

September 12, 2010; Proper 19C
Jer 4: 11-22, 22-28; Ps 14
1Tim 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

Rev. Deborah Meister

J.R.R. Tolkien's trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*, tells the story of how a small band of disparate creatures, led by the wise Gandalf, tried to stop a great evil which was threatening to destroy the world. The tyrant Sauron, who hungered after limitless power to control and to destroy the world around him, had fashioned a series of rings of power, offering them to each of the earthly lords in turn; each ring would give its owner the power to achieve their dreams – or so Sauron claimed. What Sauron did not mention was that he had also made One Ring for himself, a subtle chain linking each ring-holder to Sauron's own will, turning their aspirations, inexorably, to evil.

And so Frodo and his companions, falling into possession of that ring, cross the known world, seeking to destroy it. At one point, they realize that they are likely to be pursued, not only by the forces of Sauron, but by Gollum, a slimy creature who used to be much like themselves until the ring corrupted him, and who will do anything to get it back. Frodo bursts out, in his bitterness, “‘What a pity that Bilbo did not stab that vile creature, when he had a chance!’ ‘Pity?’ [Gandalf relieves.] ‘It was Pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and Mercy: not to strike without need...Be sure that he took so little hurt from the evil, and escaped in the end, because he began his ownership of the Ring so. With Pity.’ ‘I am sorry,’ said Frodo. ‘But I am frightened; and I do not feel any pity for Gollum...He deserves death.’ ‘Deserves it!’ [Gandalf replied.] ‘I daresay he does. Many that live deserve death. And some die that deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgment...The pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many.’”¹

The choice in the story is simple: pity or violence, mercy or death. The choice in the “real” world is rarely that simple, for pity here may expose the many to the violence of the few. Still, it is a good choice to consider this week, when we remember the attacks of 9/11 and the dark tide of violence which those attacks and our response have unleashed upon the world.

The prophet Jeremiah writes, “I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert, and all its cities were laid in ruins, before the Lord, before his fierce anger.” (Jer 4:26) I found these hard words this week, when they echo so clearly what the hijackers thought they were doing: bringing the judgment of God upon an ungodly nation. And yet, did they, do any of us, have the right to arrogate that power of judgment to ourselves? It is a divine attribute, not a human one.

When St. Paul was still Saul, he received letters empowering him to arrest the followers of Jesus and bring them bound to be sentenced in Jerusalem; he did that because he believed that God had commissioned him to bring retribution upon the ungodly blasphemers who were infiltrating the land. But once he had encountered Christ, he wrote, “I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.” (1 Tim 1: 13-14) St. Paul is speaking of the conversion of the heart: of God working through Christ to transform us from agents of death to agents of life. And the primary tool in God's hand is mercy: the mercy which God shows to each one of us, letting us see and taste and feel the forgiveness of God pressing upon our hearts, pressing us, pressing us, pressing us to show that same mercy to one another.

“Which one of you,” Jesus asks, “having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it upon his shoulders and rejoices.” (Luke 15: 4-5) Just so, we are to believe, the angels of God cross the earth again and again, looking for the lost soul, the one who is frightened

¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, in chapter 2, “The Shadow of the Past.”

and endangered and alone, and, when they find her, they send the Son of Man to go and carry her home. It is a deeply comforting image, for who among us has not been afraid, has not been lost, has not been alone among strangers or among close friends who suddenly do not seem to know what is in our soul? We know, each one of us, that we are capable of evil. We know that we hurt one another without even trying. And so we cling to God's message of forgiveness: that there is no act so heinous that God cannot forgive it, no damage we can do to our own soul which Christ cannot heal, that all we need to do is seek his face one more time, to be saved.

Nor is all this without cost. When I think of the shepherd carrying us on his shoulder, I usually imagine a lamb. That's how sculptors and stained-glass artists tend to depict it. But the Gospel says it's a sheep, and sheep weigh between eighty and three hundred pounds. The shepherd who goes out after us is willing to carry a substantial burden, if he lifts us to his shoulders to bear us home. One year, for Good Friday, I translated a Medieval mystery play and rehearsed members of my parish in performing it. There was one problem we could not resolve: when the other four players needed to lift the crucified Christ, they stumbled around under the weight like the keystone cops. But on Good Friday itself, their action was smooth and assured, as if they had been doing it all their lives. They told me later, "It was the strangest thing. It weighed *nothing!* Nothing!" That is what Christ has done for us: he has taken the burden of our sin and shame upon himself and made the weight of our past evils weigh nothing at all.

