

The Lord Has Bound Us to One Another By the Thread of Holy Love

By Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeev (November 24, 2013)

Our Lord Jesus Christ tells us the story of the merciful Samaritan who feels sorry for someone who has fallen into the hands of robbers. The Samaritan binds his wounds, brings him to an inn, pays the innkeeper and does everything that is necessary in order to save the man, who was ignored by a Levite and a priest who indifferently pass by him (Luke 10:30-37). Our Savior spoke this parable in answer to the question of a lawyer: "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29). In His reply, our Lord reminds us that our neighbor is not necessarily always someone who is close to us by family ties or a colleague or a co-worker; but sometimes our neighbor can be a person with whom we have incidental contact and is sent to us by the Lord. Our neighbor is anyone who needs our help.

As a rule, there are many ways in which we can help our neighbor. We can put him on our donkey and bring him to an inn, pay for his lodging and care or do whatever else we are able to do. It may be that we don't have a donkey or money for physicians, and then it seems to us that we are unable to offer any help. Even if we are unable to offer help in a material way, we are always able to offer our neighbor help in a spiritual way: we can offer our sympathy, a word of comfort and we can offer fervent prayer.

The Church commands us to pray for one another. The entire Divine Liturgy and all of its prayers and the litanies which are said by the deacon contain within themselves prayers for the [entire] church community — not only for each of her members individually, but for all of us as one Body in Christ, in which *"if one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together"*, according to the words of the Apostle Paul (I Cor 12:22-27).

The Holy Church, through these prayers, through the experience of jointly participating in the communion of the one Bread and the one Chalice of Christ, teaches us that we are one Body. This means that we cannot remain indifferent if one of the members of this common Body suffers and we cannot pass by our neighbor who is suffering from a misfortune.

The Lord Jesus Christ created the Church, absolutely, as a special fellowship of people, and these people are not connected in order to pay off some kind of debt with dues or with money-oriented interests. You see, very often various groups and organizations are founded on principles which are based on some kind of political, economic or commercial aim. It is not for these reasons that we go to church. We are in no way united here by political viewpoints, for they can be various, and not by business interests from which many of us also may diverge. We are united by something else: love for the Lord and the special, superhuman, Divine love of people for each other arising from this love. This type of love is not founded on intimate feelings or money-oriented interests. It does not have the character of natural love, the type which we show towards those who love us and who help and do good deeds for us. It arises from the grace of God, which we receive in church through prayer and by receiving the Holy Mysteries of Christ, Holy Communion.

When the Lord opens our spiritual eyes, we begin to see the people around us in a new way. Perhaps we notice their faults, but this does not make us love them any less, for we understand that we all suffer from one or another [spiritual] illness and we are all in need of healing. We are like patients who go to the polyclinic and sit in rows in various medical offices, because each of us suffers from his own particular illness and misfortune. We have all gathered together in this house because we all feel that we are in need of healing. We know that we receive healing from the one Physician — our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, Who through His saving Mysteries heals us from spiritual illnesses.

Healing can occur through various priests, in various circumstances, through different Mysteries [sacraments], because the Lord's Divine grace works in and through various and diverse ways. We know one thing: not one person who comes to church and participates in her Mysteries and receives [Holy Communion] the Holy Mysteries of Christ departs without being healed.

And even if now and then people do not find within themselves the strength or the ability to put this or that person on a donkey, take him and hand him over to physicians and pay for his medical help, the Lord Himself has many means and ways to help and to save people. Our not being indifferent towards our neighbor must consist of prayer for one another, for you see, we are always able to help every person when we pray for them.

We must pray for one another not because God does not remember this or that suffering person or because He needs us to remind Him — God never forgets anyone, — but because He wants us to help each other, to think about each other and to love one another, in order for our care for our neighbors to be expressed not only in concrete actions but also in prayer. Therefore, this is why we pray at the Divine Liturgy not only for ourselves but also for our neighbors, this is why we offer up prayers for the peace of the whole world, for those who are suffering or sorrowing and for those who are traveling — for each and everyone who, in his own way, needs God's help. We also believe that this prayer helps us the same way that participating in the Mysteries of the Church helps us.

When the Lord calls us to come to church for the services, when the church bells proclaim every Sunday morning that soon the Divine service will begin, this proclamation is not a call to leave the world and to forget about the people around us. This is a call to come to the Lord with our entire earthly life and with everything that it is filled with, with every person who surrounds us, and to hand all of it over to God. This is why every litany ends with the amazing words: "...and let us commend ourself and each other and all our life unto Christ our God."

We commend our entire earthly life to Christ our God and every person who surrounds us and ask that the Lord Himself would help each of us in our sorrows, illnesses, difficulties, our jobs and our family life, asking that the Lord would also help our neighbors.

This chain indissolubly binds all people to one another, — as inhabitants of the earth who regard themselves as the One Body of the Church of Christ, and including as well those who have already passed into the next life. Therefore, this is why we pray not only for the health of the living but also for the repose of the departed. We bring our commemoration lists not only with the names of our neighbors who are still living on the earth, but also with the names of those who have already departed into the next life, realizing that they also are in need of prayer, healing and forgiveness of sins. Like a person who has suffered at the hands of thieves, they also need someone to place them on a donkey, to pay their debts for them, because people, as a rule, pass into the next life weighed down by their sins and debts. This, therefore, is why, when a person dies, the members of the church gather around his body, in order to offer up prayers for him, beseeching that the Lord may forgive him his sins. Let us not consider such prayer to be in vain, for the Lord — the Judge of the living and the dead — makes the final judgment on each person, but at the same time hears our prayers and what we can tell Him about other people, our neighbors. Therefore [the Lord] He waits for us to pray for each other — the living and the departed. The Lord desires that each of us would support one other, in order that in this earthly life and in the age to come we would be supported by an unbroken thread, uniting us with God and each other through the Church of Christ.

This, therefore, is the type of mercy and love towards our neighbor that the Lord reminds us about in the parable of the Samaritan. The Church reminds us about this at every Divine Liturgy, in every litany: we are one Body in Christ and connected with each other, not because we desired this, but because the Lord bound us together with one thread, caught us like fish into one net, out of which no one must fall, for we all hope to reach the Kingdom of Heaven and we all hope to abide there together.

Translated from the Russian by Archpriest Peter Olsen