

5TH SUNDAY OF GREAT LENT ~ ST. MARY OF EGYPT
Luke 7:36-50

By Archpriest Peter Olsen
St. Basil's Russian Orthodox Church, Watervliet, NY, 12189, April 21, 2024

Many people today in America and in Europe have fallen away from faith in God and from living the Christian life. Among them are some young families who formerly were active in church life and stayed home because of the recent pandemic, became accustomed to not going to church, and have fallen away and not returned to church. Many young people who are not taught about morality, virtue, and chastity feel that it is acceptable and natural to gratify their sensual and carnal desires with a handsome young man or a beautiful young lady. Such a relationship is entirely lacking in altruism and is entirely self-centered. They speak of love, but their love is empty and devoid of meaning. Couples who understood the meaning of life and the Christian understanding of marriage became soul mates who spent their entire lives loyal and faithful to each other. Today, almost 50 percent of all marriages in the United States will end in divorce or separation.

Today on the 5th Sunday of Great Lent we remember St. Mary of Egypt, who lived in the 5th century. At the tender age of twelve she left her parents' home and went off on her own. Without parental guidance, she was swallowed up by the carnal temptations of the cities and became a slave to the passions of the flesh. God did not give up on Mary, but always watched for an opportunity to lead her to repentance. The time came when she tried to enter the Church of the Holy Resurrection in Jerusalem on the feast of the Elevation of the Holy Cross. Even though Mary tried multiple times, the invisible power of God prevented her from being able to cross the threshold into the church. It was as if there was an invisible line of angels who guarded the entrance and pushed her back every time she tried to enter. This gentle rebuke by God, together with seeing the icon of the Mother of God outside on the church, became the impetus which finally permitted the light of Christ to penetrate the extreme darkness which filled her soul. Tears of repentance filled her eyes as she prayed to the Mother of God, who is the penultimate example of purity and chastity. Now the invisible warriors of God stepped aside, and Mary was permitted by God to enter the church. So began her arduous and difficult life of repentance. From the lowest depths of sin imaginable she was able, with God's help, to rise to the highest heights of the spiritual life, of holiness, sanctity, and closeness to God.

Wednesday evening of the 5th week of Great Lent we served small compline with the Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete. At this time we also read in church the life of St. Mary of Egypt. As we are reaching the end of Great Lent and approaching Holy Week and Pascha, the Church once again reminds us of repentance by giving us the extraordinary example of the amazing life of St. Mary of Egypt.

Many people who are new to the Orthodox Christian faith are frustrated by the fact that they are unable to quickly conquer their passions and their sins. Their faith is sincere, they pray and they fast, they go to Confession and they receive Holy Communion, yet they continue to fall to temptation and this leads them to despair. St. Mary of Egypt struggled under the most extreme conditions imaginable for seventeen years before her passions finally began to subside and the grace of the Holy Spirit began to replace the darkness which formerly filled her soul. Let us all take a lesson from Mary's life. Sins and passions, even as extreme as those which formerly enslaved our venerable Mother St. Mary, can be conquered, and the example of her life teaches us not to despair. What her life teaches us is that we must persevere, be humble, and be patient. Perhaps our spiritual struggles may not be so amazing as those performed by St. Mary, but all of our struggles, if performed in sincerity, faith, and humility are valued by our Savior and will help us to grow incrementally closer to God. Our goal is not to be able to levitate in the air when we pray, to have clairvoyance, or to be able to live on a loaf of bread for several years like St. Mary. Our goal is to remain faithful in our humble struggles, to

trust in God and His mercy, to love and to serve, to forgive and to repent, and when we fall down, to pick ourselves back up and start again.

Through the prayers of our holy and venerable Mother Mary of Egypt, may we have faith in the power of repentance, and may we be inspired to transfigure our lives so that with God's help we will always, until the end of our days, steadfastly and uprightly walk the path of our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