The great joy of Christ, the great triumph of Easter, is that it showed beyond a doubt that Mercy rules the universe, not condemnation. As St. John of the Cross wrote, "In the end, we will be judged on love." I would add: In the end, we will be judged *by* Love. In the end, each of us -- those who have grown old in peace and those whose lives have been wrecked by war, those who dwell among rich groves and those whose lives have been hemmed by barbed wire -- will arise from our shattered bones and know what it is to be made whole. We will know the rejoicing of our shepherd, who carries us home.

And yet, if we believe in Eternal Life, it must begin here and now. "It is the present moment which is an image of eternity."² And that presents us with a challenge, one I do not always meet very well. It is very easy to embrace the parable of the lost sheep when we imagine Christ as our shepherd, seeking us out. It is harder, for most of us, to put ourselves in the position of the shepherd, to be willing to go after the ones we have lost, the ones who have rejected us, and the ones who have hurt us, showing them our love until we are allowed to carry them home. And yet, as Reinhold Niebuhr reminds us, "Forgiveness is the final form of love."

And forgiveness is costly. Forgiveness asks us to set aside our rights, what we are owed, and to accept instead what we have been given, what we can give. It derives all its power from that great work given to each one of us upon the Cross. St. Paul reminds us, "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners -- of whom I am the foremost. *But for that very reason I received mercy*, so that in me... Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe." (I Tim 1: 15-16) We receive mercy so that we can show mercy to one another. To withhold that mercy is a form of violence: it leaves other lost and alone and chained to the past.

Lost coin, lost sheep. For these, we might not turn our house upside down. Even in recession, we are more prosperous than a peasant who lives on the edge. What about lost child, lost spouse? You who are parents, how many times do you forgive your children? How many times will you set aside your pride, not out of obligation or because it was commanded, but out of sheer delight that these people are in your life, gifts from the very hand of God? (If not, none of us would live past thirteen years of age!) You who are married, how many times have you had to renegotiate

² Terry Eagleton, *The Meaning of Life*, p.174, cited by Timothy Radcliffe, *Why Go To Church?*, p.87.

your relationship, letting it die so that it could rise again and live? You may not even have liked each other very much when the tension was high, but still you sought one another out in order to give each other life.

Can we do that for one another, as Christ did? Can we try to see one another as gifts from God, people from whom we can learn the hard art of love, even when unlove seems to rule the day? Can we begin at home, practicing on one another until we learn to reach out that way to a stranger, even to an enemy? Do we even want to? Or would we rather lash out at one another, striking with voice and with fists until all our house is desolate, “the earth...waste and void”? (Jer 4: 23)

Our assailants dealt death to three thousand Americans, men, women, and children going about their daily rounds, oblivious to the fact that they would not come home. That was a great horror, a terrible choice of death over life. Since then, our soldiers have dealt that same death to tens of thousands of men, women, and children, and almost 5500 of our own have perished in Iraq and in Afghanistan, not counting our civilians. That response may have been necessary, but each of these losses, ours and theirs, brings with it a tide of maimed lives: widows, widowers, bereaved parents, and orphans: enough to sow seeds of bitterness, rage, fear, and conflict for decades to come.

Violence and unforgiveness, my friends, are so many rings of power: They offer us the illusion of control, the promise of security, the will-o-the-wisp of autonomy. But each time we use them, they turn in our hands, for the rings which bind them are Anger and Fear and the force they use is Pain and the harvest they sow is Bitterness of Spirit. We can choose Christ’s path of mercy, or we can perish alone. Looking at the world as it is today, looking at our broken communities, our shattered trust, at the poison of hatred welling up in our very communities, will we let the Pity of Christ rule our fate?

Do we have a choice?