Over the past several Sundays, I’ve been preaching on topics related to our seriousness and our commitment to following the ways of our faith and developing a vibrant, living, dynamic relationship with Christ. The recent Sunday Gospel stories, along with those coming up in February, give us much to reflect upon.

One week I focused on the story of Zacchaeus and the theme of distractions. I highlighted something that St John of Kronstadt wrote about this danger of distractions 100 years ago. St. John noted how the people of his day have given in to superficial distractions in life that create four dangerous temptations for a Christian. Such distractions have:

1) led people to forget how to lead a serious life, a life focused on the “other,” on doing good for others instead of taking more interest in simply fulfilling one’s own desires;
2) made people bored with pursuing a mature spiritual life, with all the effort and ascetical struggle that comes with a sober life in Christ;
3) guided people to focus on superficial pursuits, whether on materialist gains, the latest social or political fads, or a never-ending consumption of entertainment;
4) confused people in understanding what is the ultimate purpose of life and what will bring about the deepest meaning and happiness in life. Distractions keep us from discovering that the deepest purpose of life is our relationship with God, loving Him above all else, and in loving our neighbor.

Imagine, St. John was disturbed by the distractions he saw in the early 1900s pulling people away from faith and the Church. He could have never imagined the constant distractions that bombard us each and every day today in the 21st century. What would he say today if he could see how our lives would be dominated 24/7 by our addiction to our phones, by all that the internet has opened up to us, and the constant attention of social media?

Distractions distract us from what is most important in life, from our relationship with God, and our relationship with our neighbor, the “other.”

Yet there are examples in Holy Scripture which remind us of people who broke through all the distractions of life, and discovered the “pearl of great price.” These are the men and women who discovered that “one thing is needful” and pursued that one thing, the kingdom of God, with all their heart. The disciples were such people. The faithful women who followed Jesus, and ministered to him were others.
The mission of Sts. Constantine and Helen Church is to proclaim the Good News of Salvation through the Orthodox Christian Faith for the glory of our Triune God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

We are a community of believers who journey towards our Lord Jesus Christ and one another through our WORSHIP, FELLOWSHIP, SPIRITUAL GROWTH, WITNESS, and SERVICE. We invite all people to join us on this journey in the Kingdom of Heaven.

We are under the jurisdiction of
His Holiness, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew
His Eminence, Archbishop Demetrios of America
His Eminence, Metropolitan Methodios of Boston

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SERIOUSNESS TOWARDS CHRIST

Of course, a positive example we heard about during one of our recent Sunday readings was Zacchaeus, the corrupt and self-centered tax collector, who meets Jesus, and allows Christ to even come to his house. This encounter transforms him from a dishonest, broken man to a new creation. “Today, salvation has come to his house,” Jesus proclaimed. Zacchaeus reminds us that there is always hope for all people!

Yet, for every Zacchaeus, there are also plenty like the rich, young ruler who asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. When Jesus looks into his heart, and sees what entangles his heart, he says to the man, “Go, sell all that you have and come, follow me.” This radical call and invitation was met only with fear and uncertainty. The rich young man preferred his riches and lifestyle over following Jesus. And thus, he walked away from Christ with sadness.

Many in the world do the same as the rich, young man. Very few follow the path of Zacchaeus and the disciples. What about us? What are we willing to do to walk with Christ? How are we willing to sacrifice in our own lives to truly put Jesus first, and become one of His faithful disciples?

We heard on another Sunday St. Paul warn, “Do not accept the grace of God in vain.” And this epistle reading was on the same Sunday we heard the Parable of the Talents, where the Master gave three servants different talents, and then tested them on what they would do with their talents. Two of them worked hard, and doubled their talents, acting as faithful and trustworthy servants, while one was lazy and did nothing with what the Master had given him, except make excuses for his behavior and blame others for his laziness.

Again, these words can challenge all of us to sincerely look at our own lives, and to reflect on what we do with the gifts that God has given us. Our Lord has given us His grace in abundance, at our baptism, in our life in the Church, each week in the Divine Liturgy when we are united with Him through the Mystery of Holy Communion. We have received His grace. But have we “accepted the grace of God in vain?”

We all have been blessed in countless ways, spiritually, materially, and with the opportunities we have in life. What have we done with these gifts? Have we been “good and faithful” stewards with all that God has given us? Have we used His gifts to glorify His name and bless others, or have we hoarded them for ourselves and our loved ones?

We don’t receive gifts from God to keep them to ourselves. God doesn’t give us His grace to simply bless us. God blesses us, so that we can bless others. God gives to us, so that we can share with others. God fills us with His love, so that we can love others. God forgives us, so that we can forgive others. By giving away God’s gifts and talents, they only will abound all the more.

St. Paul warns us to “not accept the grace of God in vain.” We can avoid this great temptation, by learning to share His grace, share His blessings, share the talents He gives us with others, and thus watch them increase in our lives.

After the Sundays of Zacchaeus, and the Parable of the Talents, we have the Sunday of the Canaanite woman, who persistently sought after the help of Jesus, and whose humble and strong faith astounded even the Lord and all his disciples. This woman reflected a person whose desire for Christ stood above all else. Even though she was a foreigner, and even a seemingly helpless, desperate woman, she displayed a faith that Jesus marveled at.

Every Sunday we come to Church, we come to encounter God and to listen to Him speak to us through Holy Scripture and through our worship. In fact, each and every day we are called to make a connection with God, feeding our souls and minds by reading the Bible and nourishing ourselves with His holy word, as well as with our prayers. When we strive to connect with God daily, we will see how relevant these Biblical stories can become in our own lives.

During this month of February, we will enter the Triodion Period, which is a special three week period leading up to the beginning of Great Lent, on March 11th. Each of these weeks will have other biblical stories that we are all familiar with, but which each have profound lessons for us to learn for our journey of faith. Pay attention. Listen. Strive to hear God speaking to us through these holy words!

