

North Baptist Church – Columbus, Ohio – Lenten Series 2016
“Reclaiming the Good News”

First Sunday in Lent – “The Grand Inquisitor” – Luke 4:1-13 – February 14, 2016
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A number of amazing coincidences fall together this year on the First Sunday of Lent. The gospel lesson is, of course, about the Temptations of Jesus, this year from Luke. The Synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke, all tell us that after his baptism Jesus was led by the Spirit out into the wilderness to undergo some testing and preparation before presenting himself to the world as the Messiah. Close readers of the New Testament generally understand that the question on the mind of Jesus was very much what kind of Messiah he would be. How would he go about his ministry and what exactly was God, the Father, calling him to do? Whether those issues were decided through some sort of physical confrontation with Satan, or whether this testing took place internally in the mind of Jesus, we don't really know. Clearly Jesus felt the struggle of the world expecting a miracle worker Messiah, a mysterious cultic figure Messiah, or a political revolutionary – and he rejected them all in order to become the suffering servant.

But about those coincidences. This year the First Sunday of Lent coincides with Valentine's Day in our American calendar. We also have a leap year this year and a Christmas Day that comes on a Sunday. So we are feeling the theme of love bubbling up during some very sacred moments – the beginning of a period of reflection on the cross and our own penitence, and the celebration of the birth of Christ. Let's make the most of it. This Sunday also comes just days after the historic meeting between Pope Francis and the head of the Russian Orthodox Church – Patriarch Kirill. No Pope has met in conference with the head of the Russian Orthodox Church in the history of these bodies since the Great Schism of 1054. The Eastern Greek branch of Christianity and the Western Latin branch split in the eleventh century AD. Over the centuries the Russian branch of the Orthodox Church has become the most powerful and influential of the Orthodox communities. This historic meeting has been criticized by those who are cynical. These skeptics point to the need for both to score political points in the midst of problems facing the world in the Middle East. I would take the meeting on face value and echo what Pope Francis said, “It is very clear that this is the will of God.” As we move ever closer to the 500th anniversary of the events in the Protestant Reformation, it appears God is actually moving believers worldwide to discuss again the central core that binds us together as Christians – and that is Jesus Christ.

The First Sunday of Lent is about the temptations of Jesus. Perhaps the most famous discussion of the temptations of Jesus found in western literature comes in a chapter of Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, published in 1879 a few years before his death in 1881. This novel is the last and perhaps most powerful of his four great novels. The chapter title is “*The Grand Inquisitor*.” I think it is unfortunate that this one chapter is taken out of this novel and published in many places as a stand-alone example of good literature. It certainly is an engaging discussion of the conflict between good and evil and the necessity of the human person to make choices in light of that conflict. But it is most beneficial to the person who encounters it

during a reading of the entire novel. At least it should be read with the chapter that precedes it where the conversation between Alyosha and his brother Ivan begins. *The Brothers Karamazov* is a story of a lecherous old man, Fyodor Karamazov, and his four sons – Ivan, Dmitri, Alyosha and the illegitimate Smeryakof. Fyodor Karamazov had become wealthy through the inherited fortune of his first wife and he had become a cruel, loathsome man who was not much of a father to his sons. They are all involved in some way in the murder of their father. The story follows the events that lead up to that event and then winds down during the trial and decisions made by the brothers after that crucial plot development. In some way the brothers represent aspects of human life – Ivan as intellect and reason, Dmitri as flesh, Alyosha as spirituality, and Smeryakof as the vulnerable and insulted. These are rough exaggerations as Dostoyevsky's genius led him to create fairly complex characters.

Anyway, in a central part of the book Ivan and Alyosha meet. In two chapters - "*Rebellion*" and "*The Grand Inquisitor*" – Dostoyevsky explores the hypocrisy of organized religion. Ivan recounts story after story of news accounts he has clipped that show despicable acts committed by Christians toward defenseless people, especially children. He asks Alyosha whether he would agree to the torture and killing of a small child if it would guarantee harmony and peace in the world. Alyosha wisely says that he would not and points to the fact that Christ's sacrifice was a willing death on behalf of the world. And then Ivan recounts a poem that he has written that takes place in Seville, Spain during the worst time of the Inquisition of the 16th century. Fires were lighted daily and heretics burned at the stake. The cardinal in Seville, The Grand Inquisitor, an old man of about 90, has just sacrificed several hundred heretics in front of the king, the court, the knights, other cardinals, the ladies of the court, and the population of Seville.

