

Matthew 4:1-11
July 29, '18

“THE BATTLEGROUND”

ON DECEMBER 22, 1849, MEMBERS OF A RUSSIAN INTELLECTUAL LITERARY GROUP KNOWN AS THE PETRASHEVSKY CIRCLE WERE SENT TO SEMYONOV SQUARE TO MEET THEIR FATE – DEATH BY FIRING SQUAD.

WITH THE MEN POINTING THEIR RIFLES AND FINGERS RESTING ON THE TRIGGER, A MESSENGER FROM THE TSAR RODE INTO THE SQUARE WAVING A WHITE FLAG.

LIKE SOMETHING OUT OF A HOLLYWOOD MOVIE, HE DECLARED HE HAD AN OFFICIAL PARDON FROM THE TSAR OF RUSSIA, NICHOLAS I, IN A “SHOW OF MERCY.”

THIS WAS NOT A SHOW OF MERCY, BUT RATHER A STAGED WAY OF FOSTERING FEAR, TERROR, AND GRATITUDE.

THIS WAS A “MOCK EXECUTION” AND AMONG THE VICTIMS WAS FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY.

WE’RE IN THE THIRD WEEK OF THE SECOND SECTION OF A SUMMER SERIES THAT FOCUSES ON “MOVIES, BOOKS & SONGS WITH A SPIRITUAL MESSAGE THAT AREN’T NECESSARILY RELIGIOUS.”

WE’VE LOOKED AT FOUR MOVIES & THIS IS THE THIRD IN THE BOOK PORTION OF THE SERIES.

WE’RE USING THE TERM “BOOK” RATHER LOOSELY BECAUSE, IN THIS CASE, WE’RE TALKING ABOUT A BRIEF SECTION OF A BOOK AND NOT NECESSARILY EVEN FOCUSING COMPLETELY ON THAT ONE SECTION.

DOSTOEVSKY IS CONSIDERED BY MANY TO BE THE GREATEST NOVELIST WHO EVER LIVED.

IN VIRTUALLY ANYONE’S ESTIMATION, CRIME & PUNISHMENT AND THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV WOULD BE INCLUDED IN A TOP TEN LIST OF THE WORLD’S GREATEST NOVELS.

ALBERT EINSTEIN SAID OF DOSTOEVSKY, “*HE GIVES ME MORE THAN ANY OTHER THINKER.*”

COUNTLESS INDIVIDUALS OVER THE PAST HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS WOULD SAY THEY CAME TO FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST AFTER READING DOSTOEVSKY.

THAT SEEMS TO BE A STRANGE THING TO SAY ABOUT A MAN WHOSE LIFE WAS NOT AT ALL WHAT WE THINK OF WHEN WE THINK OF SOMEONE INSPIRING RELIGIOUS BELIEF IN OTHERS.

HE WAS ADDICTED TO GAMBLING & WAS CONSTANTLY ON THE RUN FROM CREDITORS.

HE SPENT FOUR YEARS IN HARD LABOR & FOUR MORE HARD YEARS IN CONSCRIPTED MILITARY SERVICE.

HIS CHILDHOOD WAS ONE OF TREMENDOUS TRAUMA, TRAGEDY & LOSS.

HIS MOTHER DIED WHEN HE WAS YOUNG & HIS FATHER WAS A TYRANT TO HIS CHILDREN.

WHEN HE WAS 18 YEARS OLD, DOSTOEVSKY’S FATHER WAS BRUTALLY MURDERED BY HIS OWN RUSSIAN SERFS & HIS BODY LAID IN A FIELD FOR TWO DAYS BEFORE BEING FOUND.

HE ENTERED INTO WHAT PROVED TO BE AN UNHAPPY MARRIAGE & HIS WIFE DIED AT A RELATIVELY YOUNG AGE.

NONE OF THIS SOUNDS AS IF IT WOULD AT ALL BE THE KIND OF LIFE THAT WOULD PRODUCE LITERARY WORKS THAT WOULD INSPIRE FAITH IN OTHERS.