With love and gratitude in Christ our Lord,

+Luke
If a person is inspired by the spirit of God, he or she can forgive. Certainly, people can forgive. But I’m not sure you can say that in general there is the feeling that forgiveness is of value. I have met people who would say, “I don’t care. I can go on and live my life; it really doesn’t matter to me. If I’m not bothering you and you aren’t bothering me, why be reconciled?” This is plain indifference.

Another reason why people don’t value forgiveness is that they consider it to be collusion with evil. They feel that if a person has done something really terrible, he or she should be reminded of it until death and, moreover, that the evil should be avenged. And of course, most of us feel that any offense committed against us is irreparable. Nothing that the other person does can ever cancel it. If you kill my child, for example, there is nothing you can do in reparation, and for me to forgive would simply be to condone the evil. So, I’m not sure that most people value forgiveness.

When you look at it from the point of view of justice, there is no reason for forgiveness. Only if God exists and we realize that there is either a world with evil or no world at all can we understand that we are going to have to undergo the trial of evil. But if that is not there, I don’t know why anyone would forgive. Or want to. But I do think that people who are not believers in God, by the fact they are made in God’s image, can have the sense that reconciliation is better than allowing the evil to go on.

By definition, forgiveness is breaking the chain of evil, beginning with recognizing that evil really has been done. People tend to think forgiveness means something bad was not really done, that a person didn’t understand the consequences, or whatever. If that were the case, there would be no need for forgiveness; it could be seen simply as a mistake. Forgiveness has to admit, and rage over, and weep over a real evil, and only then say, “We are going to live in communion one with another. We are going to carry on.”

Never forgetting—you can’t, at any rate—but carrying on in a spirit of love without letting the evil poison the future relationship. Certainly, that is what happens theologically. The striking thing in the Gospel is that God refuses to let evil destroy the relationship. Even if we kill him, he will say, “Forgive them.”

The Orthodox approach to forgiveness is remembering that we are created in the image and likeness of God, and that God is a Trinity of persons in perfect communion. Therefore, communion with one another is the given. Anything that breaks that communion destroys the very roots of our existence. That’s why forgiveness is essential if we are human, human as created in the image of God. We are all sinners, living with other sinners, and so we must re-establish communion seventy times seven times a day — and want to do so. The desire is the main thing, and the feeling that it is of value.

The obsession with relationship—the individual in search of relationships—in the modern world shows an ontological crack in our being. There is no such thing as an individual. He was created, probably, in a Western European university. We don’t recognize our essential communion. I don’t look at you and say, “You are my life.”

Modern interpretations of the commandment in the Torah reflect this individualistic attitude. The first commandment is that you love God with all your mind, all your soul, and all your strength, and the second is that you love your neighbor as yourself. The only way you can prove you love God is by loving your neighbor, and the only way you can love your neighbor in this world is by endless forgiveness. So, “love your neighbor as yourself.” However, in certain modern editions of the Bible, I have seen this translated as, “You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself.” But that’s not what it says.

I recall a discussion program in which we were asked what was most important in Christianity. Part of what I said was that the only way we can find ourselves is to deny ourselves. That’s Christ’s teaching. If you cling to yourself, you lose yourself. The unwillingness to forgive is the ultimate act of not wanting to let yourself go. You want to defend yourself, assert yourself, protect yourself. There is a consistent line through the Gospel—if you want to be the first you must will to be the last.
The other fellow, who taught the psychology of religion at a Protestant seminary, said, “What you are saying is the source of the neuroses of Western society. What we need is healthy self-love and healthy self-esteem.” Then he quoted that line, “You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself.” He insisted that you must love yourself first and have a sense of dignity. If one has that, forgiveness is either out of the question or an act of condescension toward the poor sinner. It is no longer an identification with the other as a sinner, too. I said that of course if we are made in the image of God it’s quite self-affirming, and self-hatred is an evil. But my main point is that there is no self there to be defended except the one that comes into existence by the act of love and self-emptying. It’s only by loving the other that my “self” actually emerges. Forgiveness is at the heart of that.

As we were leaving a venerable old rabbi with a shining face called us over. “That line, you know, comes from the Torah, from Leviticus,” he said, “and it cannot possibly be translated ‘love your neighbor as you love yourself.’ It says, ‘You shall love your neighbor as being your own self.’” Your neighbor is your true self. You have no self in yourself.

After this I started reading the Church Fathers in this light, and that’s what they all say - “Your brother is your life.” I have no self in myself except the one that is fulfilled by loving the other. The Trinitarian character of God is a metaphysical absolute here, so to speak. God’s own self is another—His Son. The same thing happens on the human level. So, the minute I don’t feel deeply that my real self is the other, then I’ll have no reason to forgive anyone. But if that is my reality, and my only real self is the other, and my own identity and fulfillment emerges only in the act of loving the other, that gives substance to the idea that we are potentially God-like beings. Now, if you add to that that we are all to some degree faulty and weak and so on, that act of love will always be an act of forgiveness. That’s how I find and fulfill myself as a human being made in God’s image. Otherwise, I cannot. So, the act of forgiveness is the very act by which our humanity is constituted. Deny that, and we kill ourselves. It’s a metaphysical suicide.

Forgiveness is a decision in the sense that you have to will it. You have to choose life. A person can choose death by not forgiving. So, there is a sense in which you can destroy yourself by not saying “yes” to the reality that actually exists. That’s the choice: yes or no to what truly exists. Forgiveness is the great YES. There is, however, a choice. In the Greek patristic tradition, the more a person is a person, the more we realize and will our communion with others in the act of love, the less we choose. Thus, the freer we are, the less choice we have.

That’s almost opposite to the post-Enlightenment, secular Western thought. We tend to think the freer we are, the more choice we have. For example, if you would sin against me and I want to love with the love of God, then I do not have a choice whether or not I should forgive you, I only have a choice whether or not I will. And I must, if I want to be alive. If I were truly holy, I wouldn’t even choose—it would be a spontaneous act.

As an individual, if someone insults me or offends me or betrays me, it is impossible to forgive them, lacking this understanding of the reality of our interconnectedness. This understanding is needed because one suffers from not being able to forgive.

