

Fifth Sunday in Easter
May 10, 2009
Church of the Savior - Episcopal
Orange City, Iowa
Rev. Dr. Karen Wacome, Officiating
Dr. Donald Wacome, Lay Preaching

Love or Death

WHOEVER DOES NOT ABIDE IN ME IS THROWN AWAY LIKE A BRANCH AND WITHERS; SUCH BRANCHES ARE GATHERED, THROWN INTO THE FIRE, AND BURNED. JOHN 15.6

THERE IS NO FEAR IN LOVE, BUT PERFECT LOVE CASTS OUT FEAR, FOR FEAR HAS TO DO WITH PUNISHMENT, AND WHOEVER FEARS HAS NOT REACHED PERFECTION IN LOVE. 1 JOHN 4.18

Most of us know the writer Cormac McCarthy from the Coen brothers' film of *No Country for Old Men*, or from his bleak, post-apocalyptic novel *The Road*, or horrifically violent books like *Blood Meridian*. Not so well known are his plays. *The Sunset Limited* consists of two unnamed characters, designated simply "Black" and "White," sitting and talking at a table in an apartment in a rundown tenement in Harlem. We soon learn that earlier in the day White, a professor at a nearby university, jumped off a platform into the path of an oncoming train, "The Sunset Limited." His suicide attempt was thwarted by Black, who, after jumping onto the tracks and pulling him to safety, has now brought him back to his ghetto apartment. Black is not exactly holding White captive, but he's doing his best to keep the professor there, talking, rather than going out to have another go at killing himself. And we learn that Black is doing this because he thinks Jesus wants him to. Black, it transpires, was once a violent criminal, serving time for murder. He tells White that, after a knife fight with another inmate:

I woke up in the infirmary. They had done operated on me. My spleen was cut open.

Liver. I don't know what all. I come pretty close to dyin. And I had two hundred and

eighty stitches holdin me together and I was hurtin. I didn't know you could hurt that bad. And still they got me in leg irons and got me handcuffed to the bed....And I'm layin there and I hear this voice....Couldn't of been no clearer. And this voice says: If it was not for the grace of God you would not be here (48-49.)

And Black tells White, who doesn't for a moment take seriously the possibility that there's a God who might have spoken to Black or anyone else:

The point is, professor, that I aint go the first notion in the world about what makes God tick. I dont know why he spoke to me. I wouldnt of.

But Black now lives in the worst part of the crime and drug ridden ghetto doing Jesus' work which for reasons he does not understand or question now includes the task of pulling White back from his decision to take his own life. He coaxes from him his reasons for killing himself. At first they are grand and dramatic: the professor has seen through the veneer of human life into the abyss of meaninglessness. Once he dedicated himself to the truth, beauty and goodness stored up in books and music and art, but he now sees there is nothing but absurdity and pointless suffering: "civilization went up in smoke in the chimneys of Dachau...I was too infatuated to see it. I see it now" (27).... "When you read the history of the world you are reading a saga of bloodshed and greed and folly the import of which is impossible to ignore" (112.) Anyone who sees the awful truth of human life will end it.

Black has a hard time taking White's explanation seriously. Subtly, he draws out White's deeper motives. This world, the professor tells Black, is full of horrible people who are not worth saving. Even if they could be saved. Which they can't (40.) It's hopeless, a moral leper colony (75.) A cesspool, peopled with the unsalvageable only a fool would want to try to salvage (77.) The professor's violent rejection of life, his embittered desire for death, is tied up

with his self-righteous conviction of his own specialness, his judgment on the failings and follies of his fellow man, his silent hatred of the commuters he left behind on the platform. Black makes him acknowledge that his leap into the hoped-for peace of nothingness was in reality an attempt to escape from what White derides as the “communal misery wherein one finds salvation by consorting among the loathsome” (128.)

Finally, Black puts it to him:

Suppose I was to tell you that if you could bring yourself to unlatch your hands from around your brother’s throat you could have life everlasting?

White: There’s no such thing. Everybody dies.

Black: That aint what he said. He said you could have *life* everlasting. Life. Have it today. Hold it in your hand. Then you could see it. It gives off a light. Not much.

Warm to the touch. Just a little. And it’s forever. And you can have it. Now. Today.

But you don’t want it. You don’t want it cause to get it you got to let your brother off the hook. You got to actually take him and hold him in your arms and it don’t make no difference what color he is of what he smells like or even if he don’t want to *be* held. And the reason you wont do it is because he don’t deserve it. And about that there aint no argument. He *dont* deserve it. (He leans forward, slow and deliberate.) You won’t do it because it aint just. Aint that so?

If you want to know what happens, you’ll have to read the play. I hope it’s clear enough that Cormac McCarthy in *The Sunset Limited*, and John in both his epistle and his gospel, offer the same improbable--and indigestible--good news: that, as Black puts it: “You must love your brother or die” (121).

