

Thanksgiving

(A pit stop on our *Journey through the Parables*)

In the United States, Thanksgiving approaches; on this day, we gather with loved ones to give thanks to God. While this is a national holiday and not specifically a religious Orthodox feast day, it's truly a good thing that the nation stops to give thanks. God gives us many blessings: our homes, our families, our communities, our very lives. It is good to give thanks for those gifts! It's also really very important for the health of our souls that we cultivate gratitude.

St. Ambrose of Optina said,

“We must begin with thanksgiving for everything.

The beginning of joy is to be content with your situation.”

Isn't that interesting? In our last lesson, we saw the man who gave his servants talents congratulate them on a job well done and say, “*enter into the joy of the lord*”. To live in the Kingdom of heaven is to live joyfully -- to enter into the joy of our Lord -- and the beginning of joy is to be content with your situation, to begin with thanksgiving.

It's not always easy to be content with your situation, is it? Sometimes we are in a difficult situation, and sometimes we are dealing with things that are not so good. But here's a question for you:

If I set a lemon on this table, and you are wearing glasses with blue lenses, what color is the lemon?

Well, if you're looking through blue lenses, the lemon on the table looks blue, or maybe green. But the answer to the question is yellow; the lemon is always yellow. You can wear any sort of glasses, and that won't change the lemon. It will just change the way you see the lemon.

There is an old story about a farmer which you may have already heard. It's not from the Bible, but it is a kind of parable, because it's a simple story that teaches a profound truth:

Once upon the time there was an old farmer who had worked his crops for many years. One day his horse ran away. Upon hearing the news, his neighbors came to visit. “Such bad luck,” they said sympathetically. “Perhaps,” the farmer replied, “Who knows what is bad or good?”

The next morning the horse returned, bringing with it three other wild horses. "What great luck!" the neighbors exclaimed. "Perhaps," replied the old man. "Who knows what is bad or good?"

The following day, his son was taming the wild horses, and one of them threw him off and he broke his leg. The neighbors again came to offer their sympathy on his misfortune. "Perhaps," answered the farmer, "Who knows what is bad or good?"

The day after, military officials came to the village to draft all the young men into the army. Seeing that the son's leg was broken, they passed him by. The neighbors congratulated the farmer on how well things had turned out. "Perhaps," said the farmer, "Who knows what is bad or good?"

And the story could go on and on. Every time something happens, the neighbors think they know whether it was a good thing or a bad thing -- but the old farmer is wise, and he knows that it's hard to tell whether something is bad or good. We don't really know what will come next, and that might make something that looked bad suddenly look good instead, or vice versa.

The farmer asks, "Who knows what is bad or good?", and of course, the answer is God. God knows, because He always knows how the story ends. God can see the bigger picture; He can see all of eternity. We know that He loves us and that He has promised to take care of us and to love us, and that ultimately what really matters is our life in His Kingdom. If we trust God, then we can trust that all things will turn out good in the end -- even if they look bad today.

What color is the lemon? Well, God knows it's yellow, but sometimes you might think it's blue or green or orange. That's ok. If you can trust that God will turn all things to the good, then you won't worry about how your eyes are seeing that lemon, and you'll trust that it really is yellow. It's like the way that we might be caught in a terrible downpour and be surrounded by a huge rain storm, but we know that the sun is still there. We may not always see it, but it's there!

This is the trick to beginning with thanksgiving for everything, to becoming content with our situation: if we can learn to see the good things, then we can easily find things for which we thank God. In St. Paul's letter to Titus (1: 15) we read the beautiful line:

"To the pure, all things are pure."

Just like if you wear blue glasses you will see blue, if you have a pure heart, everything you see will seem pure.

So if having a pure heart means seeing the pure, seeing the good in things -- then it makes sense that gratitude will help us enter into the joy of our Lord. If you are always seeing the good in things, then of course you will feel joyful!

But what if you can't always find something for which you really want to thank God? What if life seems really hard and miserable today? St. Basil the Great, who was a wonderful Church Father and who built the very first Christian Hospital, once said in a sermon:

“When you sit down to eat, pray. When you eat bread, do so thanking Him for being so generous to you. If you drink wine, be mindful of Him who has given it to you for your pleasure and as a relief in sickness. When you dress, thank Him for His kindness in providing you with clothes. When you look at the sky and the beauty of the stars, throw yourself at God's feet and adore Him who in His wisdom has arranged things in this way. Similarly, when the sun goes down and when it rises, when you are asleep or awake, give thanks to God, who created and arranged all things for your benefit, to have you know, love and praise their Creator.”

