

All Saints Sunday: Matthew 5.1-12

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There's a familiar arc to more than one of the stories of Anton Chekhov. A character becomes unexpectedly happy, but then comes to his senses, sees his miserable life for what it is, and ends up in a state of utter despair. Not to generalize unfairly, but did I mention that Chekhov was Russian?

In one, a soldier steps into a darkened room at a party where he receives a kiss meant for somebody else. For days he thinks of nothing except his future life with his mystery beloved. But then he remembers what a pathetic, unattractive clod he is, returns to his previous state of hopeless despair, and the story ends. In another, a vagrant holds forth for pages on the farm he'll have one day in the promised land of Siberia, where the land is free and the rivers are wide, until one of the men escorting him out of town reminds him he can barely stumble along the road they're on. He'd never make the trip to Siberia, even if life there really were as idyllic as he imagines. The prisoner sees his point, and wilts into a state of hopeless despair. The end.

I know. You're trying to figure out whether Chekhov begins with a C or a T so you can find him on the shelves at novel.

But a third example also seems to address the topic of human happiness more directly. Get comfortable. I want a tiny Chekhov to be perched on your shoulder as we consider the Beatitudes on this fine All Saints Sunday. Here's the gist of his story titled "Gooseberries."

Two men, Ivan and Burkin, are out hunting with their dogs one perfect afternoon in the countryside. As they walk, Burkin reminds Ivan that he recently promised him a story. Ivan says he'll tell one about his brother. But as he's lighting up his pipe, it begins to rain, dampening their spirits as well. Fortunately they see their friend Alyohin's farm across the meadow and make a run for it. When they arrive, Alyohin greets them warmly. His maid Pelageya brings them towels and dry clothing and also happens to be the most beautiful creature our soggy hunters have ever seen. Alyohin suggests they head to his bathing cabin where he slips into the bath himself. He's so overdue for a wash that water turns to ink. Ivan, however, jumps straight into the river and has a rapturous swim there in the rain, diving to the bottom and resurfacing over and over again, exclaiming, "By God!" and "Lord have mercy on me!"

The men then head to the house where they're given silk dressing gowns and warm slippers and settle into armchairs in the drawing room where, of course, pretty Pelageya brings them a tray of tea and jam. They are warm and dry and clean and ... well, don't you think it's about the coziest scene in the whole history of the patriarchy? And it's here, after that extended interlude, that Ivan returns to his story.

Ivan's brother Nikolay worked unhappily in a government office, but dreamed of owning an estate in the country with servants quarters and a gooseberry patch. He scrimped and saved for years, married a rich widow for her money, and literally starved her to death with his stinginess, according to Ivan. After she died, he took their money and bought the estate he'd always wanted, planting the gooseberry bushes himself.

Understandably, Nikolay's happiness, as he ate plate after plate of his precious gooseberries, offended his brother Ivan. But not only because this dream come true was ill gotten. As Ivan lay in bed at his brother's estate one night, he realized an unpleasant truth about the world. "Obviously," he tells his present listeners, "the happy man is at ease only because the unhappy ones bear their burdens in silence, and if there were not this silence, happiness would be impossible. It is a general hypnosis. Behind the door of every contented, happy man there ought to be someone standing with a little hammer and continually reminding him with a knock that there are unhappy people, that however happy he may be, life will sooner or later show him its claws, and trouble will come to him."

Kind of makes you wonder if Chekhov himself is the man with the hammer, doesn't it? Well, the two men in their dressing gowns and warm slippers think Ivan's told a pretty lousy story. Alyohin would rather hear one involving goats or hay or something more relevant to his life. Burkin heads off to bed, and the others follow. Here is how the story ends.

"The wide cool beds which had been made by the lovely Pelageya gave off a pleasant smell of clean linen.

Ivan Ivanych undressed silently and got into bed.

"Lord forgive us sinners!" he murmured, and drew the bedclothes over his head.

His pipe, which lay on the table, smelled strongly of burnt tobacco, and Burkin, who could not sleep for a long time, kept wondering where the unpleasant odor came from.

The rain beat against the window panes all night.

Well. I seem to have spent half this sermon on the opening story. But here's why. I think Chekhov was exploring something that interested Jesus in the Beatitudes. Namely, the relationship between happiness and hardship. For the Greek word usually translated "blessed" refers to a state of mind, not blessedness only in the eyes of God. "Happy are the meek," is an ancient and valid translation. We'll return to this question in a minute. But let's note a few things in the story first.

