

NEW YEAR, NEW DAY

Rev. Fr. John-Brian Paprock

Extemporaneous sermon recorded Sunday, January 1, 2006 at Holy Transfiguration Orthodox Mission Chapel (Maruroopa Palli) in Madison, Wisconsin USA

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

Happy New Year!

Let me first speak a little bit about this secular day that we call New Year's and how we honor it in the sense that we understand in Holy Orthodoxy that we are part of a community. That community does not necessarily have to be run according to the way the church is run, although there's nothing that precludes it, it's just that we accept and understand that there's a world in which we live and a context in which we express our faith. And it is because of this that we honor even the secular days, or we try to. Today we are saying prayers for the New Year and these prayers can be done also in September, or October, when the other New Years begin for the church calendar and in those countries that have unique dates for beginning the year.

The beginnings of a secular world that we live in can be found in Rome, and continues through Europe and here in America and all other places that are business oriented at this point of the world. So, this is the New Year in the entire secular world.

Every Orthodox person knows there's another New Year. So what's the difference? Or why do we have multiple new years? Well, it is arbitrary in the sense that it doesn't matter when we begin a year. For that matter, it doesn't matter when we begin a month or when we begin a day. You see, one of the marvelous things of our faith is that we can be constantly beginning, which is to say that we are redeemed only by the day, not by the entire life altogether. Not as accumulation of days, but in this day we are saved. In this day, we are given the opportunities to express our faith. In this day everything, our entire eternal life, can be determined.

The powerful thing about Holy Orthodoxy is that we do honor the secular world that we live in that is ruled by people who may or may not be Orthodox. We also honor and accept the cycle of the seasons and the changing of the moon – that's a month. One lunar cycle is that word “month,” or at least in the English language the period of time we get that word “month” from. And even all the calendars, every calendar that I've ever looked at, follows at least the cycle of the moon, at least, and also the cycle of the sun. So we do have this expressive ability to honor that which is part of God's creation and that which is part of our own creation. And we want to bless that, we want to bring God's love into all of that because as we have been baptized and as we have been given the power of the Holy Spirit through Holy Baptism and Chrismation and as we partake of the Holy

Communion, the highest level of possible being with God and his physical body, we then become agents of God's love in this world, both the natural world and the secular world.

But it does not matter to us really which day it is – or should not matter to us which day it is – because every day is a day of redemption. Let me be clear about that – we look forward to the Lord's return just like other people talk about and try to predict the day and the hour, or try to say it's coming soon because there are signs or because they've read, and according to my belief, misinterpreted many of the prophecies to believe that they are something that they're not. And they believe that God is bound to prophecy. And so therefore, they actually use the prophecies as a way to manipulate their own personal power and personal prestige in believing that God can be manipulated because there are certain words written in a book.

But see in Orthodoxy, we've always anticipated the Lord's return as imminent, as though it's going to come any moment, any day and we live – if we are truly Orthodox and if there is an ideal of Orthodoxy that we can live to – it is the ideal that every single day we know can be the very last day on this earth, or the very last day on THIS earth.

And we also are very conscious and very aware, if we are truly present with this, we are honest and we admit that we have fallen so far short of the glory of God every single day. So we do two things: We pray, "Lord, have mercy," and we do whatever it takes to further the love of God in this world as we have been given the power to do, the strength to do, the ability to do each of us with our own unique and special gifts.

But also, we also have this other way of Orthodoxy, which is that we acknowledge and we honor the fact that history has passed, that we are elements of history that we are in context with history. We don't say that the world stopped or the last words of the Bible were put together and bound together by Gutenberg into what everyone now calls a book, "The Book," when it's several books. The world didn't stop, time didn't stop.

In fact, in Holy Orthodoxy, as much as we do things that are very ancient, we are constantly, in a sense, moving with the time. But more than that, we are moving outside of the idea of time and we grab onto those things that are eternal and everlasting. And what we've been given from the apostles from the very time to this present hour has been meaningful and purposeful and helpful and healing to a broken world full of broken people, of which we may be included.

So we also honor the fact that because there's been this long history, there may indeed be as much history into the future. So we live also with that understanding that every day may be just one more day in the eternity of days ahead of us on this planet – so not just us, but our generations that come after us and the children that come after that. The Native Americans, the Ojibwa people, the Anishinaabee people, of which I have a little bit of heritage – say that they look forward, if they're going to make decisions in a good way of the community, they look forward seven generations, the impact of their decision. In other words, they feel that they are stewards not just of what the generations they've been given, but also of the generations to come.

And so in Orthodoxy we do the same thing. We honor that, we understand that, and we respect that and we live according to that. Now when I visit people in the hospital, I say to them if they know they're dying because their body is growing weak, their abilities are diminishing and they have a diagnosed illness that has a history and it has a clear cycle that means that eventually it will stop the body from functioning. And I have encountered many people at different levels of death and dying and I have been both blessed and also dismayed sometimes by my experiences – maybe not by my experiences – but in that I have hoped always that people would aspire to the greatest they possibly have in their hearts that they knew their life was ending.

