

## LEO TOLSTOY'S *DEATH OF IVAN ILYICH*

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan  
University Public Worship  
Stanford Memorial Church  
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Today's gospel reading<sup>i</sup> has Jesus telling a parable to great crowds gathered on the beach at the Sea of Galilee and then later interpreting it privately for his disciples. It's all about how one hears the word of the Kingdom of God that Jesus is bringing to the world: not understanding it, or accepting it immediately but then falling away from it when the going gets tough, or hearing it but having it drowned out by the lure of wealth and worldly desires, or finally hearing it and having it bear fruit.

What exactly is the word of the Kingdom of God, though? Most centrally, it's about unconditional love. Jesus, as reported elsewhere in the gospel of Matthew, explains that one will be called great in the Kingdom of God<sup>ii</sup> when one fulfills the law of the Torah in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>iii</sup> Then, when asked which commandment in the law is the greatest, he cites two verses from Deuteronomy<sup>iv</sup> and Leviticus<sup>v</sup>: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"<sup>vi</sup> As today's reading from Psalm 119<sup>vii</sup> expounds, a full life and escape from affliction comes by never forgetting God's commandments in the law of the Torah, even as the wicked of the world lay snares for us: "Your decrees are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart." And Jesus

explains that on these two commandments to love God and neighbor "hang all the law and the prophets."<sup>viii</sup>

I believe that Leo Tolstoy's novel *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* does a wonderful job of bringing today's Bible readings to life for us in the modern world. The title character is a good, hard-working professional -- a lawyer and then a judge -- who seems to go through all the different experiences described in the parable of the sower, only to understand fully the word of the Kingdom of God during his final hours on his death bed.

Ivan is born in 1837 as one of four children of a St. Petersburg government official, and he dies at the age of forty-five in the same city as a respected judge, after a terminal illness.<sup>ix</sup> He has a pleasant childhood,<sup>x</sup> and the narrator explains that by the time he's a law student, "he had become exactly what he was to remain the rest of his life: a capable, cheerful, good-natured, and sociable man, but one strict to carry out whatever he considered his duty."<sup>xi</sup> Not bad, eh? But there's no indication here that he understands anything about the Kingdom of God in terms of the commandments to love.

Later, as a magistrate, he inspires respect and is always careful to separate his official duties from his private life. He has considerable power over other people by virtue of his position, but he's never known to abuse it.<sup>xii</sup> When he becomes a public prosecutor, with the capability of summoning, indicting and incarcerating whomever he chooses, he remains utterly impartial and skillful in the exercise of his duties.<sup>xiii</sup> Likewise, when he's appointed a member of the Court of Justice in St. Petersburg he acts skillfully and professionally.<sup>xiv</sup> Still sounding pretty good, but nothing yet about understanding the nature of love.

When he meets the woman who becomes his wife, she is known as "the most attractive, intelligent, and outstanding young lady of the set in which Ivan Ilyich moved."<sup>xv</sup> She falls in love with him and they marry, but now the narrator begins to give us some hints about Ivan's own understanding of love. It's certainly not unconditional, and it seems like the seed sown on rocky ground: One hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet it has no roots, for when troubles arise, one falls away. As the novel puts it, "To say that Ivan Ilyich married because he fell in love with his fiancée and found her sympathetic to his views on life would be as mistaken as to say that he married because the people in his circle approved of the match. Ivan Ilyich married for both reasons."<sup>xvi</sup> Then, Ivan thought "that marriage would not disrupt the easy, pleasant, cheerful, and respectable life"<sup>xvii</sup> he had been living. But when his wife becomes pregnant, "she became jealous without cause, demanded he be more attentive to her, found fault with everything, and created distasteful and ill-mannered scenes." They go on to have a daughter and a son, but "to the degree that his wife became more irritable and demanding, Ivan Ilyich increasingly made work the center of gravity in his life."<sup>xviii</sup>

