**SUNDAY OF THE PUBLICAN AND THE PHARISEE**

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

What I would like us to explore today is one of the aspects in the parable of the Publican and Pharisee, and that aspect may be summarized with this question: “Why are we here?”

There are of course many different behaviors related to church attendance: Some people are always here. Some are here only once a year. Some are always early. Some are always late. Some always come to Matins. Some always come to Vespers.

And besides the question of whether or not someone is here, there is also the issue of what they do when they get here. Some focus attentively on everything happening in the service. Some have attention that wanders and comes back. Some read the bulletin. Some just sort of enjoy the experience. Some are asking themselves how they can better repent. Some always make sure they hear the sermon. Some are serving at the altar. Some are serving in the choir. Some are serving from their places in the nave.

When we come, what we do when we get here ? “Why are we here?” why are we in the church? What did we come here for?

I know this may seem obvious, but please bear with me. This is a question that bears asking, and it also bears returning to, even frequently. Why? Because ideally, corporate worship is something we keep coming back to, Orthodox Christianity is something we keep doing. None of this is about making a one-time decision and then being happy with it and forgetting about it later.

So what does this parable tell us about motivation for worship? What does it tell us about why we’re here—or, why we should be here?

We first meet the Pharisee, about whom the Lord says this: “[He] prayed thus with himself.” We then hear him thank God for how wonderful he is, how much better he is than other people, especially better than the Publican, the tax collector in the back. But let’s just focus in on that first description of him: “[He] prayed thus with himself.” The Pharisee is not open to anyone else, certainly not to God. He is there with himself, for himself, by himself.

Now look at the Publican. The Publican actually is crying out to God. He is actually praying, actually asking for something. He asks for mercy. He desires to connect with God. He is aware of his brokenness. He comes to the temple to make a real request. He is not there to feel good about himself. He is not hoping to walk away confirmed in his good opinion of himself. He is wounded. He is hurting. He is looking for the Healer. He does not expect anything, does not demand anything. He asks for mercy.

If we get that, we are seeing here an image of pride contrasted with an image of humility, then you’re on the right track.

Here is the question: Are we here because we need God? Are we here because we know we are broken and wish for God to heal us?

Consider in your heart all those extraneous reasons you may be here—someone else wants to you be here, you like to see your family and friends, you like how you feel when you come here, you like the choir. You are here to meet your God, because you need Him. Because you love Him. Because here, you find mercy.

The reason we come here to church to pray is this: That we are suffering, incomplete, and, if we truly looked into our hearts, we will see that we are desperately wounded creatures, and here is the place, above all others, where we find mercy. Here is the place where we find the blessed peace that washes away sin, where the blood and flesh of the God-man transform finite creatures with the power of the uncreated infinite. Here is the place where we find eternal life, which is to know our God, to know the Christ Who was sent. Here, He is our God, and we are His people.

Lord, be merciful to us sinners!