

Pastor's Pound

March 2009

In his searing book *The Gulag Archipelago* Alexander Solzhenitsyn told of the attempts of the Russian secret police to recruit him when he was a university student. Something within the young Solzhenitsyn resisted their tempting offers of special rations, high pay, and heady authority. “Still, some of us were recruited,” Solzhenitsyn recounted, “and I think that if they had really put the pressure on, they could have broken everybody’s resistance”—including, he admitted, his own.

From this experience Solzhenitsyn learned a vicious truth:

If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?

Much as we hate to admit it, residing within us are traits, thoughts, and behaviors that are weak, odious, and downright despicable. This is the part we try to hide from others, even from ourselves. We would rather pretend that evil exists in some pure form in the likes of Osama bin Laden or in an institution or system like racism, rather than within ourselves. For “who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”

Yet this is what Christ calls his followers to do. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who died a martyr, wrote, “When Christ calls [persons], he bids [them] come and die.” The apostle Paul spoke of being “crucified with Christ” (Romans 6:6; Galatians 2:20, among other verses).

The central focus of Lent is the cross, representing both the offering of Christ for our salvation and the offering of ourselves in devotion to the Lord. Jesus gave his disciples the mandate (Latin *mandatum*, from which comes the word *maundy*) to “love...as I have loved” (John 15:12)—and the way that he loved was to give himself completely for our sakes. It requires the death within us of all that is not Christlike.

It cannot be done in an instant, nor in a forty-day season. It is the fruit of a lifetime of commitment to Christ, of prayer and service. It begins in the ashes of repentance, leads to resurrection joy and hope, and culminates in the fire of the Holy Spirit.

Let us make the journey together.

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