Seventeen years into his marriage, after a number of promotions, he finds himself in the most difficult time of his life. Now we see that his seed is sown among thorns, because it's choked by the lure of wealth. The text explains that "he could not make ends meet on his salary," and "even his father did not consider it his duty to help him...convinced that the position of a man earning three thousand five hundred rubles was entirely normal and even fortunate."<sup>xix</sup> Ivan himself knows that he's living above his means.<sup>xx</sup> So, he goes back to St. Petersburg "with only one purpose...to obtain a post with a salary of five thousand rubles." And through "an acquaintance" and some "amazing and unexpected" luck, he receives an

appointment that pays five thousand rubles.<sup>xxi</sup> As a result he finds that his wife and he "were closer than they had been since the first years of their married life,"<sup>xxii</sup> and he's grateful to discover "a charming apartment, exactly what he and his wife had dreamed of."<sup>xxiii</sup> But soon, the narrator tells us, their new quarters seemed just one room too small and their new income seemed just a bit less than they needed.<sup>xxiv</sup>

When he's forty-three years old, Ivan experiences what seems to be a minor accident: missing a rung on a ladder while hanging curtains, he bruises his side on a window-frame knob. But it turns out that he's suffered an internal injury that will ultimately lead to his death two years later.<sup>xxv</sup> As his health slowly declines, he becomes irritable, quarrels with his wife, criticizes his children, and becomes a less effective bridge player with his friends.<sup>xxvi</sup> More importantly, his illness forces him to ask some big existential questions: "Can this really be death?" "Where will I be when I'm gone?"<sup>xxvii</sup> "Why has God done this to me?" "What is all this horror for?" "Does life really make any sense in the first place?"<sup>xxviii</sup>

Most painful for Ivan is a set of questions he begins asking himself about whether his life has been "real" at all. For example, he begins questioning his judicial professionalism as he watches how his doctors care for him during his illness. He feels treated exactly as he has dealt with people in his courtroom, but he becomes resentful of what he sees as professional distance and professional indifference to what's vitally important to him. He starts longing for a more personal response from his physicians, especially regarding whether his illness is terminal and how to handle that.<sup>xxix</sup>

Much of life begins looking false to him, as he asks whether anyone, including his wife and close friends, has moved beyond play-acting to really empathize with him and pity him, in

the best sense of that word.<sup>xxx</sup> He sees that this same falseness has been part of his life all along.<sup>xxxii</sup> He has simply not deeply cared about others. Now, he begins to condemn virtually everyone around him as his final illness progresses. He hates his wife for her plump vitality,<sup>xxxiii</sup> his daughter for her impatience with his illness that interferes with her happiness,<sup>xxxiii</sup> and his friends for wanting to take his place professionally when he dies.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

However, a household servant named Gerasim is one bright light in his life. He consistently shows Ivan compassion. For example, Ivan apologizes for Gerasim's having to clean his chamber pot when Ivan can't leave his bed. Gerasim simply responds with a smile, "Oh no, sir! Why shouldn't I help you? You're a sick man."<sup>xxxv</sup> Gerasim holds his legs up, so that Ivan can feel more comfortable, sometimes throughout the whole night, saying, "Don't worry, Ivan Ilyich, I'll get a good sleep later on."<sup>xxxvi</sup> Only Gerasim will directly acknowledge that Ivan is dying: "We all have to die someday, so why shouldn't I help you?"<sup>xxxvii</sup> This is not done simply as part of his employment contract, but genuinely as a matter of empathy and sympathy.

Within several days of his death, as he gazes at Gerasim's face, Ivan begins in earnest what the narrator calls his "moral agony," along with the intense physical agony from the pain in his belly: "What if my entire life, my entire conscious life, was not the real thing? It occurred to him that what had seemed utterly inconceivable before -- that he had not lived the kind of life he should have -- might in fact be true...His official duties, his manner of life, his family, the values adhered to by people in society and in his profession -- all these might not have been the real thing."<sup>xxxviii</sup> But then what would make a life "real?"

