

Speaking the Truth in Love

Conference Papers

General Introduction

by

Fr. John Parker
Dean of St. Tikhon's Seminary
Lecturer in Pastoral Arts and Practice

“Use your inside voice.” Many a child has heard these words in the elementary school classroom—or (at least in my day!) in the library. The “inside voice” was the soft voice, the quiet one—the whisper, even. In his treatise, *On the Holy Spirit*, St. Basil the Great (4th century) would call the “inside voice” *the dogma of the Church*—whispered, not proclaimed. “Insider” words.

By contrast, we also know “the outside voice.” Though not a phrase often used, “the outside voice” is the loud one, the one heard by all—on the basketball court, across the parking lot; in the Scriptures, “from the housetops.” St. Basil, in that same treatise, would call this “*the kerygma*”—that is, the preaching, the proclamation, to be heard far and wide.

This collection of papers from the 2019 conference “Speaking the Truth in Love” is a blending of the use of inside and outside voices. The conference was meant to be an “insider’s” conference—not evangelistic, not proclaimed from the rooftops. In the

conference, we “whispered” to one another words about the Word, related to difficult dogmatic and pastoral matters of the day, in order to help ourselves more carefully prepare our *Kerygma*, our preaching, our proclamation—our witness to the Cross of Christ Crucified, to the empty Tomb, to the preaching of repentance, and forgiveness of sins. And in so doing, we face the great challenge of our digital age: because of recordings and because of the printing press, one’s inside voice is easily shared with the outside world.

We gladly offer these essays as mainly a word to committed Orthodox Christians, meant to help ground us further in what the Church teaches about the human person and human sexuality. We acknowledge that for some (perhaps for many) they will prove *hard words*. But our Lord did not call us to easy words, or the easy life, or the easy path. *Wide is the gate and easy is the way that leads to destruction,” but narrow is the gate, and hard is the way, that leads to life.* Our aim is *life*, and that path is hard, and that gate is narrow.

In so many ways, the world is broken. And nearly universally today, it’s demanded that this brokenness be accepted as normal, as standard, as inevitable. We Christians, however, do not take the brokenness of the world (including our own brokenness) as a God-given norm; and none of us, we believe, is called to be named for his brokenness—like Legion, who was named for his myriad demons.

Fr. John Oliver points out in his paper that in his pastoral experience many such broken people are suffering from self-loathing and self-hatred (and I will add loneliness), and these see the only solution as being the eradication of their former selves, right down to the mutilation of their flesh. But we proclaim a different, royal way to deal with self-loathing and self-hatred: acknowledging the brokenness, labeling it as brokenness but that is in need of repair, and finding our way into a voluntary new birth—a birth which conveys a new life and a new name.

The essays that we’ll be posting week by week wrestle with difficult topics. And we remind ourselves that as we absorb and embrace the traditional teaching of the Church, it must be faithfully and pastorally applied to those who are entrusted to our

care. We have to have real answers for real people about real trials. Our answers must be inspired by our Orthodox doctrine, but they cannot be doctrinaire.

Still, we must take into account that in many ways, our society functions like a very wounded teenager from a broken family. As a result, we also need to learn a new word—or rather, to learn anew how to say a very old word: “No.”

We aren’t here to say “we’ve got it right” with a self-righteous pat on the back. But we are here to say, “We trust the Lord; we trust the Scriptures; we trust the Saints; we trust the services.” We are imperfect people, who come from imperfect backgrounds, seeking to be perfected by the Only Lover-of-Mankind.

We are confident that we know a more excellent way—indeed, the Royal Way to the Kingdom. And our task is to be both confident and humble enough to go out into the world to deal with those whom God sends our way, in order to give them a new name and new life, to share joy.

In so doing, those who are suffering from self-loathing, self-hatred, and loneliness, can learn to trust in the One, True God. They can come to know that they are deeply loved by Jesus Christ, His Only-Begotten Son. They can come to know that they are freely and graciously offered new life in the power of the Holy Spirit. Made new by their Baptism into His death and Resurrection, they will come to know that they are no longer alone (“for where two or three are gathered...”)—because they, like us, were once strangers, but are now called His friends, fellow citizens of the household of God.

Often, in studying the Parable of the Prodigal Son, we are led to discuss either the son who left, or the one who remained, neither of whom acted as a true son of the generous father. Perhaps with these papers, we would be moved to consider the *broken-heartedness of the father*. Essentially, he said to his son, “Go. I won’t bless your leaving; I don’t approve of what you’re about to do. But I am going to give you what you want. Go, do what you want; but wherever you go, please remember: you know where home is. And I’m going to be here when you come back.”

We know what happened when the son left home and went far away; and we know what happened when that same son returned, and how the father blessed him royally. Maybe now is the season where we become intercessors. We have to be able to just “sit”—sit in the tension between speaking the truth in love and waiting for the prodigal to return. This is an unresolvable tension that we don’t want to have to deal with, but we must sit with it, and say, “Lord, help!” In the home. In the parish. In the neighborhood.

We don’t want to lose even one! And so, as Fr. Thomas Hopko of blessed memory used to say, “We must go that extra one-hundred-thousandth mile in order not to lose them,” while not blessing what cannot be blessed.

Perhaps now it’s time to say, “That is not the way. We know the way, even though we may not live it very well. But we do know the way; and so often what the world offers, entices us with, and approves *is not it*. If you must go to learn this the hard way, then go. We still love you, and we are here for you. The door will be open when you come back. We will leave the light on.”

And between the time they leave and the time they return, we pray with great fervor for them, yet without condemning them or judging them, and also *without running after them*. Recall: the father didn’t run after his prodigal son, but continued maintaining the household at home. This may be the “insider” action: the way we pastorally work with those Orthodox Christians who wish to justify their own ideas and actions, living an *asotos* (often translated ‘loose,’ but literally meaning ‘not salvific’) life.

And perhaps we also need to consider another perspective once offered by Fr. Hopko. One time he made a beautiful insight related to the prodigal son. He noted that the capacity of the prodigal to return *was dependent on the fact that he had departed*. That is to say, the prodigal *knew where home was because he had begun there*; and he remembered how good that home was, especially now by contrast to the pigpen in which he found himself.

Many, so many of those suffering in the pigpen of today *know no good home*. And even if raised in some tradition of Christianity, almost no American person knows anything of the life-in-Christ as we Orthodox Christians know it. That is to say, these people do not have an internal compass to point them back to what's good and salvific. They cannot long for the home called the Church, because they never were in it. They can only long for something—their true home—which, if they are open, they will recognize, if you or I show it to them.

O that we would be brokenhearted for a world which hates itself! O that we would be a neighbor to a world filled with self-loathing! O that we would love enough to notice a lonely person! You and I were once strangers—and now Jesus calls us His friends. O that we would make *new friends* for Jesus Christ! Armed with truth and love, may we would go forth in peace, keeping our eye open for that one lost sheep.

I congratulate Drs. David and Mary Ford for their efforts in putting together this remarkable conference! And I thank all who contributed to this profound event. May the Lord bring healing to even a small corner of our world through the efforts of those whose papers are being presented here on the St. Tikhon's Seminary website.