So forgiveness is not just the healing of the other, it is the healing of yourself. If you don’t forgive, you allow yourself to be poisoned. That’s why Jesus says, “Do not resist the evildoer.” The minute that you resist or react in kind, you become part of the evil. That’s the radical teaching of the Cross.

Ultimately it comes to this. We are forgiven whether we like it or not. If we accept it, then we, too, become forgivers, and it’s called Paradise. But if we don’t accept it, it is hell. When you reject the forgiveness, you destroy yourself. You refuse communion.
Here are three stories of Greek Orthodox Church leaders who risked their lives, as well as the safety of their Christian flock, in order to save Jews in Greece during World War II.

Archbishop DAMASKINOS of Athens and all Greece

The leadership role of the head of the country’s Greek Orthodox Church, the Archbishop of Athens and All Greece, Damaskinos, was unprecedented in all of Europe. Not hiding behind cowardly “neutrality” of his counterparts at the Vatican and other European churches, Damaskinos openly and unabashedly opposed the deportation of the Jews of Greece and took drastic, and sometimes life-threatening measures to fulfill his mission.

With the support of the police chief of Athens, Archbishop Damaskinos oversaw the creation of several thousand “baptismal certificates” and provided more than 27,000 false identity papers to desperate Jews seeking protection from the Nazis. The forged papers gave them Christian names and allowed them free passage through Nazi checkpoints. The Archbishop also ordered monasteries and convents in Athens to shelter Jews and urged his priests to ask their congregations to hide the Jews in their homes. As a result, more than 250 Jewish children were hidden by Orthodox clergy alone.

Damaskinos also spearheaded a direct protest to the Germans, in the form of a letter in a bold defense of the Jews who were being persecuted. The letter incited the rage of the ferocious Nazi General Jürgen Stroop—the man responsible for the brutal suppression of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising and the loss of 50,000 lives. He had since been transferred to Greece. He threatened the Archbishop with death by a firing squad. Damaskinos’ response was, “I have made my cross, have spoken with God, and decided to save as many Jews as possible... If you will kill me, Greek Orthodox religious leaders are not shot, they are hanged. I request that you respect this custom.” The simple courage of the religious leader’s reply caught the Nazi commander off guard.

The appeal of the Archbishop and his fellow Greeks is unique; there is no similar document of protest of the Nazis during World War II that has come to light in any other European country. It reads, in part: “In our national consciousness, all the children of Mother Greece are an inseparable unity: they are equal members of the national body irrespective of religion... Our holy religion does not recognize superior or inferior qualities based on race or religion, as it is stated: ‘There is neither Jew nor Greek’ and thus condemns any attempt to discriminate or create racial or religious differences. Our common fate both in days of glory and in periods of national misfortune forged inseparable bonds between all Greek citizens, without exemption, irrespective of race... Today we are deeply concerned with the fate of 60,000 of our fellow citizens who are Jews... we have lived together in both slavery and freedom, and we have come to appreciate their feelings, their brotherly attitude, their economic activity, and most important, their indefectible patriotism...”

Metropolitan JOACHIM of Volos

On September 30, 1943, the Jewish New Year, the chief rabbi of the central Greek city of Volos was ordered to report to the German military leader, Kurt Rikert, and submit a list of the names of the city’s Jewish community within 24 hours. At the time, there were 872 Jewish residents.
The rabbi turned to his friend, Metropolitan Joachim (Alexopoulos) who presided over the Greek Orthodox flock of the region and didn’t even blink an eye when asked to help. He ordered every priest in his diocese to help any Jew who asked for it and signed his own name to a letter of introduction that the rabbi used to seek hiding. The letter read in part “I heartily recommend the teacher, bearer of this letter, and I ask every brother who is going to meet him, to listen to him carefully and in good will, and to give him any kind of assistance for anything he may be in need of for his life as well as for his flock, so they do not become victims of this difficult situation.”

Joachim mobilized the underground of the region and within 24 hours, 702 Greek Jews fled and were taken into the protective hands of strangers in the villages of the mountains surrounding the city. When he was asked for information about Jews from the Germans he firmly refused their requests for lists of Jewish residents, answering them, “I am a Jew.”

The 130 Jews who decided to remain behind were arrested by the SS and sent to Auschwitz. The Nazis blew up the synagogue and looted and pillaged the shops and homes in the Jewish neighborhood.

In November 1944 after the liberation of Greece and the Jews came out of hiding, Joachim issues a statement urging all local inhabitants to return to the Jewish residents any valuables they may have either taken during the looting or left in their hands for safe-keeping.

For saving the lives of some 700 people, he was recognized posthumously, in 1998, by the State of Israel with an inscription in the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. and on the Righteous Honor Wall at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.

Metropolitan CHRYSTOSMOS of Zakynthos

Of course, there is also the timeless survival story of the ONLY Jewish community in all of Europe that didn’t lose a single soul during the Holocaust, on the Greek Island of Zakynthos—thanks to the efforts of the Metropolitan Bishop of the island, Chrysostomos.

When asked for the island’s Jews, he offered his own name, and that of the Mayor’s, as the island’s Jews and proceeded to tell the German commandant that he was prepared to march with his Jewish neighbors straight to the gas chambers if that were his destiny.

“The Jews of Zakynthos are Greeks, peace-loving and industrious. They are pure-blooded Zakynthians and totally harmless. I beg you to rescind the criminal order.”

When the commander remained persistent and threatened Chrysostomos and the mayor with their lives, and severe reprisals against the civilian population of the island, they handed him a scrap of paper with their own two names scribbled on it.

“I am at your mercy,” Chrysostomos told the Nazi. “You can arrest me, not them. If this does not satisfy you, then know that I will march together with the Jews straight into the gas chamber.”

Three Greek Orthodox hierarchs, each with high-profile positions of moral authority, spoke to their God and responded with what they believed to be their moral and ethical responsibility to save fellow humans—regardless of religious background.
“A few years ago, I was the parish priest of St. Vasilios church (Piraeus) and was called to hear the confession of a young man, Xenophon, 42 years old. When I arrived, his days were numbered. Cancer with rapid metastases had affected his brain too. He was all alone at the ward, the bed next to him was empty, so we were all alone.