I've taught this book to students at the Harvard Business School and at Stanford's Graduate School of Business, as well as in the Sophomore College and Masters of Liberal Arts programs at Stanford, for some twenty-five years now. I've asked them how they'd answer this question. What makes a life "real?" Here are some of my students' answers: 1) Strive to become extraordinary in your life, not just ordinary. Live with passion. That makes your life real. (One of the classic lines of the book, near the beginning, is this: "Ivan Ilyich's life had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible."<sup>xxxix</sup>). 2) Don't get so absorbed in climbing ladders that you start missing rungs. Enjoy and appreciate each aspect of your life day to day, like playing bridge with friends, and a job well done. That makes your life real. 3) Non-attachment. Pursue your role in life or your *dharma* without getting attached to success and to externals. That makes your life real. 4) Develop personal values to live by authentically, rather than trying to fulfill conventional societal expectations. That makes your life real. 5) Only the examined life is worthwhile. Set up a regimen for self-examination and truly get to know yourself. That makes your life real. 6) See pain and suffering as a positive force for growth and insight. That makes your life real. 7) Actually, there was nothing wrong with Ivan's life, except his long, agonizing death, which would contort anyone's self-understanding. If he'd just been killed instantly crossing the street, everyone would have said he that he'd lived a good life and a "real" life.

These are all thoughtful answers. "A" for effort. But I don't think any of them are ultimately right. Listen to what happens in the last two pages of the novel: "An hour before his death...his son crept quietly into the room and went up to his bed. The dying man was still screaming desperately and flailing his arms. One hand fell on the boy's head. The boy grasped

it, pressed it to his lips, and began to cry. At that very moment, Ivan Ilyich fell through and saw a light, and it was revealed to him that his life had not been what it should have, but that he could still rectify the situation. 'But what is the real thing?' he asked himself, and grew quiet, listening. Just then he felt someone kissing his hand. He opened his eyes and looked at his son. He grieved for him. His wife came in and went up to him. He looked at her. She gazed at him with an open mouth, with unwiped tears on her nose and cheeks, with a look of despair on her face. He grieved for her... He looked at his wife and, indicating his son with a glance, said: 'Take him away...sorry for him...and you. He wanted to add: 'Forgive' but instead said 'Forget,' and too feeble to correct himself, dismissed it, knowing that He [God] who needed to understand would understand. And suddenly it became clear to him that what had been oppressing him and would not leave him suddenly was vanishing all at once -- from two sides, ten sides, all sides. He felt sorry for them, he had to do something to keep from hurting them... He searched for his accustomed fear of death and could not find it. Where was death? What death? There was no fear, because there was no death. Instead of death there was light. 'So that's it!' he exclaimed. 'What bliss!'"<sup>xl</sup>

Ivan had lived his whole life without ever truly learning how to get outside of himself in love for someone else. Finally, at the end he was taught how to do so by his servant Gerasim and by his schoolboy son, Vasya. Only then was he able to transcend himself in concern for others. Moreover, he asked for forgiveness from other human beings to whom he was very close but for whom he had not fully cared, and he asked for forgiveness from God. So, from my perspective, some other business students in my classes have gotten it right. When asked what would make a life "real," they've said: 1) Become selfless, thinking of others'

needs first and building for posterity. 2) Develop depth relationships with others as your first priority. 3) Be like Gerasim, holding other people when they need to be held. 4) Develop a spiritual life, looking for the light beyond yourself.

"Wake, now my senses, and hear the earth call; feel the deep power of being in all; keep, with the web of creation your vow, giving, receiving, as love shows us how."<sup>xli</sup>



## PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

7/13/14

(Please join me now in the Prayers of the People. The response to my words, “For all of this, O God,” is “We give our thanks this day.”)

O God, Eternal Spirit of Life, we are in the midst of a season of sensuous riches of sunshine and color. Being outdoors more in this season, we ponder anew the expanding grandeur of Creation, worlds known and unknown, galaxies far and near, filling us with awe and challenging our imaginations. There is such a vast array of things in our own world, from fire to flowers, coral to coal, rays to atoms, beetles to whales.

**“For all of this, O God, we give our thanks this day.”**

We also contemplate our human community, our common past and future hope, our oneness transcending all separation, our capacity to work for peace and justice in the midst of hostility, conflict and oppression. There is a wealth of human connections and a treasury of talents bestowed upon each of us that can be used for the welfare of all.