DOSTOEVSKY, THOUGH, WAS A GOOD MAN – A MAN WHO WAS PROFOUNDLY COMMITTED TO JESUS CHRIST, EVEN IN THE MIDST OF HIS STRUGGLES & TRIALS.

AS A YOUNG CHILD, HE HAD LEARNED THE LESSONS OF FAITH FROM HIS MOTHER BEFORE SHE DIED & FROM A KINDLY SOUL AT THE HOSPITAL WHERE HIS FATHER WORKED – A MAN WHO WOULD READ HIM STORIES FROM THE BIBLE.

WHEN HE WAS INCARCERATED IN PRISON, THE ONLY ITEM DOSTOEVSKY HAD WITH HIM WAS A COPY OF THE GOSPELS & HE READ THEM VORACIOUSLY.

THIS WAS AFTER A PERIOD IN WHICH HE HAD LAPSED IN HIS FAITH & REGARDED CHRISTIANITY WITH SKEPTICISM.

THOSE DOUBTS THAT HAD CREPT INTO HIS HEART & MIND ENABLED HIM LATER – WHEN HIS FAITH WAS RESTORED & BECAME STRONGER THAN EVER – TO MAINTAIN AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE LEGITIMATE QUESTIONS THAT ARE RAISED BY THOSE WHO REJECT FAITH.

AT ONE POINT, WHEN TALKING ABOUT THE BOOK THAT IS OUR FOCUS THIS MORNING, DOSTOEVSKY SAID, “*ONE COULD NOT POSSIBLY CONCEIVE SO STRONG A DENIAL OF GOD AS THE ONE TO WHICH I GAVE EXPRESSION.*”

THE WHOLE BOOK IS AN ANSWER TO THAT.

YOU MIGHT SEARCH EUROPE IN VAIN FOR SO POWERFUL AN EXPRESSION OF ATHEISM.

THUS, IT IS NOT LIKE A CHILD THAT I BELIEVE IN CHRIST AND PROFESS HIM.

MY HOSANNA HAS COME FORTH FROM THE CRUCIBLE OF DOUBT.”

THAT'S ONE OF DOSTOEVSKY'S STRENGTHS AS A WRITER & CHRISTIAN APOLOGIST.

HE DOESN'T SET UP STRAW MEN TO EASILY BE KNOCKED DOWN. HE HAS HIS CHARACTERS WRESTLE WITH QUESTIONS OF FAITH IN A WAY THAT IS BRUTALLY HONEST & INTELLECTUALLY RESPECTFUL.

SUCH IS THE CASE WITH PERHAPS THE MOST WELL-KNOWN SECTION OF HIS MOST-HIGHLY ACCLAIMED NOVEL.

IN POOR HEALTH, NOT KNOWING WHETHER HE WOULD HAVE THE STRENGTH TO FINISH IT, DOSTOEVSKY SAID, *"I'D DIE HAPPY IF I COULD FINISH THIS FINAL NOVEL, FOR I WOULD HAVE EXPRESSED MYSELF COMPLETELY."*

THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV IS A STORY OF FOUR BROTHERS, EACH ONE REPRESENTING A PARTICULAR CHARACTER TRAIT THAT WAS ALSO VERY MUCH A PART OF WHO DOSTOEVSKY WAS.

ALYOSHA IS THE UNQUESTIONED "HERO" OF THE STORY WHEN VIEWED FROM A STANDPOINT OF FAITH.

HE'S THE YOUNGEST BROTHER & THE ONE WHO GIVES US THE COMMITTED SPIRITUAL SIDE OF THE AUTHOR.

HE'S NAMED AFTER DOSTOEVSKY'S YOUNG SON WHO DIED DURING THE WRITING OF THE NOVEL.

IVAN, THOUGH, IS THE BROTHER WHO IS MORE PROMINENT IN THE NOVEL.

HE REPRESENTS A MORE INTELLECTUAL WAY OF LOOKING AT THE WORLD.