Now it’s a wonderful thing, an ideal we can all happily accept...so long as it’s reasonably understood. But I’ve read these texts with care and the bad news is that there are no

qualifications, no exceptions in the fine print that advise that of course we're not required to love those who don't deserve it, those who in fact deserve to be hated. God comes to us in Jesus, calling us to come share in his life—in the end the only life there is—saying we can have it, right now, as we are, no questions asked...the only thing is it just isn't possible to accept this life that loves us without condition or qualification and at the very same time disapprove of it, deny it, reject it by refusing to love as we are loved.

It's important to keep in mind *when* Jesus speaks in today's gospel. His last meal with his friends before he is seized by the authorities and killed is winding down. Judas has gone off into the night on his mission of betrayal. The rest will soon betray him too. Jesus knows, with what's coming, that in their shame, grief and fear, in the wreck of their hopes, they will have good reasons to justify themselves by condemning one another: "You ran away first! You sold him out! You denied him! You cursed him! You got me into this; you said he was the messiah!" So he tells them, and tells them again and again—he goes on for three more chapters after saying, "Let's get up and go" (14.31) before finally heading out to receive Judas' kiss and be arrested. It's the one thing he leaves with them; the one thing he hammers home, the one thing to get them through the horror to come: he is the true vine, the only life consists in being joined to him. It's the very life of God, the life that brought the world into being and turns the heavens, and the only way to be part of it, not to wither and die so there's nothing left but to be thrown away, is to love one another not reasonably but recklessly, as he has loved us.

We hope and pray for the victory of the grace of Christ, that in the last day God's great joyous *Yes!* outlasts and silences all our pathetic little *no's*, and that there will be no dead branches to be cast out, not Judas, not McCarthy's white professor, no one. *Amen*. But there's still this not altogether attractive prospect of being *pruned*. What needs to be pruned, we read, is what keeps

us from bearing fruit, and that's what keeps us from abiding in Christ. And what keeps us from abiding in Christ is not loving the other guy the way God loves both of us. So, what God aims to prune is whatever in me gets in the way of my loving that other guy. What's *that*? Well, there's a really obvious answer: what keeps me from loving him is all the ways he is not lovable. He just doesn't deserve to be loved. He is a living, breathing challenge to everything I invest in getting things right. He deserves to be condemned, rejected, and banished forever. Or at least put down with witty repartee and rendered harmless enough to be politely ignored. But here's Jesus, quite seriously telling me to love *this* person, not some hypothetical, improved future version of him. Jesus insists on cutting out what in *me* keeps me from loving, not all the stuff in the *other* guy that makes him so unworthy of love. It's just not *fair*, but there it is. Here's Jesus telling me to lose the very things that to all appearances ground my identity, my sense of self, my integrity in the world. He's telling me to play fast and loose with an awful lot of what makes it possible for me to make sense of, and finally, approve of, myself. So, of course, what Jesus tells us to do is just what *he* did—what *God* did—giving up on everything we have a right to for the sake of those who don't deserve anything. Can *we* really do this?

Conversion to Christ is what happens in those rare moments when we experience the shift from hearing the good news as

Everyone is welcome, even *them*!

to

Everyone is welcome, even *me*!

It's relatively easy to make the move from the popular idea that God loves the deserving, the good people who do their best and merit God's approval, to the Christian idea that God loves

those we actually *need* to be saved. We know that the gracious God reaches out to the crooks, whores and assorted moral lepers of the world, but I think for most of us most of the time *in the gut* this is knowledge about God and *them*, not knowledge of God and *me*. Given that most of us are morally pretty good, and know it, the widespread tendency to conceive our sinfulness as being a moral problem is deadly. It makes it very hard deeply to *feel* how utterly unsuited we are to being invited into the life of God. It blinds us to how *outrageous* it is that God, in utter humility, comes to me and patiently waits for me to get around to responding to him. I love the ancient sermon which by tradition we read during the Great Vigil of Easter. With Chrysostom we raucously proclaim:

For the Lord is gracious and receives the last even as the first.
He gives rest to him that comes at the eleventh hour,
as well as to him that toiled from the first!

But so long as I think *I'm* someone who toiled from the first, not one of the gauche late arrivals, I need pruning. So long as we're magnanimously extending a forgiving greeting to those slackers who show up so late we have yet to be converted to Christ. There remains in us what rejects God's love, for there remains in us that which just isn't ready to go along with the God who refuses to condemn the sinner, but instead joyfully welcomes him as he is. The only answer to it is to hear, and hear again, that *I* am that implausible candidate for God's love.

Nadia Bolz-Weber, a minister at *The House for All Saints and Sinners*, a Lutheran mission in Denver, recently preached a sermon in which she said that the point of Christian worship, our work together in Word and Sacrament, is to raise the dead. Here we are called, and called again, to die "to our individualism and sense of specialness and fears," so we may once again receive life in Christ. It is, she says, resurrection, "a small Easter for all of us." Each of us

needs once again to find ourselves on the receiving end of the love that stubbornly ignores our insistent demand to be worthy. Each of us needs to be pulled once again from the path of the *Sunset Limited*, to die that we may find life in Christ.

Amen.