



19 Pentecost C 04 (Pr 23)

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

20 October 2004

2 Kings 5:1-2;7-15c

Psalm 111

2 Timothy 2:8-15

Luke 17:11-19

A LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT LARGE, FROM A SAMARITAN LEPER

The Samaritan Leper writes, “There is a certain advantage to being called *unclean*, to being called *an abomination*, to being seen by others as cast off by God. Even though the one from Nazareth has surely declared me clean, the rest of us of the world—and especially the religious world—still sees me as an outlaw, as an unclean person—barely human—who must stay outside the church walls, if not outside the walls of polite society as well. The advantage in all of this,” writes the Samaritan leper, “is that I am reminded daily that I am going to hell, straight to hell. So they say, and so indeed I am, thank you very much. They remind me that there is nothing I do or say or think that can keep me from being condemned by the Law.

“I start every morning with such good intentions—well that’s a lie too. Each morning I awake to the world about me and, as often as anything, I remember some past wrong, real or imagined done to me by another. It doesn’t matter who that other is or what the other said or did—the Other is still on the planet, and I am not pleased. Another day of barely tolerating the fools that surround me . . . And I remember, forever too late, that such thoughts are the same, according to the One from Nazareth, as taking a gun to the other’s head. I object, but I know that my excuses mean nothing.

“Each morning too, I leave the house to make my way through my public day. I see all the things that my neighbors have—new cars, bigger houses, expensive and beautiful clothes. I see them living in perfect luxury—and I want it all and more. I wonder—how can I make enough money to get that stuff? Perhaps a rich relative will die and soon—the sooner the better. Perhaps I shall win the lottery, the lottery of course funded by the poorest among us. Forget being thankful for what I have; I want more, and I feel deprived because I don’t have all the newest, coolest stuff. And as for giving to the poor—or to anyone or anything else for that matter—forget it. I need my money for myself. I earned it . . . didn’t I?

“But again, I know that the One from Nazareth will have none of my own self-justification. ‘When you take too much,’ he says, ‘it means others will have less. Are they not worth as much as you? And what must you do to get riches? Money and the things it buys have become your ultimate concern. Everyone else and everything else take second and third place—if they even rate at all.’ But let’s be practical, I plead. ‘Yes, let’s,’ he says. ‘You are practically—in practice—engaging in modern-day slave trade when you buy shoes and clothing made in factories where workers displaced from their farms by transnational corporate agriculture are forced to work under unsafe and degrading conditions for less than subsistence pay. Your lust to have it all as cheaply as you can—cheaply so you can buy even more stuff for yourself—that desire has reduced people all over the world to subhuman existence—practically speaking that is.’

“The One from Nazareth is right. If it’s not one thing for which I deserve to die eternally, it’s another. The evidence is everywhere—no matter how hard I try, I find that I am an outlaw according to the Law of God. Religious people tell me that I am an abomination. And so I am. I cannot escape this dark world and its dark

systems. I am in bondage to it and I cannot free myself. And so there is only one thing to do—and that not by my own effort: on my way to hell, I can only cling to the cross of Christ. My only hope is to throw myself on the ground beneath Christ's tortured, dying body and hear his prayer: Forgive them . . . forgive them, they have no clue. And hearing those words, holding on to those words with all my might—something beyond my own reason or strength begins to happen. I begin to trust that I am indeed forgiven—as I cling to that place of horrid suffering, the Word comes: your trust is enough. You are made clean. Yes, I am being washed and made clean—and as I am being made clean, I come more and more—I know not how—to follow another one who is cursed; I follow the one who is forever being put to death outside the city walls, the only one who forever turns the other cheek, the one who forever loves all, who forever forgives all, the only one whose love cannot be stopped by the doors of any tomb in this world and the next. That one too is called an outlaw – he dies as an outlaw—and he prays unceasingly for those who hate him—in unwavering love for us sinners he prays.

“And so, knowing that it is only through his Word of forgiveness that I can be good to God—knowing with a knowledge beyond all reason or hope, I go about my daily rounds—and though you can't see it yet, though I can't see it yet, clinging to the cross, being stained by his blood and watery sweat and tasting on my lips bits of flesh falling from the body ripped apart by his torturers—unseen to the eye, I am becoming reborn in his image.

“Some say that Samaritan lepers aren't supposed to stand up in public and talk about the love and mercy of God made manifest by the cross. Only, I just can't seem to be able to shut up—I've tried—but somehow I can't help but come back to telling about the cross and the good news written there in Christ's blood for me and for all people. There is a strange advantage to being reminded every day that I, a Samaritan leper, am going straight to hell: it makes me all the more aware that the only thing I have going for me—the only thing any of us will ever, ever have going for us—is the One who says to all of us here on this dark planet, that nothing—not even our greatest and gravest sins—can keep God from forgiving us and loving us; there is nothing that can keep God from creating us anew in the image of the loving, forgiving, sacrificing, self-emptying, and fully-God-Christ. And there is no one who is going to make me shut up about that.”

So writes a Samaritan leper.