IN "THE GRAND INQUISITOR" – ONE OF THE HIGH POINTS IN THE NOVEL AND, INDEED, ONE OF THE HIGH POINTS IN ALL THE WORLD'S LITERATURE, IVAN & ALOSHA ARE ENGAGED IN CONVERSATION,

TRYING TO HELP ONE ANOTHER UNDERSTAND THEIR PERSONAL VIEWS ON CHRISTIAN FAITH.

IVAN SAYS, “*IT IS NOT THAT I REJECT YOUR GOD, ALYOSHA. I REJECT HIS SYSTEM, HIS WAY OF DOING THINGS.*”

HE TELLS ALYOSHA THAT HE HAS WRITTEN A PROSE POEM THAT HE’D LIKE TO SHARE WITH HIM.

IT’S SET IN 16TH CENTURY SPAIN, DURING THE TIME OF THE INQUISITION.

HERETICS ARE BEING BURNED ALIVE & AFTER ONE PARTICULAR NIGHT OF HORROR IN WHICH MORE THAN 100 WERE KILLED, CHRIST SHOWS UP & IS RECOGNIZED AT ONCE.

HE BEGINS PERFORMING ONE MIRACLE AFTER ANOTHER – MIRACLES THAT MIRROR THOSE HE PERFORMED IN THE NEW TESTAMENT.

THERE’S A BLIND MAN & HE HEALS HIM.

THERE’S A CRIPPLED GIRL & HE HEALS *HER*.

JESUS WALKS TO THE CATHEDRAL & COMING OUT IS A FUNERAL PROCESSION.

THE CORPSE OF A LITTLE GIRL IS BEING CARRIED OUT OF THE CHURCH.

JESUS WALKS OVER AND RAISES THE GIRL FROM THE DEAD.

“THE GRAND INQUISITOR” – THE HIGH CHURCH CARDINAL IN CHARGE OF THE INQUISITION – ORDERS JESUS ARRESTED AND THROWN IN PRISON.

LATER, THE GRAND INQUISITOR ENTERS THE CELL AND SILENTLY WATCHES JESUS FROM THE DOORWAY FOR A LONG TIME.

FACE-TO-FACE, THEY MAKE EYE CONTACT WITH ONE ANOTHER AND NEITHER ONE FLINCHES.

EVENTUALLY, THE CARDINAL SAYS, “*TOMORROW, I SHALL CONDEMN YOU AT THE STAKE AS THE WORST OF ALL HERETICS. AND THE PEOPLE TODAY WHO KISSED YOUR FEET, TOMORROW AT THE FAINTEST SIGN FROM ME WILL RUSH TO HEAP UP THE EMBERS OF YOUR FIRE.*”

JESUS DOESN'T RESPOND – EITHER TO THAT STATEMENT OR TO ANYTHING ELSE THE GRAND INQUISITOR SAYS TO HIM.

IN ESSENCE, WHAT THIS CARDINAL SAYS IS THAT THE WORLD WOULD HAVE BEEN BETTER OFF WITHOUT JESUS.

THE *CHURCH* WOULD HAVE BEEN BETTER OFF WITHOUT HIM.

WE OFTEN HEAR THAT THE CHURCH HAS MESSED UP WHAT CHRIST CAME TO DO BUT THE GRAND INQUISITOR IS SAYING THAT IT'S PRECISELY THE OPPOSITE - IT WAS CHRIST HIMSELF WHO MESSED THINGS UP & THE CHURCH HAS CORRECTED HIS ERRORS.

IN ESSENCE, THE GRAND INQUISITOR SAYS, “*WHY HAVE YOU COME BACK? IT HAS TAKEN US, THE LEADERS OF THE CHURCH, 1500 YEARS TO UNDO WHAT YOU DID.*”

***YOU CAME INTO THE WORLD & SATAN SHOWED YOU THE HUNGER OF THE WORLD AND SAID ‘END THE HUNGER! TURN THE STONES INTO BREAD!’ AND YOU WOULD NOT DO IT.*”**

THE GRAND INQUISITOR GOES THROUGH EACH OF THE TEMPTATIONS JESUS EXPERIENCED IN THE WILDERNESS & SAYS THAT JESUS WAS WRONG IN NOT ACCEPTING SATAN'S OFFER.