The very next day a figure appears in the city walking slowly through the town. Somehow everyone recognizes that it is Jesus, and people begin to fall at his feet in worship, begin to implore his aid in curing them, and in general a commotion ensues. A procession comes out of the cathedral where the coffin of a young girl is being borne to the cemetery. They stop before Jesus and he brings the girl back to life. Just as that happens the old Inquisitor is walking by with his guard and he observes the miracle, discerns that it is Jesus, and he immediately arrests him and drags him to his dungeon in the palace of the Holy Inquisition.

The next day the Inquisitor appears at the cell in which Jesus has been held. He comes in alone and asks Jesus why he has come back to hinder them in their work. He declares that the next day he will burn Jesus at the stake. Jesus remains silent and the Inquisitor begins to lecture Jesus. You came to give people freedom, he tells Jesus, but your whole experiment failed. People don't want freedom. They want the pleasures of life, entertainment, and something to worship. You should have listened to the dread spirit in the wilderness, he continues. There you were offered the way to subjugate the rebellious human family and give them happiness. Why would you go into the world empty-handed? People want bread, not freedom. Feed them and they will follow you like a flock of sheep, grateful and obedient, at least until you withdraw the bread. They need miracle. Why didn't you throw yourself down from the high point of the temple? You were offered this pathway another time. Come down from the cross and we will worship you. The Inquisitor continues to harangue Jesus and says that since he failed to worship Satan and take all the earthly kingdoms for himself, then that job fell to his followers – the

leaders of the Inquisition – and they would not fail to take that power and wield it. People are looking for miracle, mystery and authority and since you won't give that to them, we will, he says, and we will correct your work and accomplish the task of making rebellious people happy. The Inquisitor stops talking, and when Jesus stays silent, he eventually has the door to the cell opened and he leads Jesus to a back alley and tells him to go. The only response of Jesus is to kiss the Inquisitor and disappear.

Clearly Dostoevsky's story is a satire of the Roman Catholic Church and he intends to poke fun at the way in which the Church in Rome seeks power in the political and spiritual realms of human history, but the genius of Ivan's poem is that it contrasts for us just what the implications are for the way that Jesus answered Satan in the wilderness. Man does not live by bread alone. Do not put God to a test. Worship God alone. These replies of Jesus get at the heart of what he understood his mission to be. Knowing that in his human state, he had extraordinary power, Jesus discerned that this power must be used judiciously and with an eye toward calling all people to trust the heavenly Father. You will do greater things, Jesus tells his disciples, because I go to the Father and I will continue to work through you as you spread the gospel around the world.

Jesus had the ability to use the natural world to demonstrate miracles as signs of his Messiahship. But he used that power – turning water into wine, loaves and fish into a meal of plenty for thousands of people, and curing people's diseases – in a thoughtful way that met people's needs, rather than just leave people in the thrall of magic. Jesus used his mysterious power to walk away from a riot of people threatening to throw him off a cliff but he was unwilling to use that power to awe the masses of humanity wanting to be entertained. He spent his years with the disciples trusting in God's guidance, praying constantly, and did not submit to the temptation to use his position as an earthly ruler.

When Jesus presented himself to the world as the suffering servant, and called his followers to also take up their crosses, it was in a direct refusal of the way in which power is normally used in human history. And that has made all the difference in the world to human history – as Christians have advocated for peace, patience, and humble influence in our affairs.

Just think for a moment about our election year theatre playing out before our eyes every day in the United States. We have candidates accusing each other of being weak or losers. They do this often in the name of Jesus Christ, without the slightest appreciation that Christ taught that power is displayed in humility and that he is the advocate for the loser's camp rather than the victor's. The real Spirit of Christ is found in many other places and not everyone who says Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom.

As you meditate on these words in Luke's gospel as we begin this season of Lent, may you understand fully that they have important application to your life. Just as Jesus understood himself to be the suffering servant who would give his life for the sins of humanity, may you discern that God is calling you to follow in the footsteps of Jesus in the way you use the gift of your life in this world. What do you think Jesus meant when he said turn the other cheek, do not resist the evil one, pray for your enemies, do good to those who abuse you, and consider it a joy when you are mistreated? Let us pray...