I think it’s been a while since I gave one of my world-famous sermons on Gnosticism, which means that today you are in for a treat. Because when I read surveys of what the people of St. John Chrysostom want, “hearing about Gnosticism” comes in at number three. Number one is of course, “Could we get the diocese to do something besides banning worship” and number two is “Instead of paying our assessment couldn’t we just buy party barge.” But anyway, back to Gnosticism. To add a little more excitement today I want to sort of expand what I am talking about to include the opposite of Gnosticism. And further what I really want to look at is how we see Gnosticism and its opposite in our daily lives. If you are confused hopefully you won’t be by the time I am done, but if you are, I will be happy to come over to your house and try to explain what I was talking about, using my world-renowned Gnostic puppet show (but only after checking the diocesan guidance in regards to home puppet shows on the topic of Gnosticism).

So, let’s start with our Old Testament lesson particularly the part which reads, “As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven.” So, what do we learn from this besides where the great 1981 English film about the Paris Olympics got its name? Well, we learn that Elijah ascended in the whirlwind, which seems fairly remarkable. I mean it’s not something you see every day, at least not in the part of Fresno where I grew up. But the other big thing about it is that all of Elijah ascended. What I mean by that is that his soul did not sneak out of his body like Anakin Skywalker did at the end of *Return of the Jedi*. No, all of the Elijah that was on earth went to heaven. If you remember, this is the same thing that happened to Jesus after the Resurrection. And if you are Roman Catholic or play one on TV then you also believe this happened to the Blessed Virgin Mary. But regardless of how many people are on your list of bodily ascensions, what this tells us is that bodies are capable of going into heaven. They may be the bodies of very special people, but still they go.

And this gets us to Gnosticism. Gnosticism argues that we are made up of two substances. These two substances like oil and water do not mix – put in broad categories one substance is body and the other is soul. Gnosticism is also dualistic meaning that they believe there are two gods -- one good and the other bad. What this means in practicality is that the soul is the dominion of the good god and that the body is the dominion of the bad god. Taking this out a little further this means that the spiritual is the realm of the good and that the physical is the realm of the bad; meaning that which we can see and touch is bad and that which is unseen is good. But if bodies go to heaven, as we hear today, and are capable of dwelling with our good God, then they cannot be inherently bad. Okay, so hopefully so far so good. Now here is the issue: Gnosticism says we are separate but Christianity says we are one and both body and soul are capable of glory. And if that were the end of the story I could stop and we could all go home knowing a little more about Gnosticism, but there is a problem and that has to do with Gnosticism being very sneaky. If you talk to Christians you will see that many make the mistake of having a Gnostic understanding or an anti-Gnostic understanding of their faith. What I mean by this is many Christians like to emphasize one half of this equation to the exclusion of the other, by either saying that the spirit is what really matters or that the earthly is what really matters. Let me try and explain.

First let’s take a look at the Gnostic view as it appears in Christianity. Since Gnosticism says that the spirit is what matters this means that all of the stuff around us does not matter. So the Gnostic Christian is able to look at the world and separate it by those who are good souls (i.e. those who have cultivated their good soul) and those who are bad (i.e. those who have not cultivated their good soul). If you look at most splits within church, they contain a fair amount of this dynamic. The side that leaves believes that the soul of the other side is so corrupt that they have an obligation to get as far away from their physical presence as possible. Because such an understanding gives us license to separate ourselves from anyone who does not act the way that we do. If our only job is to cultivate our spirit then the best way to cultivate it is to keep it away from all of the things which might corrupt it. If you are dualistic and can divide the world into good and bad then it becomes your spiritual duty to not only ignore others but to also hate them. I realize that what follows is not necessarily a Christian example but I think it illustrates what I am talking about. There was a crazy editorial in the Los Angeles Times the other day by a person whose neighbor plowed their driveway, just to be nice. But there was a problem the neighbor who plowed the driveway was a Trump supporter and the person whose driveway was plowed was not. So, the editorial writer spent most of the article figuring out a way that they could still hate the neighbor. The physical actions did not matter because they knew their neighbor’s spiritual reality and that it was bad. Noble spiritual beings can happily hate unnoble spiritual beings despite what they do.

But there is another side to this and that is what I am calling the opposite of Gnosticism, because I am not positive that it has a name. And that is we can get so caught up in the physical that we forget that we also need to grow towards God. What I mean by this is we have a model for the church and for our individual piety that rests only on what the church can do for the physical needs of others. In this understanding the Church is important only to the extent that it provides social services like soup kitchens and homeless shelters. Now these are all good things and things the church should be involved in but they cannot be detached from faith in God. When we lose sight of the spiritual and focus only on the temporal our endeavors risk turning ourselves and the Church into the YMCA. Sure, it’s a great gym but when it was founded in 1844 it had the stated intention of the “improving of the spiritual condition of young men.” It would not be until 1865 that physical work through sports became part of the means by which they sought to achieve their goal. Nowadays the medium has become the message and put in strictly business terms the YMCA’s main competition is not St. John Chrysostom but rather Planet Fitness. Sure, they have a quote from 1st Corinthians on the wall but people go there to work out not to worship. This opposite of Gnosticism so elevates the temporal that the spiritual eventually becomes so muted that it might as well of disappeared.

Christianity tells us the solution is “both and”. We are supposed to love God with our heart, mind and soul but we are also supposed to love our neighbors. There is a beautiful tension that exists in Christianity. We can love creation, we can see in it the beauty of God, but through that we must also contemplate the mystery and unfathomability of God. To me this makes Christianity the most complete religion; the love for creation coupled with the mystical interactions with God. We love God and so love one another, but we love creation and so love God. Today Elijah ascended to heaven showing that God loves all of us, body mind and spirit and we should do the same this day and forevermore.