

Sunday Sermon – Meatfare/Last Judgment - 2015/02/15

By Fr. Demetri Tsigas, St. Katherine, Melbourne, FL

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

Fear. Fear is a powerful motivator. Fear can also paralyze you and keep you from acting. Fear of God is considered by some to be a bad thing. I used to think the same thing. I have now come to realize that the fear of God is usually a very a good thing. Today's Gospel reading is literally meant to put the fear of God in us just as we begin to fast and repent during Triodion and Great Lent in preparation for Pascha. Today, I want to take a look at some of the ways that fear can be used for good and for ill.

Many of us were taught to fear God. In many Orthodox churches, there was an all-seeing eye of God at the top of the iconostasis. If we misbehaved as children either in or out of church, our parent or another adult was quick to point our attention to it and try to use it to get us to behave. I believe that many of society's ills are the result of having LOST a fear of God and, for that matter, a lack of fear of even human consequences for our bad behavior. Today our jails are filled to overflowing. Today corruption characterizes governments, corporations and every level of society in many nations.

Many of us grew up with a fear of shaming our family and a fear of disappointing our parents. The first kept us out of trouble. It kept us on the straight and narrow. The second, the fear of disappointing our parents, actually kept us striving to do better in school, in business and in life. Unfortunately, there is very little of this kind of fear in many of our children any more. Loving acceptance, together with proper discipline, is what makes for a well-mannered child. Only when these things are internalized can that child become a good, mature adult who contributes to a good, fair and just society.

Fear was used by brutal dictators to keep order. It's what kept Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union together for so many years. It's also what allowed the Third Reich to grow, spread and nearly take over the world. Fear kept peace in Arab countries and other dictatorships around the world. The lack of this type of fear has allowed countries to form their own natural ethnic boundaries – a good thing – but it has also allowed tribal wars and greater unrest, even giving rise to Islamic terrorism – a new fear that threatens to bring anarchy and a new type and level of fear to all the world. I believe that doing away with dictatorships, even relatively benign ones, is a good thing...so long as we replace them with societies that are fair, just and godly.

Fear of being hurt keeps us from taking a chance in a new relationship. It also keeps brutalized spouses stuck in violent relationships. Fear of failure may keep us from taking a chance in business or it can powerfully motivate us to watch every penny and give us the discipline we need to succeed. It used to be that the fear of shame was enough to keep spouses from straying

into adultery. Today it's the fear of losing their lifestyle that keeps many out of divorce court and from the poverty that usually follows, especially and regardless of who's to blame, for the divorced woman.

I would argue that even when you have a relatively positive outcome, fear by itself is not a good thing. If you are doing the right thing for the wrong reasons, though there may be societal good from that, there is no ultimate personal gain. Turning to today's Bible reading, if fear of what will happen to us eternally at the Final Judgment is the only reason we show any care for our neighbor in need, does God really give us credit for that? St. Basil argued that we need to pair fear of God with both a sense of obedience to God's Law and an actual love for God and for our neighbor, in order to most powerfully keep us and our society from sin and keep us driving toward holiness and Christian compassion.

As we look back through salvation history, on how Christianity has formed our world into a better place, if we look carefully, we see that it was only when we combined a healthy fear of God, a mature understanding of God's Law and a deep appreciation for God's Love for us that these changes were able to take place in individual lives and in society collectively.

Today many of our pastors and churches are afraid of the IRS, the government, the media and those who would call us hate-mongers for standing up for the teachings of the Gospel. Many pastors and priests are afraid of preaching on subjects like abortion, homosexuality or anything that smacks of politics or may be perceived as controversial. Many church leaders are afraid of either losing parishioners or their job. Shouldn't they be more afraid of God? Let's be honest however. There are also some preachers who only convey the fear of God without the love of God. Few of us would embrace the Law of God without first knowing and experiencing the Love of God.

All of us have sinned from time to time. We should not be afraid of confessing that sin both in our personal prayers to God and also in Holy Confession. Sharing a secret temptation with another brother or sister in Christ, but especially to a priest in confession, drains the power of that temptation which could otherwise cause us to act on it.

The fear of sharing our past with a loving spouse is what keeps us from enjoying the true intimacy, freedom, enjoyment and love that God wills for all our marriages. God's love working in us, reminding us that we too are sinners, thus giving us both humility and mercy, is what allows us to forgive sin in others, accept them, and grow together with them toward theosis. I pray for all our marriages, that we may be able to share all our deepest darkest secrets and find in place of judgment or rejection, a loving response from our spouse that will allow us to fully realize the depth of love and intimacy that God has ordained for marriage – and that we all so deeply desire.

We must help our children internalize a healthy fear of God, a mature understanding of God's teachings but especially a deep understanding and appreciation for God's love for them and for all God's children.

Today's Gospel reading should indeed put the fear of God in us, both motivating us to show compassionate love, care and concern for neighbor in need AND keeping us out of sinful, harmful behaviors and situations. During times of persecution of Christians, it was godly love and godly fear that enabled Christians to even die for their faith rather than disavow Christ and His teachings. It seems to me that both in this free society and in societies under Islam and/or dictatorship, we all need to find both godly love and godly fear to keep free societies truly free and to bring freedom to those who are enslaved to fear and to false gods.

Fear God because you will be judged by Him in The End. Obey God so that you and those around you may be blessed. Of course, you cannot obey God if you are unfamiliar with His teachings. Read your Bible and grow in your understanding and knowledge of God's Holy Orthodox Christian Church. Finally and most importantly, know that God loves you so much that He sent His Only Son to teach you about His Love in word and in deed. Jesus was afraid of disobeying God the Father but more especially, He willingly obeyed God and Loved Him enough to suffer the Passion and the Cross for us all. Even if you were the only person on earth, God the Father would have sent His Son and His Son, Jesus, would have gone to the Cross for you. Jesus has gone to the Cross for you. It was love not fear that nailed Jesus to the Cross. I pray that you may more fully come to know His love for you and how He wants you to love Him and His Living Image in your neighbor in need.

When we combine them properly, fear, obedience and especially love will change us into the saints God created us to be and transform our world into the paradise God created it to be. To paraphrase St. Paul, fear, obedience and love, "but the greatest of these is love." (1Cor. 13:13) To quote John the Apostle, Evangelist and Theologian, "Perfect love drives out all fear." (1John 4:18)

To God be the glory, now and forever, and to the ages of ages, Amen.