HIS ARGUMENT IS THAT PEOPLE DON'T REALLY WANT FREE WILL – THEY WANT SECURITY.

PEOPLE WANT BREAD FOR THEIR BODIES, NOT BREAD FOR THEIR SOUL.

THE GRAND INQUISITOR SAYS “YOUR FAITH WAS FOR A LITTLE ELITE GROUP THAT UNDERSTOOD FREEDOM AND HOW PRECIOUS IT IS. YOUR SALVATION IS ONLY FOR THE ELITE.

OURS (THE CHURCH’S) IS FOR THE OTHERS.

THOSE OTHERS – THE VAST MAJORITY OF HUMANITY – DON’T UNDERSTAND FREEDOM – DON’T UNDERSTAND WHAT IT IS TO MAKE A DECISION.

WE MAKE THE DECISIONS FOR THEM.”

IVAN’S POEM OF “THE GRAND INQUISITOR” ENDS LIKE THIS:

“WHEN THE INQUISITOR CEASED SPEAKING, HE WAITED SOME TIME FOR HIS PRISONER TO ANSWER HIM; HIS SILENCE WEIGHED DOWN UPON HIM. HE SAW THAT THE PRISONER HAD LISTENED INTENTLY ALL THE TIME, LOOKING GENTLY IN HIS FACE AND EVIDENTLY NOT WISHING TO REPLY.

THE OLD MAN LONGED FOR HIM TO SAY SOMETHING, HOWEVER BITTER AND TERRIBLE.

BUT HE SUDDENLY APPROACHED THE OLD MAN IN SILENCE AND SOFTLY KISSED HIM ON HIS BLOODLESS, AGED LIPS.

THAT WAS ALL HIS ANSWER.

THE OLD MAN SHUDDERED.

HIS LIPS MOVED.

HE WENT TO THE DOOR, OPENED IT, AND SAID TO HIM: ‘GO, AND COME NO MORE – COME NOT AT ALL, NEVER, NEVER!’

AND HE LET HIM OUT INTO THE DARK ALLEYS OF THE TOWN. THE PRISONER WENT AWAY.”

AND ALYOSHA THEN ASKS IVAN – “AND THE OLD MAN?”

IVAN RESPONDS - “THE KISS GLOWS IN HIS HEART, BUT THE OLD MAN ADHERES TO HIS IDEA.”

IVAN & ALYOSHA CONTINUE TO DISCUSS IVAN'S BELIEFS & HIS APPROACH TO GOD.

IVAN BELIEVES THAT "EVERYTHING IS PERMITTED" BECAUSE WE LIVE IN AN IMPERFECT WORLD & DON'T REALLY HAVE THE CAPACITY TO CHOOSE BETWEEN RIGHT & WRONG.

HE SAYS TO ALYOSHA, "*BUT NOW I SEE THAT IN YOUR HEART, TOO, THERE IS NO ROOM FOR ME, MY DEAR HERMIT. THE FORMULA 'EVERYTHING IS PERMITTED,' I WILL NOT RENOUNCE, AND WHAT THEN? WILL YOU RENOUNCE ME FOR THAT? WILL YOU?*"

ALYOSHA STANDS UP, GOES TO HIM IN SILENCE, AND GENTLY KISSES HIM.

HIS RESPONSE TO IVAN IS PRECISELY THE RESPONSE OF JESUS TO THE GRAND INQUISITOR.

IVAN SAYS, "*BROTHER, YOU STEAL MY IDEA AND COPY IT.*"

TO WHICH ALYOSHA REPLIES – "*NO, I DO NOT COPY IT, MY BROTHER. THE STORY YOU HAVE TOLD DOES HONOR TO JESUS, IT DOES NOT DISGRACE HIM.*"

DOSTOEVSKY IS SAYING THERE IS NO ARGUMENT AGAINST THE POINTS THAT ARE BEING MADE BY THOSE WHO REJECT A LIFE OF FAITH.