This is what he told me about how he came to Faith, since he was a ‘hardened atheist’ in his own words:

‘I arrived here about 35 days ago, in this ward of two beds. Next to me was another patient, about 80 years old. He was suffering from cancer too, in his bones, and although he was experiencing excruciating pain, he was constantly praising the Lord “Glory to God! Glory to God for all things!” He also recited more prayers which I heard for the first time in my life since I was an atheist who had never set my foot to church. Often, all those prayers comforted him and he slept for a couple of hours. Then, after 2-3 hours, he woke up again from the excruciating pain, and he would start over “My Christ, I thank you! Glory be to Thy Name! Glory to God! Glory to God for all things!” I was moaning with my pain, and this patient at the next bed to mine was glorifying God. I was blaspheming Christ and the Theotokos, and he was thanking God, thanking him for the cancer which he had given to him, and for all the excruciating pain he was suffering.

I was so rebellious and indignant at this! Not only for the excruciating pain I was suffering, but also for his never-ending doxology. He also partook Holy Communion daily, while I was throwing up in disgust.

‘Will you please shut up! Shut up and stop saying all the time ‘Glory to God’! Can’t you see that this God, Whom you are thanking and glorifying, this same God is torturing us with such cruelty? What kind of God this is? No, He does not exist!’

And the patient on the next bed would meekly answer: ‘He does exist, my child, and He is also a most loving Father, because with all this illness and pain, He cleanses me from my many sins. If you had worked on some rough task, and your clothes and your body stank, would you not need a rough brush to clean all this dirt? Likewise, God is using this disease as a balm to cleanse my soul, to prepare it for the Kingdom of Heaven’.

His replies got even more on my nerves and I was blaspheming gods and demons. All my reactions were so negative, and all I did was keep on screaming: ‘There is no God. … I do not believe in anything. Neither in this God nor in His Kingdom …’

I remember his last words: ‘Wait and you shall see with your own eyes how the soul of a Christian who believes is separated from his body. I am a sinner, but His Mercy will save me. Wait, and you will behold and will believe!’

And that day came. The nurses wanted to place a screen, as is their duty, but I told them ‘No, don’t do this, because I want to watch how this old man will die!!!’ So I watched him as he was glorifying God all the time. He also said a few ‘Hail, Unwedded Bride’ for the Theotokos, which as I later found out, they are called ‘Salutations’. He would also chant “Theotokos Virgin Mary …”, “From my many sins ..” and “It is truly right to bless you, Theotokos …”, and he would also make the sign of the Cross a number of times.

Then … he raised both of his hands and said “Welcome, my Angel! Thank you for coming with such a bright synodeia to take my soul. Thank you! Thank you!” He raised his hands a little bit more, he made the sign of the Cross, he crossed his arms on his chest and fell asleep in the Lord. Suddenly, the ward was filled with Light, like ten and more bright suns had risen all together, such was splendour of the light with which this ward was lit!” And not only was this ward lit, but a heavenly fragrance spread around, inside the ward, even outside the corridor, so powerful that those patients in the neighbouring wards who were not asleep and could get out of their beds, they came out and started walking up and down the corridor, trying to discern where this special fragrance was exuded from.

Thus, my Father, I, the hardened atheist did believe and called for you to hear my Confession.’

Xenophon was firm and merciless with his old self, but the Mercy of our Lord was great, really great! He offered a clear confession, received Holy Communion a couple of times, and departed in deep repentance, in peace, a holy death, himself glorifying God!’
A PRAYER OF REPENTANCE

Psalm 50/51 was written by King David after he committed two sins that were considered the worst and most grave sins one could commit - adultery and murder. He committed adultery with Bathsheba, seducing another man's wife, and then when she became pregnant, he sent her husband, who was a soldier in his army, to the front lines of a battle so that he would be killed. Although David is considered the greatest king of Israel, and is a model of faithfulness in the Bible, we see how he fell away from God in the worse way. It was only when the Prophet Nathan boldly approached him and confronted him on his sins, that David acknowledged his terrible secret and sincerely repented. His example of contrite confession and repentance is a model for all to follow. He wrote the following prayer of repentance, which we offer regularly in our church prayer services, and should pray in our private prayers.

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.

Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.

Indeed, I was born in iniquity,
in sins did my mother conceived me.

You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

Purge me with hyssop,
and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Let me hear joy and gladness; let
the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.

Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.

Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,
O God of my salvation, and my tongue
will sing aloud of your deliverance.

O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.

For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt offering,
you would not be pleased.

The sacrifice acceptable to God is a
broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart,
O God, you will not despise.

Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;
rebuild the walls of Jerusalem,
then you will delight in right sacrifices, in
burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.

And have mercy on me.

Amen.
It is the afternoon of January 26th. I have to get my monthly message in to Fr. Luke by tomorrow. What shall I write about? I have not traveled since my last message. I wanted to write about a particular topic but I didn’t want it to be viewed as a political message. Should I still write about it? What to do? What to do? I’ll think more about it while I drive my son John to his basketball game.

Our son John plays basketball in a CYO league with his friends from Northboro. On that Saturday, he had a game at 4:00 PM at St. Bernard’s church in Worcester. As we arrived for the game, the bells were ringing for 4:00 Saturday Mass. It has been years since I had been to a Mass in a Catholic Church and something called me inside, perhaps it was the bells, perhaps something else. As John ran to the back door of the church to get inside the basketball court I slowly turned and walked to the front door of the church, and since I have a deep ecumenical bent in me I certainly did not hesitate as I reached the door. As I entered St. Bernard’s, a beautiful church that can hold perhaps five times as many parishioners as our church and with a great soaring ceiling, I was met with the glorious site of the setting sun shining through the church’s west facing stained glass windows.

