

Date: November 18, 2020
Subject: 24th Sunday After the Pentecost

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."

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My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

God didn't just create us and then step away to let us fend for ourselves for our life's needs and wants. He is involved and cares for us every single second of our lives. Our Gospel reading this Sunday makes this point very clearly.

LUKE 8: 41-56

And, behold, there came a man named Jairus, and he was a ruler of the synagogue: and he fell down at Jesus' feet, and besought him that he would come into his house:

For he had one only daughter, about twelve years of age, and she lay a dying. But as he went the people thronged him.

And a woman having an issue of blood twelve years, which had spent all her living upon physicians, neither could be healed of any,

Came behind him, and touched the border of his garment: and immediately her issue of blood stanch'd. And Jesus said, Who touched me? When all denied, Peter and they that were with him said, Master, the multitude throng thee and press thee, and sayest thou, Who touched me?

And Jesus said, Somebody hath touched me: for I perceive that virtue is gone out of me.

And when the woman saw that she was not hid, she came trembling, and falling down before him, she declared unto him before all the people for what cause she had touched him and how she was healed immediately.

And he said unto her, Daughter, be of good comfort: thy faith hath made thee whole; go in peace. While he yet spake, there cometh one from the ruler of the synagogue's house, saying to him, Thy daughter is dead; trouble not the Master.

But when Jesus heard it, he answered him, saying, Fear not: believe only, and she shall be made whole. And when he came into the house, he suffered no man to go in, save Peter, and James, and John, and the father and the mother of the maiden.

And all wept, and bewailed her: but he said, Weep not; she is not dead, but sleepeth.

And they laugh'd him to scorn, knowing that she was dead.

And he put them all out, and took her by the hand, and called, saying, Maid, arise.

And her spirit came again, and she arose straightway: and he commanded to give her meat.

And her parents were astonished: but he charg'd them that they should tell no man what was done.

Although both miracles are amazing examples of Jesus Christ's divine power, there is an aspect to the first miracle that is of major significance. The way the miracle occurred reveals that it was, in fact, the Savior Himself who first established a Church practice that is considered by some to be controversial. This practice is venerating icons, relics and other holy items.

Many Christians, even today, do not understand and reject the Church practice of venerating icons and other holy items. They consider it to be a pagan practice. There was even a time in Church history when this veneration was banned, holy items were profaned and destroyed, and people who resisted were persecuted and even killed. It took an Ecumenical Council of the Church to bring an end to this heresy called Iconoclasm, and to restore the veneration.

In this Sunday's Gospel, a woman who suffered for twelve years from a sickness, which no-one was able to cure, secretly approached the Savior. She did this at great risk to herself, because according to Jewish beliefs, her sickness made her unclean and was a condition that prohibited her from touching anyone. But her deep faith in the mercy of the Savior convinced her that He would, without doubt, help her. Therefore, she does not openly come to the Savior to ask Him for help. Instead, she approached Him secretly to simply touch the border of His garment. This was the first instance described in the Gospel where a person is healed not by the Savior, but by His garment, with no direct participation in the healing by Him.

The Savior, being all knowing, of course knew what had transpired. His response, therefore, is most significant: *Daughter, be of good comfort: thy faith hath made thee whole; go in peace.* He does not scold her for her disobedience of church discipline. Instead, He praises her faith which gave her such boldness. And He confirmed that His garment had, in fact, healed her.

Christ's response cannot be understood in any other way than to serve as a confirmation that, indeed, holy items have in them divine power transmitted to them by God. Since the Savior has ascended in Body back to Heaven, people cannot come to Him face to face to ask for His help and mercy. The Lord understands that people many times need physical contact in prayer to Him to believe that He has heard them. Therefore, He mercifully empowers holy items with the Grace of the Holy Spirit to compensate for our weak faith. This truth has been confirmed time and time again throughout the history of Christ's Church by incredible miracles which have happened through physical contact with holy items. How blessed we are that we have such a merciful and compassionate God!

Although it is a tragedy, the doubt and even rejection of this veneration by most non-Orthodox people is understandable. After all, they are not connected to the Body of Christ, the Orthodox Church. Therefore, they have no access to the strengthening Grace of the Holy Spirit given to the faithful through the Church's grace-filled sacraments.

But what is truly sad and most concerning is the doubt and fear that today even some Orthodox people have exhibited. They fear venerating icons. Some also fear being infected with disease through the reception of Christ's most-holy Body and Blood. We even have a case where a prominent Orthodox bishop openly stated that he cannot confirm that it is absolutely impossible to become infected when communing. What heresy! The present pandemic has laid bare this great spiritual tragedy. It has forced some of our church leaders to forbid venerating holy items in our churches. Even the way that people are communed with Holy Communion is being altered as a concession to these fears.

My dear brothers and sisters in Church, it is my deep personal conviction that after so many months, the fact that Orthodox Churches remain closed or have such limitations and prohibitions placed on them is a result of this fear and doubt harbored by Orthodox Christians. We have in many ways become lukewarm. Going forward, our passivity could result in churches that are now open to be closed again and with even greater limitations placed on the practices of our faith. We are told that it's all for the sake of public health and safety. Never mind that no Christian can ever be safe if deprived of the Holy Body and Blood of Christ! If closures do continue, we must ask this difficult question:., will we ever be free again to worship according to the teachings of our faith?

So what can be done? I think that we all need to become more firm and bold in our faith, similar to the faith and boldness of the sick woman. We need to greatly increase our prayers. We need to profoundly repent in all of our sins and strengthen ourselves as often as it is possible through confession and Holy Communion. We need to give our fears to God and leave them there in His all-might hands. If all of us

become better Orthodox Christians and place our hope firmly in God's mercy, He will respond. He always has. He always will.

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With Much Love in Christ,
Archpriest Serge Kotar