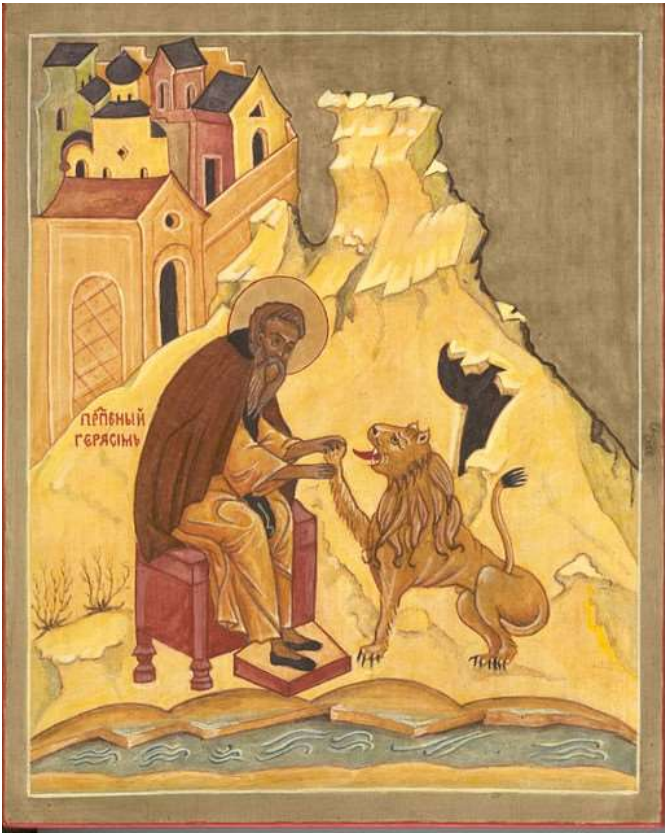


## Gerasimo and the Lion: an Allegory Glimpsed in the Heart of Toronto

Mary — March 3, 2011



Gerasimo is famous for having had the courage to go up to a roaring lion. Any person of sense would have run the other way and not looked back. Perhaps it went something like this... I can imagine because at St John's Mission, right here in Toronto, where there are wounded creatures aplenty, I've seen it happen, too.

Instead of concentrating on keeping himself out of harm's way, Gerasimo wanted to find out what was behind that roar. He went up to the lion. He was within reach of its claws, its magnificent mouth with the sharp fierce teeth. He could feel its breath on his neck as he bent over it—for he'd seen a trail of red blood glancing down one of its paws. It was not the wounds the beast might inflict on him that occupied him, but the wound the beast was suffering from.

Astonishingly, the King of the Forest was staying quiet rather than attacking him for his desire to help; having been in the wild before, Gerasimo knew what it was to be bitten or scratched, mauled or maimed, by the one you were trying to help. Now that he was close enough, he could see that the paw was swollen and irritated. He took the greatest risk of all: he touched. The animal must have known both gentle touch and rough touch, for this gentle

touch it allowed, though he could feel it trembling. Now that he was close up, and the animal wasn't hindering him by taking measures to protect itself, he could see clearly enough what was causing the pain which made the lion lash out; no deep mystery here.

Gerasimo had the tools—his own hands—and he had the courage, and he had the desire. Momentum, too, was on his side: he knew that if he turned back now, he most likely would be killed, whereas if he persisted he might be able to save them both. He held the swollen paw in his left hand, and with his right he felt the pad until his thumb recognized the end of the thorn lodged in the great beast's flesh. Only touch could have found the source of the pain. Gerasimo by now was speaking soothing words to the lion, for he knew his next move would be the first one to directly cause pain, which would test the trust that had begun to grow between them. So this was the critical moment. He must use everything he had: voice, touch, attitude. Gathering all his inner conviction, he grasped the thorn between finger and thumb, and slid it quickly out of the animal's flesh.

What surprised Gerasimo was the instant change from fear and danger to joy and friendship. The lion, once it felt the pain leave which for so long had tormented it, leaped for delight and skipped like a kitten around this strange healer. The rest of its life would be spent in loving this man; and when Gerasimo died, the lion too would lay down its head and let go of life.

Is it a fairly-tale from the past? I don't think so. Listening to the story, I suddenly realized it's highly familiar. I've seen it happen, over and over at the Mission. It doesn't always end the same way, but plenty of lions in pain have limped into this place; and staffing the Mission are people who have the courage to come close, maybe close enough to see what's behind it all. Sometimes they get snarled at or scratched for their pains. Sometimes, through persistence, patience and using all the tools at their disposal—food, gentle touch, good instincts, voice, prayer, compassion, daily attention—they are able to touch the source of the pain and make things a little better. Sometimes the lion runs away before they have much chance to get close.

Perhaps it's only rarely they are able to find and remove the thorn. In the meantime, the longer, patient, careful work of coming closer happens in the regular life of the Mission – the meals, the listening, the work, the

prayer, the faithful presence, the not-running-away. All these can be rare and precious to someone who is hurting—and maybe hurting others to escape the pain.

An example.

She was from the streets, and she had an attitude. Probably it kept her alive. Her drug habits had left her with some illnesses, both physical and psychological. Somewhere in the world, where she didn't know, she had a child, being raised by somebody she didn't know. She had a small but obedient army of professional service workers. She knew her rights, and she knew her wrongs. “Just try me,” her glance seemed to say, when she was in a certain mood. Well, like the lion, she knew how to roar, and chances are she knew how to bite. Nobody at the Mission had tested her on that last one, but they'd all heard the first. The thorn in her paw? Maybe whatever it was that put her on the streets; maybe what had happened to her since, or the relationships she'd lost along the way, or even the way she felt trapped in the life she was now living. In any case, the thorn's pain was never absent for her. Her ability to be sarcastic, manipulative, biting or just plain mean on demand kept her sharp, and kept her from getting more wounds. But it didn't keep the thorn from digging deeper and deeper into her flesh.

What would you do? How to respect her claws and teeth—not making the mistake of mistaking her for a tame housecat? Get closer a little at a time, so she wouldn't lash out or run away? How to avoid trying to put her in a cage? How to treat her like a human person—with the weaknesses, responsibilities, fears and hopes of a human person—and try to heal? Or, just give up on her and run away—stay safe in the moment, while the forest gets more and more dangerous?

It's not an easy work, even for Gerasimo I suppose. But he seems to be inspiring the hearts of the volunteers and staff at St John's. His courage to care for the wounded, despite the danger, seems alive and well in this place.