

MIRACLE, MYSTERY AND AUTHORITY

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world." When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself. When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into

a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.

(John 6:1-21, NRSV)

Instead of the thrillers, mysteries and spy novels that I usually read—the kind that you read quickly and make little or no impact on your life, I recently decided to read a literary classic. I'm not sure what prompted me to actually sit down and read a piece of literature rather than mere fiction (perhaps lingering regret over choosing Cliff's Notes instead of actually reading the books assigned to me in high school and college), but I went ahead and picked up a copy of Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. I have to confess that it's been slow-going, but I do feel a sense of accomplishment of making it halfway through the book so far.

There's an incredible chapter in the book called "The Grand Inquisitor." Upon reading it I immediately made a note in the margin thinking that I would use it in a sermon some day. That day has arrived.

In this chapter, one of the brothers from whom the book gets its name is speaking to another about faith. The brother speaking is named Ivan. He's an intellectual who despite his best efforts at reasoning cannot believe in Christianity. He describes his struggles to his brother Alyosha, a faithful monk, and does so by means of a story.

In the story, Jesus returns to sixteenth century Spain during the Spanish Inquisition, “when fires were lighted every day to the glory of God, and ‘in the splendid act of faith the wicked heretics were burnt.’”¹ He heals the sick and restores sight to the blind. At the steps to the Seville cathedral, he encounters a funeral procession for a young girl. As he does in the gospels, Christ brings her back from the dead. Just at that moment, the Grand Inquisitor himself walks by and sees the commotion. This wizened old man, the one responsible for the violent eradication of heretics, has Jesus arrested and thrown in prison.

That night the Grand Inquisitor comes alone into Christ’s cell and informs his supposed Lord that he will be burned at the stake when morning comes. Christ says nothing in response. So, the Grand Inquisitor launches into a tirade about how Jesus made the wrong choices when he was tempted by Satan in the wilderness.

According to the high church official, Jesus should have offered humanity bread. “Thou didst promise them the bread of Heaven, but ...can it compare with earthly bread in the eyes of the weak, ever sinful and ignoble race of man?”² By refusing to test God and jump from the top of the temple and be caught by angels, Jesus thought too highly of humans, because they are “weak” and need miracles in order to believe. In the final temptation to rule the world as a political and military leader, Christ rejected “all that man seeks on earth—that is, someone to worship, someone to keep his conscience, and some means of uniting all in one unanimous and harmonious ant heap.”³

The Grand Inquisitor condemns Christ for offering humans the freedom to love and to think for themselves—to accept or reject the love of God. He declares, “Nothing is more seductive for man than his freedom of conscience, but nothing is a greater cause of suffering.”⁴ In response to

Christ's "failure," he says, the church has made the opposite choices than those of Jesus. It has chosen instead to "correct" Christ's work and rule over humanity by means of "miracle, mystery and authority."⁵

In addition to being a scathing indictment of the Church in every age—an institution that continually seeks power and control, despite worshipping a savior who gave up just that—Dostoyevsky's story is a brilliant exposition of just what was at stake when Jesus faced his temptations. Jesus chose to win our love and obedience not through making us dependent on him, amazed by him or controlled by him but through selfless love and suffering on our behalf. No matter how much we may cry out for God to do things for us or remove all doubts, Jesus loved us enough to grant us our own freedom to believe or not.

Today's scripture comes from the Gospel of John, where interestingly there is no account of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness as in the other three Gospels. Yet, here Jesus makes a similar choice. Although he does miraculously feed thousands, he refuses to accept the power that the people wish to give him afterwards. After the people have been fed, they declare, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."

Jesus recognizes that the people see him as the long-awaited spiritual leader, foretold by Moses, who just like Moses would lead them from foreign domination and oppression, restoring Israel to its former glory.⁶ This passage is rich with imagery of the Exodus. It is the time of Passover, when Jews recall the acts of God that freed them from slavery in Egypt. Miraculous bread is provided to hungry people like the manna provided to the Israelites during their desert sojourn. The people have Moses on the brain, and Jesus seems like Moses come again. Jesus, however, slips away, because he is much more than a political leader.