The first is that Ivan is a piece of work. You gathered as much, right? But Ivan is complex. Did you notice that he cried out to God twice? Once in ecstasy as he swam in the river. "By God! Lord have mercy on me!" he prays, as he embodies a human being fully alive to a moment in God's glorious creation. He cries out again at the end, as he pulls Pelageya's clean smelling linens over his head in a thankless huff, muttering "Lord forgive us sinners," while his smelly pipe, the obverse of Pelagaya's sheets, keeps his poor friend awake into the night.

The story took hold of me, however, because the case Ivan makes against happy folk like his brother is pretty convincing. He sounds like the psalmist who said, "I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For they have no pain; their bodies are sound and sleek...they are not plagued as others are." A few centuries later, Jesus regularly disrupted the lives of people who had grown too comfortable with their power and privilege. It's what got him killed, right?

Chekhov was the son of a poor grocer. He studied medicine to support his parents and siblings, so he was not born into privilege. What's the old cliché about comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable? I think both Jesus and Chekhov knew how to do just this at times.

The Beatitudes were one such a disruption. The prevailing wisdom in Jesus's day was that your misfortune was probably your fault. God or the gods were punishing you for some sin, so you deserve to be unhappy. Or, if you were prosperous, they were rewarding your virtue. Yes, there were short term exceptions, but even the author of Psalm 73 goes on to say those rich sinners will eventually perish when God puts an end to them. So, for Jesus to say that a happy blessedness is available to the poor in spirit, the mournful, the hungry, even the persecuted was a radical upheaval of the way people understood their lives.

Such thinking is alive and well, by the way. You and I live in a kind of faux meritocracy. Which means our collective myth is Horatio Alger's, not Jesus's. We think we've earned most of what we have, and, too often, we believe the poor, the hungry, the persecuted, probably brought on most of their problems themselves. They should be better parents or harder workers or possess some other virtue we think happens to be the secret to our own meager success. Surely this is just a secular liberal democracy's version of the self serving illusions Jesus disrupted.

For Jesus, and maybe for Chekhov too, it is only while holding the truth about the cruel unfairness of the world firmly in mind that we can faithfully add the lifesaving "and yet..." that I think Jesus also wants us to see. Which is that Jesus wants people who don't think they could possibly be counted among the blessed, to find happiness. He wants them to believe, against all messages to the contrary, that they are the absolute apples of God's loving eye.

In the end, I don't think Jesus wants us to be Ivans. At least not Ivan at his worst. He's right to name the injustices our comfortable lives depend on. But if our mission is simply to spread unhappiness, like a foul smelling pipe that distracts us from the kindness of strangers or the gift of rain in a river that falls on the just and on the unjust alike ... if we do nothing to change the lot of people who've received too little comfort and justice in this life, and just make scowling proclamations about the people we think are the problem, have we really done anything but add to the store of unhappiness and hardship in this broken and beautiful world?

"We must have/ the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless/ furnace of this world," wrote the Jack Gilbert. "To make injustice the only/ measure of our attention is to praise the Devil."

This sermon's almost over. It's high time I made at least a fleeting reference to All Saints Sunday, don't you think? Well, I think that All Saints Day is the Church's way of radically altering our definitions of blessedness. Because the feast of All Saints doesn't limit itself to remembering the lives of the conspicuously blessed and the good. There are manipulative Nicolays and dour Ivans aplenty among the saints we celebrate on this day. The gospel of grace means that unimaginable forms of brokenness and sin will not separate us forever from the loving heart of God. Not forever.

And if we truly let our hearts and minds absorb how Jesus says blessedness can actually manifest in a life, well maybe we'd be present enough to our neighbor to help lift her poor spirit and satisfy her hunger and thirst in deeper ways than the ones that just reinforce our own virtuousness. Maybe we'd also receive the next unfolding moment of our lives for the unmerited gift that it is. Let's not praise the Devil with these brief, complicated lives of ours. Let's set ourselves to being people who believe in a strange and happy blessedness whose arms are wider than any of us can imagine.

This All Saints Sunday, let's live with the stubbornness of Ivan at his best, expressing our gratitude and gladness with backstrokes in the rain when called for. We just need to do

so without denying that this world is a ruthless furnace as well. And, if Jesus, and perhaps our new Russian friend, are to be trusted, what that world needs most from us is not that we become more hopeless and miserable in a misguided solidarity. Rather that our small definitions of blessedness expand. And that, as they do, God's belovedness for every last human being who's ever lived on God's good Earth, make its way through our lives and into the lives of people who have yet to hear the happy news that they are very much among the blessed and beloved saints of God as well.