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Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
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John 11:38-44
Vacation and Sabbatical Vignette
“Dostoevsky and Lazarus”

The Gospel reading is an excerpt from the much longer story of the raising of Lazarus. The passage read by Ed gives the crux of it. Lazarus has been in the tomb dead for at least four days. Jesus was summoned earlier to heal Lazarus but he delays his journey until after Lazarus dies so that when he comes and brings Lazarus back to life the crowd will know that God has intervened and thus they would see God’s glory.

Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead in dramatic fashion. It’s a resurrection story, stated clearly earlier where Jesus says “I am the resurrection and the life”, but difficult to understand or square with current understandings of life and death. Realistically, if one were dead for days and exuding acute odors of death one would think him or her well and truly dead.

When I began my sabbatical recently, I never thought it would take an entire novel by Dostoevsky (*Crime and Punishment*) to give me an amazing interpretation of this gospel story. The gospel narrative of the raising of Lazarus is pivotal for a deeper understanding of the novel.

We do not know much about the biblical Lazarus except that he was the brother of Mary and Martha and a friend of Jesus. Dostoevsky has two powerful women in the book (the protagonist’s sister and friend) as well as a male friend, all seen as Jesus figures. It is not uncommon for a group of people who support us in times of travail to be parts of Jesus coming to us for our well-being and wholeness.

The protagonist, Raskolnikov, is a student in Petersburg in the mid-19th century. He commits a heinous crime. In a premeditated, insanely thought-out and philosophically-driven manner, he kills a money-lender in the privacy of her room but doesn’t think he has committed a crime because she was “a vile, pernicious louse, a little old money-lending crone who was of no use to anyone, to kill whom is worth forty sins forgiven, who sucked the life-sap from the poor – is that a crime?” He also kills an innocent, young woman who accidentally arrives at the scene of the murder.

Raskolnikov further justifies the murders by the fact that people like Napoleon and Caesar kill thousands of people and are awarded medals and given honor for doing so.

In Dostoevsky's brilliant way the novel is played in a way that the student at first is given a reprieve because someone else confesses to the crime. This gives the protagonist, who is deathly ill, more time to wander in the streets, do good deeds and ponder the situation in his small, dark room. Later, when he realizes that he has been earmarked as the killer by an intelligent investigating officer, another Jesus figure, he is given the choice to own up to the crime and possibly receive a lighter sentence or be arrested and receive a longer sentence.

By this time, Raskolnikov, like Lazarus, has spent many days in a place of darkness and death (the cave for Lazarus and a tiny cave-like room occupied by this poor student). The stench of his crime, which can be likened to the stench of Lazarus's death, has become unbearable but there is no way that he can be released from this death without his admitting guilt and thereby willingly going into suffering. He could not live again without suffering and dying to the crime he had committed.

His woman friend Sonya, a pure soul who cares for her poor and distressed family by selling herself, confronts him. Raskolnikov listens to her in a way he would not listen to anyone else. Sonya says, "Stand up!" ... "Go now, this minute, stand in the crossroads, bow down, and first kiss the earth you've defiled, then bow down to the whole world, on all four sides, and say aloud to everyone: 'I have killed!' Then God will send you life again. Will you go? Will you go?"

"So it's hard labor, is it Sonya? I must go and denounce myself?" he asked gloomily.

"Accept suffering and redeem yourself by it, that's what you must do."

At first, Raskolnikov refuses to go but following a conversation with the shrewd investigating officer and another confrontation with Sonya, he goes and stands trial and is sentenced and sent to Siberia.

He is sentenced to penal servitude of the second class for a term of only eight years, in consideration of his having come to confess his guilt and other mitigating circumstances. They ruled temporary insanity, that the death of the young woman was accidental, he had not spent the money he stole and that he had done many other deeds of kindness and tenderness.

The Siberian experience is provided in an epilogue. In the first year, Raskolnikov thinks he was forced into the decision to give himself up and that he should never have been there. Since his sentence was of a lighter sort, he is given visitation rights. Sonya moves to Siberia to be close to him.

One can be sentenced in a civil court but that would not necessarily affect a person's conscience. This aspect of one's life is given greater attention in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Raskolnikov stewes in his guilt for a year and is rather nasty to Sonya and his fellow inmates but one morning he discovers the beauty of his surroundings. Sonya visits, takes his hand and something happens (one can see this as the work of the Holy Spirit in his life): "How it happened he himself did not know, but suddenly it was as if something lifted him and flung him down at her feet." He wept and embraced Sonya's knees.

I shall now end with Dostoevsky's own words, which I hope will touch your soul, and I shall then provide some words of my own. Dostoevsky writes, "For the first moment she was terribly frightened, and her whole face went numb. She jumped up and looked at him, trembling. But all at once, in that same moment, she understood everything. Infinite happiness lit up in her eyes; she understood, and for her there was no longer any doubt that he loved her, loved her infinitely, and that at last the moment had come..."

"They wanted to speak but could not. Tears stood in their eyes. They were both pale and thin, but in those pale, sick faces there already shone the dawn of a renewed future, of a complete resurrection into new life. They were resurrected by love; the heart of each held infinite sources of life for the heart of the other."

We now jump to the end of the novel. Raskolnikov is back in his room by himself. "Under his pillow lay the Gospels. He took the book out mechanically. It belonged to her; it was the same one from which she had read to him about the raising of Lazarus."

A short while later we're with Sonya. "She, too, had been greatly excited all that day, and during the night even fell ill again. But she was so happy that she almost became frightened of her happiness. Seven years *only* seven years! At the beginning of their happiness there were moments when they were both ready to look at those seven years as if they were seven days. He did not even know that a new life would not be given him for nothing, that it still had to be dearly bought, to be paid for with a great future deed..."

"But here begins a new account, the account of a man's gradual renewal, the account of his gradual regeneration, his gradual transition from one world to another, his acquaintance with a new, hitherto completely unknown reality..."

Alcohol and Narcotics Anonymous call the latter aspect of Raskolnikov's life as going to meetings and making amends. South African forgiveness practitioner, the Rev Michael Lapsley, calls it reparation. One can be forgiven; one can be dead in sin and guilt as consequence of a great crime or calamity in one's life

and be brought back to life and in one's new, spirit-empowered life one gives back tenfold, hundredfold.

One can see in Raskolnikov the words of Jesus when he says of Lazarus coming from the tomb with his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth: "Unbind him, and let him go."

There we have it: the mysterious biblical story of the raising of Lazarus and Dostoevsky's 551-page novel explaining it in real life terms, albeit in mid-1800's St. Petersburg, Russia. Amen.