Absent Jesus, the disciples head out across the sea in a boat. Jesus catches up to them by walking on the water. The disciples, in physical and spiritual darkness, are terrified, but Jesus replies, “Do not be afraid. It is I.” A better translation of the Greek would be: “I AM. Do not be afraid,” because the passage echoes the words of God, as the great I AM in the Hebrew scriptures.⁷ Jesus is more than just a miracle worker and more than just a political leader. Jesus is God living among human beings and choosing not to dominate them but to save them.

It’s worth wondering whether or not today’s followers of Jesus would be terrified or, as in the case of the Grand Inquisitor, outraged at an encounter with Jesus. The Christ preached by sensational televangelists pedaling “miracles” and so-called Christian political interest groups striving for political power seems to me to be a far cry from the Jesus of the Gospels. Yet, the temptation to understand Jesus according to earthly categories of power is not one belonging to media stars alone. Ordinary believers that belong to ordinary churches can do the same thing.

Any old church, since it is made up of human beings, can become just one more place where people can strive for control and self-interest. If people spend their lives trying to be the best, the most attractive, the most popular, the most influential, why should we expect them to act differently inside the church? A church—a community of people who claim the name of Christ—is supposed to be the place where a person is valued for who they are as a child of God rather than by their zip code or how much money is in their bank account. The Jesus that refused to be boxed in by human categories of power and success offers us much more than such things. Christ offers us meaningful and abundant lives when we follow his example of service and love.

John's story of Jesus feeding thousands of people contains an interesting element not present in the other Gospels. In each of them, Jesus multiplies a few loaves and fish, but only here does it tell where the food came from—a boy, smart enough to bring his own lunch. This story is a great one to tell at Vacation Bible School, because kids love it. They naturally get it, that the only person who had anything to share was a kid—not any of the adults.

It's an important story to teach them, because it shows children that they have something to offer—something that adults may consider insignificant—something that Jesus can use to do great things. No person in Greco-Roman society had less power than a child, so Jesus demonstrates something very incredible; that the lowest person—the person dismissed according to the social stratification of his or her day—has something to offer that with Jesus' help can be a miracle.

It's no wonder that the crowds that followed Jesus began to melt away (see later on in this chapter, verse 66). It's no wonder that Jesus' message and image have been subverted and co-opted in our culture. It is a hard thing to realize that what our culture so often promotes goes against Jesus' actions and ministry. The story of the little kid doing a good deed makes a nice feature story, but it's only a patronizing stop on the way to even more coverage of the rich and famous.

How exactly does one follow this Jesus that offers spiritual gain rather than material gain, self-sacrifice over self-satisfaction, service over being served? It's not easy, but Jesus calls us to that life anyway. The question remains whether or not we will answer that call.

Going back to Dostoyevsky, it's worth considering how his story of the Grand Inquisitor ends. Upon finishing his irate

soliloquy, the Grand Inquisitor looks to Jesus for a response, any words at all, no matter how terrible Christ's condemnation. Instead, the prisoner "approached the old man in silence and softly kissed him on the forehead." The stunned Grand Inquisitor then lets his prisoner go saying, "Go, and come no more...Come not at all, never, never!"⁸

Rev. Chase Peeples

The Eighth Sunday After Pentecost, July 30, 2006

The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of love, source of all that is pure and good, you slip away from us when we want to control you. We call you Lord, but we wish for a God that works according to our convenience and desires. Help us to see beyond our earthly understandings of power and prestige to recognize the ways that you work through the humblest of acts to bring about miracles of grace. Amen.

¹ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Signet, 1957): 229.

² Ibid. 233.

³ Ibid. 237.

⁴ Ibid. 235.

⁵ Ibid. 237.

⁶ See Deuteronomy 18:15. D. Moody Smith, *John*, Abingdon New Testament Commentary (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999.): 148-149.

⁷ Note the footnote in the NRSV: "Gk *I am*" Compare Isaiah 43:25, 41:12, 52:6 and other references that hearken back to Exodus 3:14. See Gail O'Day, *John in The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995): 596.

⁸ Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 242.