And you think that would be true for all of us. And what I say to them is this, I say, “You know what's taking you from this world, that is taking your physical life. But I could leave this hospital, this room, and meet you in heaven. Just because I don't know doesn't mean that I have more time. I could leave and get struck by a truck, God forbid, or some other equally easily mortal accident can happen. You see, the problem is that our bodies, these wonderful things that God has created, are both incredibly resilient, incredibly adaptable and yet fragile, so fragile. So fragile that literally the smallest micro-ounce of some poisons could kill us. I mean, literally, the smallest drop of a poison can kill us. That's how fragile we are. Think about that.

And depending on how we are struck by that truck, we can survive it. It's amazing! We can survive – I have met people who have survived being struck by a truck or a van – and I have seen people take every precaution you possibly can conceive of and still die in an accident. So what I am saying is that nothing, nothing is assured in terms of our life, nothing's assured of our time. And yet, we honor the successions of days and months and years and we account for them, we keep track of them as though they are of great meaning. The secular celebration that comes from actually from pagan times but has developed into its own unique qualities in a secular world of the United States in particular, but in Europe, everywhere – in fact, what is so bizarre to me, or so demonstrative of the world we live in, is that yesterday morning in the news they were showing fireworks for welcoming in the New Year in New Zealand. That means that every single time zone around the earth celebrated New Year's according to January 1, which is, in some respects, an arbitrary day. I mean, it could be any day, but that the whole world has kind of accepted this celebration suggests to us, or should suggest to us, that it has become a secular world, a world that honors the secular passing of time as more important than the sacred passing of time that we've been keeping track of since the beginning, that we keep track of with our calendars and our times so that we have a unique day. So even the day of Christmas, although it is based on a Holy Assumption, the Enunciation happened March 25, so December 25 would be the birth because the Assumption is the conception of Christ. So we have this great understanding here, this great opportunity that comes to us, that can come to us, and does come to us. That brings us a greater sense of life in that we can live outside of the secular calendar if we choose to and at the same time, we honor the secular world. We bless the secular world, we bless the natural world in our celebrations of following those calendars.

What the Apostle John says is also a unique opportunity today; both the epistle and the gospel were authored by John. So what does he say to us today? It is a very interesting comparison, but also a good teaching for us to understand how we are to live, how we are to do this blessing to the world.

In I John, in both cases, in both the Epistle and the Gospel today, there is a unique statement that doesn't appear in the other places. It says, "Do not be surprised that the world hates you." You know what is he talking about, "the world hates you?" Both that natural world, as well as the secular world. You know, often people think that there's just the secular world and there's this other world is somewhere else, right? But what he's really talking about here is that distinction that's being made that keeps track of the hours and the days and the months and the years. We do those things in our existence in this world. If we live in the eternal world, if we live in heaven, if we live in paradise, we give up that whole idea there needs to be tracking of time in that way because every moment is part of eternity. There is no reason to track the days, the seasons, the hours. Every moment is with God.

So, "Do not be surprised the world hates you." One thing we can be assured is that no matter how many days pass, at least until Christ comes again, which we have said can happen any moment or by God's mercy can be delayed for thousands of more years, but regardless, we still live in this way and the world wants us to conform to the world's standards. So what is Holy Orthodoxy do? We honor these special days, even though other things are going on in the world and we bless them to bring them into close alignment with God. Do you understand this? Rather than us capitulating or being submissive to the secular world or to the seasons, we are saying that part of God's creation, and part of the creation of church, is to bring greater harmony between this world and the world that was originally created. Did you hear what I just said? There is a distinction that is being acknowledged. If there wasn't such a distinction, there'd be no reason for Jesus Christ to ever have come.

So "We know that," and it says here, "We know that we have passed from death to life." Why does John say this in his epistle? "...Because we love our brethren." Understand again what that says. It's very clear. The way we know that we have eternal life is how? That we love our brethren. That we love them, that we have love. God's presence in this world is the love that exists. There is also a secular love out there and there's a natural love out there. Those also are to be blessed and they are blessed in holy church. They are blessed in holy church. But how do we know that we passed from death to life? Remember the teaching that we have from the very beginning of the church, which is an old document, it's a second century document called the constitution, and it's written by the apostles, or at least attributed to the apostles, and it's usually attached to St. Clement's works. It's obvious he didn't write it, though; it's a collective writing. And it says in there, it starts off, the very first phrase of the constitution of the church is this: "There is a way of life and there is a way of death." And here John says that we have passed from death to life. And I just got done talking about how people come close to death of the physical body, but we pass from death to life in the holy church. We have been given that experience and that quality of our existence that is different from those

that live in a secular world, or the natural world, where they pass from life to death. They live under the dominion of death and the fear of death. All of the sins, and the great manifold ways they come about, come into existence because of that fear of death. Under the dominion of death, we are all sinners but we pass from death to life.

