

OCTOBER 26, 2008  
REFORMATION SUNDAY  
“THE DEATH OF IVAN ILYCH”

Let us pray using the words of Madeleine Marshall’s translation of Luther’s great Reformation hymn, “A Mighty Fortress is our God:” O God,

*These human hands, for all their skill,  
cannot shape our salvation.*

*We need a champion,  
one who will achieve our liberation.*

*Who is there, good and brave,  
with strength and will to save  
our weak and fearful race?*

*Who will our cause embrace?*

*God’s only Child, Christ Jesus!”*

in whose name we are bold to pray. Amen!

Years ago, during the waning years of the Cold War in the late ‘80’s, I led a book study group called “Our Russian Neighbors” for members and friends of the congregation I served in Milwaukee. The idea was for us

to read and discuss from the perspective of Christian faith a wide variety of Russian literature as a way of getting to know the people and culture of what a certain president of that day had identified as “the evil empire.” And so we read Turgenev and Bulgakov, Dostoievski and Pasternak and Solzenitsyn.

Among our reading were short stories by two Russian masters of more than a century ago that are among my favorites, in part because I think they illustrate so vividly the breadth and depth of the doctrine of justification by grace through faith so dear to our Lutheran hearts and so central to Christian understandings of the Gospel which we celebrate on this Reformation Sunday in Word and song, that central truth of the Gospel that “sets us free.” Those of you with unusual sticky—not to say compulsive—minds may remember (I don’t really think you will!) that several years ago on Reformation Sunday I shared one of

those stories with you, Anton Chekhov’s “The Beggar” — a short, short story that tells the tale of a lying, drunken beggar whose life is turned around not by the strict demands of the moralistic lawyer who sets out to “reform him” by making him chop wood for him. Instead it is the compassionate example of the lawyer’s kindly cook Olga who chops the wood for the drunken beggar who just doesn’t seem able to do it for himself—an act of unmerited love done out of the graciousness of her heart—that so takes hold of him that he repents of his bad behavior, turns his life around and becomes a model citizen. It’s a wonderfully concise and vivid portrayal of the doctrine of justification by grace through faith that fills out the meaning of Luther’s own last reputed words from his deathbed, “We are beggars; that is true.”

But there’s a second story—this a long, short story, almost a novella—by Count Leo Tolstoy that equally well, if quite differently

and quite a bit more darkly, also illustrates the meaning of justification by grace through faith. Entitled “The Death of Ivan Ilych” it’s a story that particularly emphasizes this teaching’s sense of urgency as a matter of “life and death” as the Lutheran theologian Gerhard Forde subtitled his book of a few years ago on this subject of justification.

The title character of the story, Ivan Ilych, is an upper class lawyer become a judge in the Czar’s civil service who by dint of his family’s position, his ambition, and hard work, and by his making clever use of his connections, has by the age of 45 achieved for himself an admirable and successful niche in respectable Russian society. To all outward appearances he is an exemplary person, even, perhaps, one favored by God.

But at the very moment of his reaching the pinnacle of his profession he begins to suffer from a mysterious and debilitating

illness that at first gradually and then with accelerating certainty leads Ivan to realize that he is walking through the ever-darkening valley of the shadow of death—and that he walking through that frightful valley all **alone**.

For as the horizon of his life looms ever closer, Ivan for the first time awakens to the realization that his whole life—his work, his achievements, his material success—but even more alarmingly, his marriage and his family and his friendships—have all been **accumulated** like so much **furniture** intended merely to **adorn** his life.

At first appears a mere hint of self-doubt that begins slowly to intrude upon his consciousness that perhaps, despite all outward appearances to the contrary, maybe, just maybe, his life has not been lived as it might, as it ought, and slowly but surely this nagging doubt grows into the dreadful certainty that he has in fact **squandered** his entire life.