The windows in St. Bernard’s church truly are glorious. The largest ones are about 25 to 30 feet tall, with a Saint in the middle of each window, and lovely and vibrant stained glass all around. The stained glass is not overly dark as in some churches but rather light enough to allow the sunlight to filter through and bring brightness to the church, yet still allowing the color to be seen. The Priest entered the church and the Mass began. It was as I remember it, with a choir and a loud organ upstairs, and the same prayers that I had memorized from my childhood. In case you have never heard the wonderful Roman Catholic Mass before, you’d be amazed at how similar it is to our beautiful Divine Liturgy.

The Catholics do two readings before the gospel reading in the Mass, and today’s second reading was 1 Corinthians 12:12-30. In this famous passage of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, he speaks of the one Body of Christ being all of us and that we must all cooperate and work together to spread God’s love as one great body here on earth. I believe we also read this passage at some point in the liturgical calendar throughout the year. This passage is a great one from Paul. The Gospel reading reading followed and it was Luke 1:1-4.

When the Priest (Rev. Jonathan Slavinskas) addressed the flock in his homily I expected him to speak about the Gospel, but instead he spoke about the windows in the church. Huh? He spoke about those beautiful stained glass windows that I mentioned above? Yes, he spoke about those same windows, and asked us to look to our left and see the warmth that the light brought into the church through the windows. He said that the beauty that came through just one window was very nice but that the entire church needs all the windows, acting in concert with one another, to bathe the interior of the church with the warm glow that certainly came from God.

He then likened this to St. Paul’s letter and said these windows are acting just as St. Paul says we must act, in concert with one another, in cooperation with one another. He then wished this same cooperation that the windows showed and that St. Paul spoke of, that functioning of the one Body of Christ, also extend to our political leaders. He spoke of the government workers who continued to show up at their jobs and yet had not been paid in a month. He spoke of those needing government assistance going without for the past 35 days. He reminded us that many of those who were suffering because
of the government shutdown truly were suffering. Many live paycheck to paycheck and do not have a significant bank account to live from for an extended period of time.

And beautifully, without taking sides in the argument, without accusing either political side of wrongdoing, without tipping his hand as to his political party affiliation, he prayed with us that our political leaders heed the words of St. Paul and understand that just like Paul says we must act as one Body of Christ here on earth, so must our government officials act in concert with one another and do the job we sent them to Washington to do, namely run this country in a fair and equitable manner.

Fr. Jonathan’s sermon was perfect, and it matched exactly the thoughts I had in my head on this same topic. You see, I also wanted to write about the government shutdown. I am thankful especially for the Air Traffic Controllers and the TSA officers both working when I travel to make conditions safe. There are government workers all around us, doing important jobs, for not a whole bunch of money, and they have suffered for these past 35 days. I can’t even use the word sacrifice to describe this situation because for someone to sacrifice something they must voluntarily give that thing up. These government workers did not volunteer to not get paid. The pay was denied them and yet still they were expected to work. I salute them and thank them all.

We are now in the clear until February 15th when it all may come to screeching halt again. I thank Fr. Jonathan for his message and allowing me to borrow it, and join with him in praying that our leaders heed St Paul’s words and work together as one governmental body to find an equitable solution to our problems. I also thank the Holy Spirit for nudging me to the front door of St. Bernard’s church instead of the back door!

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**SAYINGS OF THE WISE**

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

*St John Chrysostom*

To love God is something that comes naturally to us, it is something that is part of our deep and inalienable nature. In order for us to realize and experience this love, we need only stop our mind from wandering, let go of our troubled thoughts, and silence our inner noise and turmoil, at which the reality of God will come rushing towards us, a reality that has been rushing toward us from all eternity, though we are too distracted to see it. The more we empty our mind, the more it will be naturally filled with the presence and love of God, who pours Himself out to us to the extent that we open our hearts to Him.

*Fr. Maximos Constas*

“When someone steals another’s clothes, we call them a thief. Should we not give the same name to one who could clothe the naked and does not? The bread in your cupboard belongs to the hungry; the coat unused in your closet belongs to the one who needs it; the shoes rotting in your closet belong to the one who has no shoes; the money which you hoard up belongs to the poor.”

*St. Basil the Great*

“A strange illness has appeared in our days – the passion for distractions. Never before was there such a desire for distractions; people have forgotten how to lead a serious life for the good of others; they have no spiritual life and are bored. They exchange the profound content of a spiritual life for distractions! What madness! We must re-introduce into life its lost meaning and give back to the people the knowledge of the true purpose of life.”

*St. John of Kronstadt*
Come Join Us for our 15th Annual

Grandparents/Godparents and Grandchildren/Godchildren Sunday

9:30am Divine Liturgy
10:45 Children’s Program in Church
11:00 Magic Show with Frank Damelio
11:30 A Delicious Luncheon with Frank performing at each table

Sunday, March 3

Invite your godparents and grandparents, your godchildren and grandchildren to come on this special day and enjoy a day of fellowship and love. Ask them to come with you to worship our Lord, to receive Holy Communion together, and then to enjoy a delicious meal and delightful entertainment.

FRANK DAMELIO is a local magician, and teacher from Shepherd Hill Regional High School, who has delighted crowds large and small with his magic shows. He has performed across the nation for clients such as Procter & Gamble, AT&T, Fidelity and at the MGM Grand. He will offer a 30 minute magic presentation, and then go around to all the tables while we eat, entertaining us with his magic tricks.
“Using Holy Scriptures in our Lenten Journey towards Pascha”

A Lenten Retreat with Dr. Bruce Beck
Hellenic College Dean; New Testament Professor; Director of Patristics Institute
10:00-12:30, Saturday March 16

YOUTH DATES TO REMEMBER:

Family Game Night: March 22 5:00-8:30pm
Enjoy an evening of fellowship and fun with our church families

Overnight Lenten Retreat: TBD in late March/early April

Good Friday Retreat: April 26

Project Mexico Trip: July 9-15
Come and join this transformative week of service and fun in Mexico. We have 8 of 25 spots still open.

Vacation Church Camp: July 18-22
Our 14th annual VCC. This is always a highlight for our children. Arrange your summer vacation plans around this special event.