The symbols in the secular world of the New Year are similar to that, aren't they? They pass from death to life; like the old man, which is really a secular American idea of the Old Man Time and the young baby, that's really an American invention almost of the early 20th century. It's not even that old and yet how accepted it is, as a symbol of a transition from one thing to another. But again, we have that transition every day of our lives, in fact, every moment of our lives. When does day start? If you want to say that a day is 24 hours long, whenever you want it to start it can start. It can start right now. So if we can start our day right now and every day is an act of redemption, every day we can pass from death to life, then what must we do? We must love one another.

In fact, he even goes further than that. He says, "Whoever hates his brother is a murderer." He goes one step further. He's saying, do you realize the impact that we have upon one another? That even if we don't physically do the harm that we still are creating a world that is consumed by death by participating in hateful ideas, hateful thoughts and sinful actions.

He says, "But we know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him." That does not mean, by the way, that no murderer can be redeemed. Every murderer can be redeemed. Every sin can be confessed except the sin against the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the giver of life and the sins that cannot be forgiven are the sins against our very life. Now you can take that in all sorts of meanings. The holy church is certainly merciful in its understanding.

"By this we know God's love for us because he laid down his life for us." See how he's playing against the ideas that we have about death? Because we know that Jesus Christ died, but he rose from the dead, he lives. But he went through death for it to be everlasting life. And we are being told hereby this that by laying down our lives, for our brethren, whether it's figuratively, spiritually, or by living in a secular world, by living a natural world, however we're laying down our lives for our brethren that's how we demonstrate our love; in other words, that we will give up this existence for our brethren. Or should I say we give up our secular existence, we give up the natural existence. Or let me say it even one way further – that we transcend the secular world, we transcend the natural life. We live in this world as spiritual beings. We honor and respect all of our brethren. That means that we honor and respect all of what is secular and we respect all of what is natural. We do not pretend to live outside of those things, even though we live beyond those things.

Now he goes further and even says, "Whoever sees his brother in need and shuts his mercy from him," he asked the question, "How can the love of God dwell in him?" In other words, what is also being spoken to here in this New Year, we'll say those prayers two more times – we said the prayers in the beginning, we'll say them two more times –

which are prayers of thanksgiving for the New Year, but we say those prayers, we say them also, we ask God not to visit us with calamities or anything like that, but we're also saying, "Lord, bless us according to your abundance." But you know, a lot of people want that to be physical abundance or want that to be a prestige, or whatever, or recognition. But really what we're asking for is not of ourselves. Realize this, that if we have something that it is we are stewards of that until someone else needs it, we should be giving it away to that person who needs it. If we withhold it, we are living in that fear of death again. Do you see what I'm saying here? In other words, that we think we have to hang onto this. Whatever it is, whether it be a chair, a piece of clothing, a piece of jewelry, as long as we are connected to things in this world, we will die.

But what does Christ say in the gospel today? He says, "I am the vine and you are the branches." He's using a metaphor of the natural world which suggests two things. One is that there is a source of life that can spread out in all sorts of different directions and still be part of the same branch. And vines, in particular, more than trees, vines have a way of weaving around everything around them. In fact, if you want a good vine to grow, you want to create a lattice that it can grow, and grow very abundantly and stay pretty much where you can find all the fruit, right, because of that characteristic of vines. So imagine what this is really saying about what it is to be a branch of a vine. That means that there's a rock or a tree or lattice work or whatever, we wrap ourselves around it in order to continue to grow. But again using this analogy one step further, all plants, all natural plants, we observe them growing toward what? Toward light. They cannot grow in darkness, but only in the light.

And if they're given sufficient nurture from the vine itself, all the branches will bear fruit. So what is Christ saying when he says he's the vine? He's saying he is the source of our life but that we have to continue that work, we continue that growth in the light to bear fruit.

When do we do that? Well, a vine obviously is stuck to the natural world. It has to follow the dictates of the sun, the moon, the seasons. We don't. But we honor those things, we respect those things when we're Orthodox and we celebrate – the days of the week have special significance. The times of the year have special significance. So here we are honoring both the New Year, the circumcision of Christ, because it is eight days after nativity in one calendar, it's also New Year's on the secular calendar, it's St. Basil's day because this is the day that he died and we honor the day that saints died as their celebration day. In other words, the day that they leave this world is our celebration day, not the day they were born. And so, our day of dying should be a celebration day, but it's an interesting twist. The only way it can be a celebration day is if we've lived well, if we lived according to the spiritual dictates that we've been given, the spiritual direction that we've been given, the lessons that we are taught in Holy Orthodoxy – both those that are in these books, but those that are also beyond these books. If these books go away, we still have all the teachings of these books in our services.

So if we pay attention, we're listening, we'll get all the blessings and all the teachings we need to live this day and every day and every moment, but we have that decision to make.

Once again, that decision: Are we going to live the way of death or the way of life? We're always confronted with that, but even more so with times that are so obviously transitions. May God help us and guide us in these decisions and may he help us to extend our gifts, both those that are physical, those that are natural, and those that are spiritual. It's the blessing and abundance of all of us, but not for our furtherance, but for the furtherance of the very vine which we are a branch.

Amen.