The growing isolation from all around him that he feels as his physical pain intensifies and the sense of meaninglessness that engulfs him as death draws ever nearer fill us with a sense of dread that is as vivid a picture of hell as anyone has ever painted—the realization not as the French existentialist Jean Paul Sartre said, that “Hell is other people.” But quite to the contrary, for Ivan Ilych, hell is being utterly alone with oneself, hell is absolute self-containment, absolute self-concern, absolute self-absorption—being entirely and only full-of-oneself. To this point I’ll admit that “The Death of Ivan Ilych” sounds like a gross caricature of Russian literature, as someone like Woody Allen might poke fun at—heavy, morose, melancholy, utterly depressing and despairing.

Except that Ivan is not as entirely alone in his suffering and dying as he thinks. For Gerasim, his peasant servant, whom Ivan has always treated as part of the woodwork,

is there with him— with him in his tender care for his master, washing and cleaning him when he’s messed himself in his incontinence, with him to lend his physical presence and comfort through the long, dark nights of Ivan’s excruciating pain, even letting Ivan’s legs rest upon his shoulders, the only way Ivan could get any physical relief from the pain of his dying.

But Gerasim the servant, through his faithful and compassionate ministering to his master’s raw physical needs is not only Ivan’s comforter. Gerasim the servant becomes for Ivan Ilych, the means of his redemption, his last hope of human contact, of human touch, through whom Ivan in the last hours of his agony is suddenly able to see—at long last, almost too late, as a kind of miracle—all the “taken for granted” of his former life as it has been lived with all of its self-justification, and to see it disappear as so much excrement down the toilet—

excuse the language—much like Luther in his so-called “tower experience.”

So that two hours before he would draw his last breath, Ivan is finally able to let go of his former self-righteousness, his former self-justified life, and behold the pain and sorrow in the eyes of his son and wife, and for the first time in his life feel pity for them and seek forgiveness from them.

But listen to Tolstoy’s own climactic words: *“Just then his schoolboy son had crept softly in and gone up to his (Ivan’s) bedside. The dying man was still screaming desperately and waving his arms. His hand fell on the boy’s head, and the boy caught it, pressed it to his lips and began to cry.*

*At that very moment Ivan Ilych fell through and caught sight of the light, and it was revealed to him that though his life had not been what it should have been, this could still be made right. He asked himself, ‘What is the **right** thing?’ and grew still, listening. Then he felt that someone was*

*kissing his hand. He opened his eyes, looked at his son, and felt sorry for him. His wife came up to him and he glanced at her. She was gazing at him open-mouthed, with undried tears on her nose and cheek and a despairing look on her face. He felt sorry for her too....*

*And suddenly it grew clear to him what had been oppressing him and would not leave him was all dropping away at once, from two sides, from ten sides, and from all sides.... ‘And the pain?’ he asked himself. ‘What has become of it? Where are you, pain?’*

*He turned his attention to it.*

*‘Yes here it is. Well, what of it? Let the pain be.’*

*‘And death, ... where is it?’*

*He sought his former accustomed fear of death and did not find it. ‘Where is it? What death?’ There was no fear because there was no death. In place of death there was light.*

*‘So that’s what it is!’ he suddenly exclaimed aloud. ‘What joy!’*

*To him all this happened in a single instant, and the meaning of that instant did not change. For those present his agony continued for another two hours. Something rattled in his throat, his emaciated body twitched, then the gasping and the rattle became less and less frequent.*

*‘It is finished!’ said someone near him. He heard these words and repeated them in his soul.*

*‘Death is finished,’ he said to himself. ‘It is no more!’*

*He drew in a breath, stopped in the midst of a sigh, stretched out and died.”*  
End of story.

Sisters and brothers, may it not take our deathbeds to learn the lesson of Ivan Ilych—Jesus’ paradoxical truth, as he said time and again, that gaining one’s life consists of losing one’s life, of letting go of all self-justification, and falling like a little child

into the arms of God who alone is able to justify us. May we live in faith by this truth that sets us free from self-absorption and liberates us for lives of love and gratitude.

In the words of Luther's most famous hymn, again in Madeleine Marshall's translation:

*When evil powers rage and swear  
And threaten mass destruction,  
When we are tempted to despair,  
To yield to their seduction—  
Then may we stand assured  
By God's most holy Word,  
The evil one shall fail,  
God's righteousness prevail:  
Then why should we be fearful?"*

Happy Reformation Sunday!

The peace that passes all understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.