Metropolis of Boston Camp: July 29-Aug 4
(**Sign up TODAY because this week always fills up very quickly! Go to www.mbcamp.org to sign up!)
12 Things I Love About Orthodox Christianity

1. Orthodox worship is timeless, set apart, sacred and holy. It is not simply entertainment, but an encounter with the living God. Every Divine Liturgy is an entrance into the Kingdom of God where I join with all the saints and angels, and the entire church body here on earth and in heaven.

2. Orthodoxy gives me tangible, practical tools to live as a Christian and helps me in my spiritual journey. It teaches me how to pray, fast, and give of myself to others. It is a "hands on" and practical faith.

3. Orthodoxy allows me to submit to something greater than my own personal conscience and desires. It teaches me that life is not about ME, but about something greater than me, God Himself. It gives me purpose and meaning in life.

4. Orthodoxy helps guide each day of my life with its daily spiritual calendar and yearly traditions. It gives me direction and wisdom on how to live a life in Christ.

5. Orthodoxy is not simply some mental exercise or vague meditation. It requires real physical participation and discipline, together with the spiritual practices. It touches body, mind and soul.

6. Orthodoxy provides me with the complete Bible, not a 16th century abridgement. And it is the Church that put the books of the Bible together through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

7. Orthodoxy offers me the opportunity to obey Jesus when he said, “Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood you have no life in you.” The Church offers me the mystical body and blood of Jesus Christ every Sunday, and allows me to commune regularly with the Source of Life.

8. When my children reach adulthood, the Orthodox Church will still be here, the same church as it always has been. The eternal truth of God is unchanging. He is “the One who IS, who WAS, and who IS TO COME, the Lord Almighty.”

9. In any Orthodox Church in the world, I never have to wonder before entering "What's the worship going to be like here?"

10. Orthodoxy offers me a path to the transformation of my whole being. My salvation is so much more than "Hell insurance.” It is a never ending journey into the eternal love of our loving God.

11. Orthodoxy teaches me to not only venerate the Lord's Mother and the Saints, but helps me understand that I am a part of this heavenly family. In fact, all of us in Church are a central part of the Family of God.

12. Orthodoxy teaches me that no matter what sin I’ve committed and no matter how far I have strayed away from God, Christ still loves me and wants to free me from the burden of my sins. His love is unconditional. It doesn’t depend on me and how good I am. He loves me no matter what, and constantly waits for me to turn back to Him. It’s up to me to turn back to Him, to repent. He is always waiting for me, knocking at the door of my heart, longing to receive me in His loving embrace.
SUPPORT OUR PROJECT MEXICO TRIP

Dear Beloved Parishioners

Our Church will once again send a MISSION TEAM TO MEXICO to serve our Lord Jesus Christ and His Church in a cross-cultural setting. This will be the EIGHTH TIME our Church will send such a group. **We are hoping to send a team of 25 participants. As in past years, we will travel to Mexico and work with the PROJECT MEXICO, while staying at the St. Innocent Orphanage. We will go from July 9-15, 2019.**

Our primary goal will be to help construct a home for a needy family in Rosarito. Over the entire summer, Project Mexico will be building 30+ homes. We will also spend time with the teenage orphans at the St. Innocent home, as well as spend time with the local people we meet.

In order for our group to participate in this mission trip, **WE ARE RAISING $25,000**, which will pay for the supplies and materials needed to build the house, our food and lodging at the orphanage, our flights to San Diego and the van we must rent for Mexico.

Would you prayerfully consider becoming a spiritual and financial partner with us on our mission? As a financial partner, you can make a tax-deductible donation to Sts. Constantine and Helen Church. Please write Project Mexico in the memo line of the check. You can learn more about Project Mexico on their website [www.projectmexico.org](http://www.projectmexico.org).

Thank you for helping our Church fulfill its part in our Lord’s global mission and outreach!!

In Christ’s love,

+Luke

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2018 STEWARDSHIP FINAL UPDATE

THANK YOU!!!
We ended the year with 149 stewards offering an average of $856 to support our church. We surpassed our budgeted goal by reaching $127,609.

**PACESETTERS**
($1000-$2000) - 23 Stewards

**TORCHBEARERS**
($2001-$4000) - 12 Stewards

**GOOD SHEPHERDS**
(over $4000) - 5 Stewards

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SIGN UP FOR PROJECT MEXICO 2019

Our Church reserved 25 SPOTS for this summer’s trip!
9 Spots Still Open!

**July 9-16, 2019**

For anyone with questions, or if you are interested in participating in building a home for Project Mexico, contact Fr. Luke.
LIVING BREAD LUNCHEON DONORS

The February Luncheon is donated in loving memory of
CHARLES CHITO
from his beloved wife Ann and her family.

We already have donors to sponsor the “Living Bread Luncheon” for each month through October. We are looking for donors for November and December. You can honor some special person or event, or offer the meal in loving memory of a beloved one.

We serve approximately 80-100 guests each month. A $400 donation will cover the cost of each month expenses for each month.

COME AND SERVE

We always welcome volunteers to come and serve and clean up during our Living Bread Luncheons. Come the first Saturday of each month by 12:15 to serve the meal and 12:45 to clean up!!!

We Need Help for Coffee Fellowship Hour.

Please let the Church Office know if you can help ONCE every EIGHT weeks to bring pastries, donuts, fruit or veggies for our coffee fellowship, or if you want to join a group to serve once a month.

We are also looking for more volunteers to join one of our four groups and help serve the Coffee Fellowship once a month.

+ + +

USHERS/GREETERS

Also looking for a few more stewards to join one of our four Greeters and Ushers groups!

I called on the Lord in my distress; The Lord answered me and set me in the right place. The Lord is on my side; I will fear nothing. What can anyone do to me? The Lord is for me among those who help me. … The Lord is my strength and my son, He has become my salvation.