IT'S FOOLISH & SILLY TO ARGUE ABOUT SUCH THINGS.

THERE ARE LOGICAL, LEGITIMATE POINTS TO BE MADE BY THOSE WHO SIMPLY CAN'T BELIEVE THAT THIS WORLD WAS CREATED BY A LOVING, CARING, FORGIVING, GRACE-FILLED GOD.

THE ONLY RESPONSE THAT CAN BE OFFERED IS TO LOVE.

THE GRAND INQUISITOR BELIEVES THAT ONLY THE ELITE ARE CAPABLE OF LOFTY DECISIONS & BELIEFS.

CHRIST, ON THE OTHER HAND, BELIEVES IN EVERYBODY.

CONTRARY TO WHAT THE GRAND INQUISITOR SAYS, *HE* IS THE ELITIST – NOT JESUS.

ALL OF US HAVE THE CAPACITY FOR GREATNESS – ALL OF US HAVE WITHIN US THE POWER TO MAKE DECISIONS THAT CAN CHANGE THE WORLD FOR THE BETTER.

THE CREATION OF A BETTER WORLD DOESN'T HAPPEN WHEN AN INSTITUTION – BE IT THE GOVERNMENT OR THE CHURCH – MAKES OUR DECISIONS FOR US.

THE CREATION OF A BETTER WORLD HAPPENS ONE HEART AT A TIME AS WE DECIDE FOR OURSELVES TO FOLLOW THE COMMANDS OF CHRIST TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER.

THAT'S WHAT THE CHURCH IS

IT'S THE BODY OF CHRIST – A COMMUNITY WHERE WE BELIEVE THAT EVERYBODY HAS THE CAPACITY TO GO BEYOND WHAT SEEMS POSSIBLE.

AT ANOTHER PLACE IN THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV, DOSTOEVSKY WRITES “*GOD & SATAN ARE FIGHTING AND THE BATTLEGROUND IS THE HEART OF MAN.*”

CONTRARY TO WHAT THE GRAND INQUISITOR SAYS, WE HAVE, WITHIN US - THE CAPACITY, THE STRENGTH, THE POTENTIAL, THE POWER – TO DETERMINE THE WINNER OF THAT BATTLE IN OUR OWN HEART.

THE IVANS & THE GRAND INQUISITORS OF THIS WORLD DON'T BELIEVE THAT.

THE ALYOSHAS OF THIS WORLD DO.

BECAUSE WE ARE FOLLOWERS OF JESUS CHRIST – BECAUSE WE ARE THE BODY OF CHRIST, WE CONTINUE HIS MISSION IN THE WORLD.

THE MISSION OF CHRIST THAT HE PROCLAIMED IMMEDIATELY AFTER EMERGING FROM THE TEMPTATIONS IN THE WILDERNESS IS THE MISSION WE PROCLAIM AS HIS BODY ON EARTH TODAY – “*THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS ON US, BECAUSE HE HAS ANOINTED US TO PROCLAIM GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT US TO PROCLAIM FREEDOM FOR THE PRISONERS AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT FOR THE BLIND, TO SET THE OPPRESSED FREE, TO PROCLAIM THE YEAR OF THE LORD’S FAVOR.*”

WE ALL STRUGGLE IN LIFE.

WE ALL HAVE DOUBTS.

WE ALL QUESTION, AT TIMES, GOD’S POWER IN THIS WORLD & GOD’S WILLINGNESS TO PROVIDE AN ANSWER TO OUR STRUGGLES & OUR DOUBTS.

IN THE MIDST OF THOSE STRUGGLES, THOSE DOUBTS, THOSE QUESTIONS, CHRIST COMES TO US WITH A KISS – A KISS THAT TELLS US HE UNDERSTANDS – A KISS TO ASSURE US THAT HE’S WITH US & BESIDE US – A KISS TO STRENGTHEN US IN ALL THAT LIES AHEAD OF US IN LIFE. AMEN.

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