--St. Basil the Great, from Homily V

It doesn't need to be some big thing -- a new toy or a big win or a huge success. There are a lot of things we want, and when we don't have them, we can feel like there's nothing to be grateful for -- but there really is. We can be grateful for the food and drink on our tables, for clothing, for the sky and the stars. We can thank God for His whole creation! St. John Chrysostom said,

“Happiness can only be achieved by looking inward and learning to enjoy whatever life has and this requires transforming greed into gratitude.”

That is really the key: if we can stop being greedy and wanting the things we want, being grateful instead for the things that we have, that's how we will enter into the joy of our Lord.

We learned *The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant* just a few weeks ago -- do you remember how the servant had been forgiven for his debt of so many talents, but then would not forgive another servant for a tiny amount of denarii? God forgives us so much! Even though we do the wrong thing or we say things in anger or act unfairly and unkindly, God just pours out love and mercy on us. We learned that if we cannot be forgiving, we cannot be forgiven. It's not that God is being mean, it's just how it is.

When that unmerciful servant was unforgiving, it showed that he was not truly grateful for the mercy God gave him. If he had been grateful and truly appreciated the love he was shown, he would have been inspired to show love and mercy. Gratitude is part of this process that softens up our hearts and makes us more loving, like God -- and if you remember, it's what makes our spiritual hearts work.

Remember our circulatory system? Your heart has arteries: one carries blood out of your heart and into your body, and the other one carries blood from your body back into your heart. Your blood flows through this circuit again and again: pumping out through the heart and into the body, then back

into the heart, and back out to the body. It's like a big circle that it keeps flowing through, and that gives you life! That is how your body's cells are nourished and taken care of.

Your spiritual heart is like your bodily heart: forgiveness and love and mercy are like the blood that flows into your heart, then flows out and then flows back in, again and again, in an ongoing and beautiful cycle that gives your soul true eternal life. God's love and His mercy and forgiveness flow into your heart, and you have to let them also flow out to the world, so that they can just keep circulating in this beautiful way.

Gratitude to God is the beating of the heart that actually makes that blood move through your body: when you receive blessings from God, your heart is grateful and alive. Your gratitude pumps that love and mercy and forgiveness around and around -- and when we participate in this glorious cycle, we enter into the joy of our Lord.

Blessings flow like love and mercy and forgiveness -- and when we participate in this glorious cycle, we enter into the joy of our Lord.

So far, our Journey through the Parables has shown us that we need to be aiming for the great banquet God has laid out for us; we need to be trying to enter into the joy of our Lord. St. Gregory Palamas talks about how we get to enter into that banquet and taste the blessings of the Lord while we are here on earth, so let's finish by thinking about his words on thanksgiving:

“Prayer changes from entreaty to thanksgiving, and meditation on the divine truths of faith fills the heart with a sense of jubilation and unimpeachable hope. This hope is a foretaste of future blessings, of which the soul even now receives direct experience, and so it comes to know in part the surpassing richness of God's bounty, in accordance with the Psalmist's words, ‘Taste and know that the Lord is bountiful’ (Ps. 34:8). For He is the jubilation of the righteous, the joy of the upright, the gladness of the humble, and the solace of those who grieve because of Him.”

–St. Gregory Palamas, *The Philokalia* Vol. 4'

So Thanksgiving is no small thing. It is so important to take a day out of the year, or better yet, to take some time every single day, to give thanks to God for the beauty of creation -- not just because it's polite to say thank you, but because gratitude is the heartbeat that makes the love flow; it is the gateway through which we enter into the joy of our Lord.

May we have ears to hear, and may we always be thankful!

QUESTIONS:

In the story about the farmer and his son, what did the farmer always answer when people said that his situation was bad or good?

The farmer always answered, "Who knows what is bad or good?" God knows, and He sees the big picture of our life. We can trust Him to make everything work out in the end.

What can happen when we see the good in things?

If we can learn to see the good things, then we can easily find things for which we thank God. If we can stop being greedy and are instead grateful for what we have, that's how we will enter into the joy of our Lord.

Which body part did we say gratitude is like, and why?

Gratitude is like the beating of our heart. Just like our heart makes blood move through our body, our gratitude keeps the love and mercy flowing!

FOR DISCUSSION:

The farmer in the story kept saying, "Who knows if this is bad or good?" when different things happened to him and his family. Because we know and love God, we know that HE knows if something is bad or good. Think for a moment about your life. Have you ever had something happen that seemed really awful but later you saw something good that came of it? Tell about it. When that thing happened, did you trust God completely, or were you sad or mad about it? If you were, you're not alone. Each of us sometimes does not completely trust God. Sometimes we worry or get upset when it seems like something really bad is happening. When this happens again, what will you remember from this episode that can help you keep the gratitude flowing in your heart?