**“For all of this, O God, we give our thanks this day.”**

We have the opportunity to gather in this university, the founding grant of which contemplated “mechanical institutes, museums, galleries of art, laboratories, and conservatories, together with all things necessary for...studies and exercises directed to the cultivation and enlargement of mind...to qualify its students for personal success, and direct usefulness in life.”

**“For all of this, O God, we give our thanks this day.”**

We know that in the midst of all our blessings there is also illness, injury and pain. There are those on today's prayer list who are in the midst of suffering. At the same time, there are healers and caregivers and those willing to accompany us in our deepest suffering. There is a virtue of patience that we can learn. There is a virtue of compassion exercised by others that we can experience. And God, you keep surprising us with your comfort and graciousness.

**“For all of this, O God, we give our thanks this day.”**

There are those who have died this week and every week. We think particular people whom we hold now in the silence of our hearts. (Silence). We're glad that they lived and that we could walk some steps on the way of life with them. They continue to have a powerful influence among us here and now, still acting as mentors and guides as they live on within each of us in memory. Friendship and love experienced cannot be altered by time or circumstance.

**“For all of this, O God, we give our thanks this day.”**

Your presence in the universe does not make us immune to loneliness or anger. We are besieged with anxiety, despair, and feelings of helplessness. We can experience bitterness that feeds our isolation and addictions that feed our denial. Yet, the world we know is also wrapped in cords of compassion that cannot be broken. The frightened and weary can experience the most tender care. We can be ringed by people and stories that reveal everlasting love.

**“For all of this, O God, we give our thanks this day.”**

There is also hearty laughter and there are comforting words which can transform our attitudes and spirits. With small children around us there may be wide eyes and impulsive

kisses, reminders of feathers and rocks and puddles of water – all the commonplace in which to rejoice, all the ordinary at which to wonder.

**“For all of this, O God, we give our thanks this day.” AMEN.**

(This prayer is adapted from words of Virginia Rickeman, Eugene Pickett, and the Founding Grant of Stanford University)

### **BENEDICTION**

To live in this world you must be able to do three things:

To love what is mortal;

To hold it against your bones, knowing your own life depends on it.

And, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go. AMEN.

Mary

Oliver

## NOTES

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- <sup>i</sup> Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23.
- <sup>ii</sup> Note that Matthew uses the terms "Kingdom of Heaven" and "Kingdom of God" interchangeably, as in Matthew 19: 23-24.
- <sup>iii</sup> Matthew 5:19.
- <sup>iv</sup> Deuteronomy 6:5.
- <sup>v</sup> Leviticus 19:18.
- <sup>vi</sup> Matthew 22: 37-39.
- <sup>vii</sup> Psalm 119: 105-112.
- <sup>viii</sup> Matthew 22:40.
- <sup>ix</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), pp. 35, 49.
- <sup>x</sup> Ibid., p. 119.
- <sup>xi</sup> Ibid., p. 50.
- <sup>xii</sup> Ibid., p. 53.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Ibid., p. 58.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Ibid., p. 75.
- <sup>xv</sup> Ibid., p. 55.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Ibid., pp. 55-56.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Ibid., p. 56.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Ibid., p. 57.
- <sup>xix</sup> Ibid., p. 61.
- <sup>xx</sup> Ibid., p. 62.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Ibid., pp. 62-63.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Ibid., p. 64.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Ibid., p. 65.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Ibid., p. 67.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Ibid., p. 66.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Ibid., pp. 73-74, 82-83.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Ibid., p. 89.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Ibid., pp. 118, 120.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Ibid., pp. 75-76.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Ibid., p. 89.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Ibid., p. 105.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Ibid., p. 111.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Ibid., pp. 114-116.
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Ibid., pp. 99 (See also p. 36).
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Ibid., p. 100.
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Ibid., p. 104.
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> Ibid.

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xxxviii *Ibid.*, pp. 126-127.

xxxix Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilych and Other Stories* (New York: Signet, 2003), p. 102.

xl Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, pp. 132-134.

xli Thomas J.S. Mikelson, "Wake, Now, My Senses," The Unitarian Universalist Association, *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), #298.