Psalm 118:5-7, 14
WEEKDAY SERVICES
Feb 2 - 9:30 Liturgy for the Presentation of our Lord
Feb 9 - Saturday Vespers - 6:00pm
Feb 27 - 6:30pm Paraclesis Service
Saturday of the Souls
March 2, 9, 16
9:30 Liturgy followed by Memorial service
March 3 - Meatfare Sunday
March 10 - Cheesefare Sunday
March 11 - Clean Monday; The Beginning of Lent
Holy Week April 21-27
Pascha - April 28

CONGRATULATIONS TO OUR NEW 2019 PARISH COUNCIL
President: Neal Neslusan
Vice President: Michael Chito
Secretary: Marie McNally
Treasurers: Leah DiDonato & Bill Thompson
Other Members:
Arthur Darlagiannis
Joseph Gliniecki
Lisa Healy
Sandi Kunkel
Deborah Raymond
Evelyn Pappas
Olga Poloukhine
Jared Quill
Nick Seferi

“The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliver. My God, my strength in whom I trust.”
Psalm 18:2,3

OUR CHURCH’S 100TH ANNIVERSARY

This year we will be creating a committee to help us celebrate the 100th Anniversary of our beloved Church. Various events will take place throughout the year 2020, with a final celebration at the end of 2020. Our primary goal throughout this year will be to celebrate the fact that our community has offered a place of worship, a spiritual home to us and our forebears for the past 100 years, and how we have also offered a witness of God’s love and Good News to the larger Webster, Central MA and Northeast CT communities.

A secondary goal will be for us to raise at least $100,000 in honor of our church, and an additional $100,000 to help us fulfill several projects for our future. Contact Michael Chito for more information, and to see how you can help get involved!!!
JANUARY PARISH COUNCIL SUMMARY

• Election of offices for 2019: Congratulations to President: Neal Neslusan, Vice President: Michael Chito, Secretary: Marie McNally, Treasurers: Leah DiDonato and Bill Thompson

• Reminder to the Parish Council members of what is expected of them in the leadership role of the Church. 1) Regular attendance at Sunday Divine Liturgy; 2) Striving to live a Christ-centered life according to the teachings of our faith, 3) Regular attendance and participation at our monthly meetings, 4) Involvement in the committee work and overall activities of the Church

• The year end financial report showed that in 2018, we ended with an income of $354,316 and total expenses of $373,589 for a negative balance of $28,273. This negative balance, however, was expected since it included both the special donation of $100,000 from Emmanuel Pappas, which was given for the expansion of the Church parking lot and special projects, as well as the $65,000 cost to repair the foundation of the parish home. The Parish Council received approval from the General Assembly to take a line of credit of $30,000 from the bank to help offset the cost of the house repairs, and this is what led to the negative balance. Discussion ensued about how we would pay off this deficit.

• Members divided up into the various committees they will help to oversee. For each committee, parish council members will be looking for parishioners who can join their committee and help with related programs or projects. The committees include the following: Executive, Finance, Stewardship, Living Bread Luncheon, New Members, Youth, Spiritual Life and Evangelism, Parish Activities, Maintenance, Outside Grounds, Parish House, Philoptochos/Choir. If any parishioners have ideas for other committees needed in our church, please present the ideas to a council member.

THE AGAPE FUND

In January, I blessed approximately 150 homes. It was a joy to enter your homes and bring God’s special grace for the New Year. Thank you for welcoming me warmly. If I missed your home, and you want it blessed, please call me to set up a time to come.

When I blessed your home, many of you gave me a monetary gift. Please know that it is my joy to come into your homes and bring the special blessing of our Lord. No monetary gift is ever expected, and if you give a gift, know that I do not keep it for myself. All the money I receive from House Blessings, as well as any money received from Sacraments (Baptisms & Weddings) or Memorials and Funerals goes into my “AGAPE FUND”. I use this AGAPE FUND to help a variety of people in need - this may include people within our parish, as well as others outside our Church Family. I also use it to help various Church ministries. I always welcome any donations made out to this special fund.

If anyone tells me of a special need, I will try to respond to it. Of course, any such help is always held in the utmost confidence.

THANK YOU again for supporting this special AGAPE Fund! With love, +Luke
**COFFEE FELLOWSHIP SERVING GROUPS**

Feb 3 - Marie McNally, Christa Benoit, Sandi Kunkel, Mary Seferi,
Feb 10 - Kathy Bilis, Sara Darlagiannis, Marie Monroe, Charlotte Neslusan, Stephanie Quill
Feb 17 - Thomai Gatsogiannis, Trish Lareau, Deb Raymond, Vange Wilson, Alexandra Koulax
Feb 24 - Donna Cooney, Leah Didonato, Rena Klebart, Betty Tonna

**USHERS & GREETERS SCHEDULE**

Feb 3 - Nicoleta Cojocaru, Arthur Darlagiannis, Zach Gianaris, Jared Quill
Feb 10 - Arthur Bilis, Chris Geoti, Thomai Gatsogiannis, Trish Lareau,
Feb 17 - Marie McNally, Matt Benoit, Lisa Healy, Nick Seferi, Bill Thompson,
Feb 24 - Neal Neslusan, Jimmy Karapanos, Tasi Vriga, Tatyana Zhuk, Mike Chito

**WEEKLY BIBLE STUDIES**

**Wednesday 10:00am**

Thursday 7:00pm at home of Fr Luke

Everyone welcome to join!

