

SEPTEMBER 10, 2017

ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

GALATIANS 6: 11-18

“GLORY ONLY IN THE CROSS”

The famous 20th century painter, Pablo Picasso, was an egomaniac. He loved to talk about himself. One of his favorite pastimes was to have guests come to his home and then to tell them all about his life, his paintings, etc. He would do almost all the talking..... Picasso had 2 turtledoves for pets. The birds would sometimes make a laughing sound----very, very loud. Many times it would happen, when Picasso was telling someone a story about himself, that right when he got to the climax of the story the birds would let loose with their loud and screeching laughs, preventing anyone from hearing how Picasso's story ended! Picasso would become quite upset with the birds---they were laughing at him! But sometimes he would say it was good they did it because their humiliating him in this “reminds me of my vanity.” The birds took the great painter “down a notch”. And if you know much about Picasso, he really did need that! (Life With Picasso, Francois Gilot & Carlton Lake, Signet, 1965, pp. 139-140)

Smart birds! They knew what was good for their owner. And perhaps something similar would be good for us all. For pride is a common problem and it is not a pretty thing. It causes many, many problems.

St. Paul deals with it in our epistle lesson today, from the sixth chapter of his epistle to the Galatians. Galatia was an area in the north central area of what is now Turkey. We read in Acts that St. Paul had done missionary work in that area and now he is writing a letter to the Christian parishes there, because some of the believers there are causing trouble due to their own pride.

There was a group in Galatia that are usually called “the circumcision party”. (*I know that sounds strange and you're probably thinking how glad you are you never got invited to one of those parties! But it doesn't mean people getting together to celebrate a circumcision. “Party” in this context means a group of people---a group of people who were all focused on circumcision.*) The circumcision party was a group of Christians who thought that all male Christians, including Gentile converts, had to be circumcised according to the laws in the Old Testament.

We see in the New Testament that Paul and the other apostles said “no” to that belief. They said circumcision was a temporary instruction for God for a certain period of time and was no longer part of God's plan since the coming of Christ. There's a lot that could be said here about this, having to do with the law being fulfilled in Christ, baptism replacing circumcision, etc.----but we're not going to go there today. Main point for now--the apostles decided (you can read about it in Acts 15) that circumcision was not

necessary. And that has been the teaching in Christianity ever since---that circumcision since the time of Christ is of no religious or spiritual significance. It's just a medical and/or cultural decision for parents.

But the "circumcision party" didn't agree with the apostles. If a Gentile man wished to become a Christian, these folks would say, "Wonderful---you'll need to be baptized.....and circumcised." A few of us were joking about this recently---imagine we at St. Matthew's had a church growth committee and were discussing how to increase our membership. We concluded that requiring adult male converts to be circumcised would not exactly cause great church growth! And, remember, back in St. Paul's day, there were no pain killers! So this was not a tiny thing they were talking about.

One of the motives of the pro-circumcision folks in Galatia was pride. If they could pressure people into getting circumcised, that would show how much power and influence they had as leaders in the church. Talking someone into submitting to the knife showed you really were a "big shot" in the church. And so they gloried in their success whenever someone gave in to what they demanded. St. Paul describes their pride in verse 13 of today's epistle reading-----"they desire to have you circumcised so that they may glory in your flesh." They gloried in the flesh of others.....meaning they gloried in getting others to submit their flesh to the circumcision knife. By submitting to circumcision, people were submitting to them. And that made them happy---they gloried in it.

But in the book of Galatians, where today's epistle reading is from, St. Paul stands up to these folks. He doesn't do that out of some pride or egoism of his own. He doesn't do it to glory in his authority as an apostle. There is only thing he glories in as he writes in verse 14---"But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." He glories only in Christ's cross.

St. Paul was a great apostle, certainly one of the two greatest. But he was humble and not self-righteous. He admitted his own sins and weaknesses. We see this every liturgy when we pray and sing the Communion Prayer before communing. That prayer partially quotes what St. Paul wrote about himself in I Timothy 1: 15---"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinner. And *I* am the *chief* of sinners." St. Paul did not glory in himself; he knew his own sins. He was not a proud man like those in the circumcision party. Instead, he gloried in the cross of Christ.

