

## NO PICNIC

Heb. 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14

Here we are together in this beautiful grove in Colonial Park at the end of a very hot summer, worshipping together before we picnic together. The days are getting shorter, but it will be a long time 'til winter and the snow. Which is perhaps why I have the courage to resort to a story by Leo Tolstoy about a terrible blizzard somewhere in Russia, set in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, which speaks to our three lessons for today and specifically to the urging to show hospitality to strangers and in particular to those who cannot repay that hospitality. You have heard the lessons, you have them in front of you. You understand them and need no explanation of them from me. But a good story might highlight a point and make it memorable, and so I will tell you a good story from Tolstoy set in a place that could hardly be more different than where we are gathered.

A rich young businessman and one of his laborers, Nikita, the only one of his laborers who was not drunk and whom the businessman regularly cheats out of his wages, embark on a journey in a horse-drawn sledge through a snowstorm that becomes an intense blizzard. They are encouraged to spend the night in an inn, but the master wants to press on. There is business to be done, and time is money. So they press on through the night and snow. But they lose the road, and the sledge slides down an embankment into a shallow ravine where the snow has drifted. The sledge is stuck. They will have to spend the night.

In general, this master holds peasants in contempt, disapproving of their stupidity and lack of education. And the master blames the peasant, Nikita, for the accident and thinks, “‘If only that peasant doesn’t freeze to death! His clothes are so wretched. I may be held responsible for him. What shiftless people they are...’” But then he thinks, “‘What’s the use of lying and waiting for death? Better mount the horse and get away! The horse will move when he has someone on his back. As for him,’ he thought of Nikita—‘it’s all the same to him whether he lives or dies. What is his life worth? He won’t grudge his life, but I have something to live for, thank God.... Listen to such fools as you! Am I to die like this for nothing?’ And tucking his fur coat underneath himself on the horse, he rides away.

The peasant Nikita hears his master go and thinks that very probably he will die tonight. But this doesn’t seem particularly unpleasant since his whole life has been nothing but toil and because he believes he has a Master above the masters he has served, who has sent him into this life. “‘He did not know whether he was dying or falling asleep, but felt equally prepared for one as for the other.’”

The master who has ridden off does not get far. He is soon lost and finds that he has unwittingly circled back to the sledge and Nikita, who says with difficulty that he is dying, asking his master to give what he owes him to his boy or his wife.

The master hears this, and begins brushing the snow off Nikita, after which he opens his great fur coat and lays down on top of Nikita to give him the heat of his body. After awhile a voice from underneath speaks: “‘It’s comfortable warm...’”

“‘[The master] remained silent and lay like that for a long time.

“‘Nikita kept him warm from below and his fur coats from above.’”

Before dawn the master dreams he is in his bed at home waiting for a police officer he was expecting to arrive. But the police officer doesn't come. Someone else comes, not the police officer but one he has been waiting for, comes and calls him, the same one who had told him to lie down on Nikita.

“I'm coming!” he cried joyfully, and that cry awoke him, and woke him up not at all the same person he had been when he fell asleep.... He understood that this was death, and was not at all disturbed by that... He remembered that Nikita was lying under him and that he had got warm and was alive, and it seemed to him that he was Nikita and Nikita was he, and that his life was not in himself but in Nikita....

“And he remembered his money, his shop, his house, the buying and selling... and it was hard for him to understand why [he] had troubled himself with all those things with which he had been troubled.

“Well, it was because I did not know what the real thing was... I did not know, but now I know and know for sure. Now I know!” And again he heard the voice of the one who had called him before.... He felt himself free and that nothing could hold him back any longer.” (“Master and Man”)

The master dies, Nikita lives, and there we have our story, very Russian, very romantic, but a story that illustrates well the Christian teaching that we find our lives in giving them, and this most of all when we give them to those who have no claim upon us except that they, too, are the children of God. Amen.

14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, August 29, 2010

Church Picnic in a Grove in Colonial Park