**Coffee Fellowship Supply**

**Pastries/Donuts Groups**

*These groups will bake or bring in pastries/donuts and/or fruit and veggies for our coffee fellowship. We are looking for more volunteers to help!!!*

Feb 3 – Sandi Kunkel, Evelyn Pappas, Gulapka Kostovski, Betty Tonna
Feb 10 – Kathy Bilis, Marie Monroe, Eleni Sgouritsas, Tina Collelo
Feb 17 - Leah Didonato, Mary Seferi, Olga Poulokhine, Vasiliki Zahariadis
Feb 24 – Sara Darlagiannis, Sissy Darligiannis, Helen Constantine Alexandra Koulax
March 3 – Lisa Healy, Marie McNally, Despina Condos, Trish Lareau
March 10 – Charlotte Neslusan, Evis Jordanoglou, Dolly Sosnowski, Annalisa Dunning
Mar 17– Lynn Purcell, Rayne Purcell Sophia Foisy, Kelly Vosnakis
March 24 Titi Chito, Rina Sgouritsas, Lorna McWilliam, Pres. Faith Veronis

**YOUTH EPISTLE READERS**

Feb 3 - Maia Beaudry
Feb 10 - Zach Beaudry
Feb 17 - Kiera MacKenzie
Feb 24 - Lily Mueller
March 3 - Helen Dunning
March 10 - Panayiota Veronis
Remembering Our Church Family

Important Dates in FEBRUARY:

Make a visit, give a call, or express your congratulations to members of our Church family who celebrate special days during this month.

**BIRTHDAYS:**

Feb 1    Michael Chito
Feb 2    Fr Luke Veronis
Feb 2    Teddy Benoit
Feb 3    Vasiliki Zahariadis
Feb 3    Katia Kladas
Feb 4    Grace Darlagiannis
Feb 10   Athena Bilagiannis
Feb 11   Lily Mueller
Feb 12   Bozena Khozami
Feb 13   Arthur Darlagiannis
Feb 13   Athanasia Darlagiannis
Feb 13   Norman Desrosiers
Feb 13   Michael Angelo
Feb 15   Richard Bethune
Feb 23   Eleanor Teguis
Feb 25   Nike Avlas
Feb 26   Angelina Papageorge
Feb 28   John Sgouritsas
Feb 28   Helen Dunning

**WEDDING ANNIVERSARIES:**

Feb 11   George/Mary Papageorge

**NAMEDAYS:**

Feb 3    St Symeon the Prophet
         Symeon Dunning

Feb 6    St. Katia
         Katia Kladas

Feb 10   St Haralambos
         Harry Jordanoglou
         Harrison Jordanoglou

Feb 11   St. Theodora
         Theodora Veronis
         Theodora Stathis

Feb 17   St. Theodore
         Ted Tonna
         Teddy Benoit
         Ted Theodores

Feb 26   St. Fotini
         Faith Fotini Veronis

**God’s Blessing to**

**DIMITRI SIDOPOULOS**

**KARA BILIS**

Who Found the St. Basil Coins During our Vasilopita Luncheon

+  +  +

Congratulations on the 40 Day Churching of

Aiden Nicolaos Konstantakis

the son of Danielle & Kyriakos
IS OUR CHURCH IN YOUR WILL?

Remember Christ’s Beloved Church in your Estate Planning and Legacy Giving!

What a beautiful way to remember the Church that has blessed you and nourished you throughout your life, or at different stages in your life.

Even after you have gone to be with the Lord and join the Church Triumphant in the company of the saints, you can still help the Church here on earth continue her sacred ministry of love and hope to the world!

COMMIT TO 20 MINUTES WITH GOD EACH DAY

Use Fr. Luke’s Daily Email to help you spend 20 minutes every day connecting with God throughout the new year.

You can sign up to the daily email at the Church’s website www.schwebster.org. On the left column of the main page you will find a place to sign up.

Look for our safe and convenient

Online Giving

at bottom left of Church webpage at www.schwebster.org

Learn your Orthodox Faith from Orthodox podcasts, music, teachings at

www.myocn.net

www.AncientFaith.com
Thank You to those who sponsor our monthly bulletin!
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<td><strong>7:00 Bible Study at home of Fr Luke/Pres Faith</strong></td>
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<td><strong>March 2 1st Saturday of the Souls</strong></td>
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<td><strong>7pm AA</strong></td>
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<td><strong>7:00 Bible Study</strong></td>
<td><strong>12:30 Living Bread Luncheon</strong></td>
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CHURCH IS HARD

Church is hard for the person walking through the doors, afraid of judgement.
Church is hard for the prodigal soul returning home, broken and battered by the world.
Church is hard for the girl who looks like she has it all together, but doesn’t.
Church is hard for the couple who fought the entire ride to service.
Church is hard for the single parent, surrounded by couples holding hands, seemingly perfect families.
Church is hard for the widow and widower with no invitation to lunch after service.
Church is hard for the person insecure in their role as a leader.
Church is hard for the wife who longs to be led by a righteous man.
Church is hard for the single woman and single men, praying God brings them a soul mate.
Church is hard for the teenager, wearing a scarlet letter, ashamed of their mistakes.
Church is hard for the sinners ashamed of their sin.
Church is hard for the priest’s family, under the microscope of an entire body.
Church is hard for me.

It’s hard because on the outside it all looks shiny and perfect. Sunday best in behavior and dress. However, underneath those layers, you find a body of imperfect people, carnal souls, selfish motives.

But, here is the beauty of church - Church isn’t a building, mentality, or expectation. Church is the Body of Christ. Church is a group of sinners, saved by grace, living in fellowship as saints.

Church is a family of believers bound as brothers and sisters by an eternal love. Church is a holy space where sinners stand as equals before the Throne of Grace.
Church is a refuge for broken hearts and a training ground for mighty warriors.
Church is a converging of confrontation and invitation. Where sin is confronted and hearts are invited to seek restoration.
Church is a lesson in faith and trust.
Church is a bearer of burdens and a giver of hope.

Our Church is a family, coming together, setting aside differences, forgetting past mistakes, rejoicing in the smallest of victories. Our Church is a circle of sinners-turned-saints. It is where Jesus Christ resides and where we meet Him every week.

So even on the hard days at church - The days when I am at odds with a friend, When I’ve fought with my husband because we’re late once again. When I’ve walked in bearing burdens heavier than my heart can handle, yet masking the pain with a smile on my face. When I’ve worn a scarlet letter, under the microscope. When I’ve longed for a baby to hold, or fought back the tears. When I’ve walked back in, afraid and broken, after walking away.

I’ll remember, Christ has never failed to meet me there. The Church is His Body, God’s family of love, a place where I belong, and feel valued, cherished and loved.

I love our beloved Church!