We should be like St. Paul, not like those pro-circumcision folks. We should never glory in ourselves, but only in Christ and His cross. Even if we do something good, we shouldn't take the glory for ourselves, but give the glory to the Lord.

There is an old story about the donkey that Christ rode on as He entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. We usually think of donkeys as humble animals....but not this donkey. He was a proud animal. And as He carried Christ through the gates and the crowd yelled and cheered and waved palm branches, he just assumed all the praise was for him. He thought to himself, "Smart crowd! They recognize a great donkey when they see one." Now the donkey did do a good thing that day---he gave the Lord a ride. But the glory was meant for the Lord, not for him. (Preaching The Word of God, Father Anthony Coniaris, Light & Life Publishing, p. 17)

It's easy for us to be like that donkey---to do something for God and then to become

proud of it. It's easy for us to be like the circumcision party-----to glory in ourselves and in our own supposed goodness. But we should be like St. Paul and glory only in Jesus Christ and His cross.

If we are like the circumcision party, though, then we have a problem with what is called "self-righteousness." That means to think you are righteous in yourself. It means to rely on your own supposed righteousness, not on the righteousness of God.

How can you tell, if like those pro-circumcision folks, you are falling for the temptation of self-righteousness? Three clues:

One clue----If you are more concerned with other people's sins than with your own sins. If you are truly righteous, you will be too busy repenting of your own sins to pay much attention to other people's sins.

Second clue---If it is important to you that *others* notice how good you are. Do you thrive on people saying how great you are? That's a big clue!

Third clue----When you do something good for God or for other people, is part of your motivation, or most of your motivation, to get thanks and recognition from others? An example----let's say you decide to help out with one of our monthly serving of meals to the poor at St. Herman Shelter..... Do you do that because others will say what a good person you are to help the poor? Or do you do it because the poor need help? And....if you do a good deed for the church or somewhere else----and nobody notices or says thanks".... Does that upset you or hurt your feelings? Big clue!

If we are truly depending on God's righteousness and are not self-righteous, then we will be concerned about our own sins, not others' sins. We won't want to hear praise from others, because we know that we're not all that good. And we will do good happily, even if no one knows or ever says "thank you" to us.

So don't be like the circumcision party---thinking that you're better than others; seeking to dominate and get everyone to realize how good you are; thinking that you are the wisest of all.

Instead be like St. Paul---not glorying in yourself, but in Christ and His cross. As St. Paul wrote in verse 14 of our epistle---"far be it from me to glory except in the cross." And keep a realistic view of yourself, as did St. Paul, writing in I Timothy 1:15-----"I am the chief of sinners."

Once an abbot of a monastery in Greece was getting arrogant. He thought more and more about how wise he was and how he had so much knowledge of God. He became proud of how he really had managed to understand God quite well. One night he went out for a walk on the hills near the monastery. As he walked and thought about how wise he really was, he came upon a shepherd and his sheep---and the shepherd was doing something unusual. He was staring intently at a part of the sky and then bending down and scratching a number in the dirt. Then he would again look intently at another part of the sky and then again bend down and scratch a number in the dirt. After watching for a while, the abbot asked the shepherd what he was doing. He said, "Father, I am counting the stars and keeping track of the number by writing in the dirt.---I hope to get them all counted up before dawn." The abbot replied, "But that's impossible. There are far too many stars for you to count! You can't get their whole number into your mind!" The shepherd then said, "But, Father, it's more likely I'll succeed at this than that you will succeed at understanding

God.” The abbot was struck to the heart by the rebuke to him from this shepherd (whom the story says was actually an angel sent to confront the abbot). He walked back to the monastery with his head hanging down in sorrow for his own foolishness and pride. He went to the chapel and spent the rest of the night on his knees begging God’s forgiveness. (Experiences During The Divine Liturgy, Stephanos Anagnostopoulos, Gelbasis Publishing, 2008, p. 46)

Don’t glory in yourself, in your own supposed goodness or wisdom. Instead, like St. Paul, glory only in Jesus Christ and His cross.