exhausted, St Spyridon asked his daughter to get some food so they could eat with their guest. Since it was Lent, however, there was not much food in the house. In fact, his daughter came and informed her father that there was not even bread in the house. Apologizing to his guest, he ordered his daughter to cook a salted ham from their meat stores. After seating the stranger at the table, St. Spyridon began to eat, urging the man to do the same. When the latter refused, calling himself a Christian and pointing out the fact that it was a fasting period, the saint replied, "It is not proper to refuse this, for the Scripture proclaims, "Unto the pure all things are pure" (Titus 1:15).

Here is another favorite of mine. Robbers planned to steal some of St. Spyridon's sheep. They broke into the sheepfold at night, but here they found themselves bound up by some invisible power and unable to move. When morning came the saint went to his

flock, and seeing the immobilized robbers, he prayed and released them. For a long time he spoke with them, advising them to leave their path of iniquity and to earn their livelihood by respectable work. Then, he gave them a gift of a sheep and sending them off, the saint said kindly, "Take this for your trouble, so that you did not spend a sleepless night in vain."

From the life of St. Spyridon, we see exactly what it means to be a saintly Orthodox Christian. First of all, sainthood starts at home – his life was saintly even before he was a bishop because of his faith-driven charitable deeds. Second, he was a man of prayer and a churchgoer. Next, he was a defender of the Orthodox faith. At the Council of Nicea, St. Spyridon did not say “what do the differences matter as long as you believe in Jesus?” Rather, he stood firm in his defense of the faith of the Apostolic Church and Orthodox Christianity despite the fact that he was not some well-educated theologian but a simple shepherd-turned-bishop. The story above about the heavenly choir at a sparsely attended church reminds us that even when there are just a few of us in Church, be it daily vespers, or a weekday liturgy, there are choirs of angels singing with us as we worship the One God in Trinity. Then, St. Spyridon’s encounter with the thieves shows us that we are to counter evil, not with malice and revenge, but with Christ-like love, forgiveness, and mercy.

Especially important for us is the lesson that welcoming the stranger supersedes the fasting rules. The story about St. Spyridon eating ham during the fast is not a call for us to abandon or ignore or to take lightly the fasts of the Church. It is a reminder about hospitality. In Matthew 25, Jesus says to those who are counted among His sheep, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” In welcoming the stranger, St. Spyridon was actually welcoming Christ into his home. Now, if we remember the Lord’s words in Mark 2:19, there is no fasting when the Bridegroom, i.e. Christ is present. That, in my interpretation, is why St. Spyridon did not worry about the fasting rules in this situation. The presence of the stranger was really the presence of Christ.

If you would permit me one more tangent, I would like to apply this principle to our lives right here in St. Louis. We are blessed to have a chapter of FOCUS, the

Fellowship of Orthodox Christians United to Serve, which is reaching out to the poor and the homeless here in St. Louis. Every Sunday, they serve meals to total strangers who, as we know from the Gospels, are really Christ the Bridegroom in our midst. Hence, when we are serving and feeding the guests of FOCUS, even if it is Advent or Great Lent, we need not worry the fast either for them or for ourselves. Our job is to provide healthy sustenance to the poor and hungry unimpinged by fasting rules applicable only to us Orthodox.

In the life of St. Spyridon, we do not see the life of some exceptional saint whose deeds are beyond our capabilities. Rather, we see the life of an Orthodox Christian who has truly heeded the words of St. Paul to “walk as children of the light,” “try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord,” “not be foolish”, and “understand what the will of the Lord is.” This is the life that all of the people of God, man and woman, young or old, ordained or not, are called to do. That life begins today right here in Church where by the operation of the Holy Spirit and the grace-filled sacramental life of the Church we are transformed - if we are willing to be transformed – into saints. As we approach the feast of the Nativity of Christ, let us meditate upon the life of St. Spyridon and be inspired to walk as Children of the Light. For Jesus Christ came to be the Light of the World; and to Him is due all glory, honor, majesty, and worship, now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.