

4th Sunday of Lent: Sunday of St John Climactus

Sermon by Fr. Milan Medakovic

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, today is the Fourth Sunday of the Great and Holy Fast. This Sunday of Lent is dedicated to Saint John Climacus or Saint John of the Ladder. Saint John was a monk of Saint Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai. As a monk of Sinai, he lived a spiritual life. He captured his experience in a book with the title, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. In this book, he describes the spiritual life and growth to God through 30 steps or rungs on a ladder. Through these 30 steps, a man is transfigured into continual communion with God. The spiritual growth that is achieved by the action of these steps is only achieved through God's mercy, prayer and fasting.

In today's Gospel, we hear of Christ our God's mercy and healing and their relationship to prayer and fasting. In this Gospel, we hear of a man that brings his son to our Lord for healing from demons. This man has doubt that our Lord can accomplish this healing because his disciples could not heal him. Our Lord first rebukes him and the crowd that is with him. Our Lord then asks him to believe that this healing can occur. The man says that he believes but asks Christ to heal his unbelief. The man's son is then healed. Later, the disciples ask why they could not heal this man's son. Jesus replies that this type of demon can only be removed through prayer and fasting.

The first thing that confronts us in this Gospel is the existence of evil spirits, fallen angels or demons. We would all like to deny their existence. We would like to dismiss their action as illness or mental illness. Mental illness is something that does exist, but it is different from the spiritual illness that is being described in this Gospel. The possession of the soul by demons is a sickness of the soul. The sickness of the soul separates a person from God and from other people.

The goals of the demons are to convince us that they do not exist or that they have the same power as God. The prince of the demons is Lucifer or the devil himself. He is the prince of lies. If we believe the lie that there is no evil, then it becomes easier for us to believe that we do not need God. The other lie that the devil wants us to believe is that he is an evil god that is equal to God. We often hear of this good and evil equality in the belief of the ying and the yang. When we believe these lies, we deny the power of God and separate ourselves from Him and others. Through this separation from God and others, our soul's becomes sick. In the most severe cases of soul sickness, the person starts to act differently. Sometimes this is mistaken for a mental illness.



Entrance of the Theotokos to the Temple

That is what we see in today's Gospel. The father refers to his son as a lunatic or a person that is crazed. This man wants to believe that the illness is something other than a sickness of the soul. In a way, the man wants to believe that this illness is something that was given by God, that it is a punishment from God. This is the true denial of God--attributing to Him the evil of the fallen angels that has been self inflicted through the misuse of our free will. We must remember that all that God has created is good. This is continually reinforced for us as God creates the world in Genesis with the words, "and God saw that it was good." (Genesis 1:10-31)

This is why our Lord rebukes this man and the crowd. He does this because of their forgetfulness that all that God created is good, and to bring them back to belief in Him. The Apostle James explains rebukes that are made in the following passage from his epistle: "For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body. Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body." (James 3:2-3) Thus, rebukes may seem offensive but they are a tool to turn us back to a correct way of living.

Then Jesus asks the man to bring his son to Him for healing. Then the Lord asks him to believe that his son can be healed. The man then cries out, "Lord I believe heal my unbelief." Saint Nikolaj Velimirovic says, "There is nothing that melts the ice of unbelief as readily as tears." These tears occur when we can no longer endure the pain of not trusting in God. We often hear this in the cry, "God help me!" when we are at the point of despair. It is at this point of despair that God can enter into our lives. This is when God can help us to have belief and faith in Him. Saint Nikolaj Velimirovic further says, "... man cannot even come to faith without God's help. Man can only come to some slight belief ...But the path from some measure of belief to true faith is long indeed, and no man can follow this path without God's guiding hand."

When the man's son is healed, our Lord tells the demon to enter him no more. In this, the Lord is reminding us and the young man that our behaviors are often engrained in our very being. This is a reminder to us that we are not to return to our sins once we have repented of them. In the Gospel of Saint Matthew, our Lord also reminds us that once we have removed a sin from our lives, we must be careful not to add more sins with the following: "When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man, ...Then he goes, and takes with himself seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter in and dwell there: and the last state of that man is worse than the first." (Matthew 12:43-45) With these two reminders, our Lord reminds us that we must be continually diligent in the conduct of our lives not to sin, to prevent the sickness of the soul.

After the healing of the man's son, Christ's disciples ask him why they could not cast out the demon. Our Lord's response is that it is because of their unbelief and that this type of demon is only cast out through prayer and fasting. Saint Nikolaj Velimirovic points out the following regarding the disciples' unbelief and their inability to cast out this demon: "...the measure that their faith had become weaker, whether from worldly fear or from pride, so the power that had been given to them had become weakened." Our Lord then gives the prescription for healing to regain that which was given to them by God: prayer and fasting. This same medicine is given to us by the church so that we can regain or strengthen our faith and enter into continuous communion with God.

Saint Peter Chrysologus of Ravenna discussed prayer and fasting in the following way: "Prayer knocks at the door, fasting obtains, mercy receives. Prayer, mercy and fasting: these three are one, and they give life to each other. Fasting is the soul of prayer, mercy is the lifeblood of fasting." Fasting is a method of quenching the passions through abstinence. Fasting is not only the abstinence from food but the abstinence from loose living. It is a self discipline that allows us to knock at the Lord's door through prayer and receive His mercy for us that restores us into continual communion with Him.

So, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, my prayer for you is that you may take your spiritual medicine of fasting, that you may be able to pray to restore and grow in your faith, so that you may receive the Lord's mercy and have continual communion with Him.

Amen.