

14 October 2007
Pentecost 20

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Unfailing Mercy”

Text: Luke 17:11-19 (Ruth 1:1-19a; 2 Timothy 2:1-13)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

God does nothing by accident. Perhaps we hear the story of the ten lepers and think, “*What a happy coincidence for those ten that Jesus happened by that day.*” No. That is not the way of things with God. No accidents. No “happy coincidences.” God came in flesh and blood in the person of Jesus of Nazareth on a mission of mercy. He came to bring life to those who have no life – whether they be first century Palestinian lepers, or 21st century residents of Northern Virginia. And so when the lepers cried out, and when we cry out (as we did again this morning) “*Lord, have mercy,*” it is no accident. And our Lord is not bothered by those words, or inconvenienced by them – thinking, “*O great! Another loser, deadbeat, sinner calling out for help. Why don’t they get their act together!*” (Like *we* think when we pass by such people calling for help on the street, right?) But not our Lord. He is, in fact, *pleased* with such cries. For to give such mercy is the reason why He has come. To give life and hope to those who have no life and no hope – *to us!* – by giving us Himself.

So what is it for you? What is it that today is causing **you** to cry “*Lord, have mercy?*” For yourself or for others. For big problems or small problems. Physical problems, spiritual problems, emotional problems, financial problems. Problems at home, or work, or school. Family problems, personal problems. What has caused you doubts and fears? What has overcome you or overwhelmed you? What is robbing you of life and hope? What have you gotten yourself into that you cannot get yourself out of? What is it that is eating away at you? And I know it is something. For as long as we live as Christians in this world, you will be in the devil’s crosshairs, who will attack you in one way or another. To rob you of your faith, your life, your hope. Trying to take away those very things that Christ has come to give! For He is the very anti-Christ, who wants you for himself.

And so it is good that we “modern-day lepers” have banded together in this place

again today, to cry out with one voice “*Lord, have mercy!*” It is good, for how often did we fail *as individuals* to do that very thing this week? Ignoring our neighbor in his (or her) need. Taking our struggles upon ourselves. Getting so wrapped up in the things of this world and life that we forget about everything else. That we forget about our Lord’s promised mercy.

And so our Lord comes here – not by accident or happy coincidence; and not that He wasn’t there for us to hear our prayers during the week! – but He comes *here*, today, in this place, that we might come. **He remembers us that we might remember Him.** Not because He needs it, but because we do. He comes and calls to us that we might call to Him, “*Lord have mercy.*” And as we did so in our liturgy, our liturgy puts right our wrong, our weekly failure is undone, and we are back where we belong. Calling out for, and *receiving*, our Lord’s promised mercy.

For despite our failure, our Lord does not withhold His mercy. He does not chastise us for our lack of faith during the week. As we heard in Paul’s letter to Timothy, “*if we are faithless, He remains faithful – for He cannot deny Himself.*” He remains faithful and gives mercy because to fail to do so would be against who He is. He remains faithful and gives mercy because to fail to do so would be to deny His own name which was placed upon you in Holy Baptism. And this He does not do. This He *cannot* do!

And so even though we may be slow to seek Him; even though we may be quick to turn away from Him, or even to turn *on* Him; even though we fail to pray; even though we fall into the same pits again and again; even though we doubt His Word, His presence, and His goodness; even though we forget Him . . . His mercy never fails. And it is not conditional. Jesus did not “unheal” the nine lepers that did not return to Him to give thanks. And He does not take His mercy away from us. For He is not like us. We may stop giving gifts when we do not receive thank you notes. We may hold a grudge against those who take advantage of us, and those who are ungrateful. But not our Father. Not our Saviour. Not the Spirit who lives and dwells with us and in us. *If we are faithless, He remains faithful.* And how good that He is!

And so Jesus was on the road that day, passing between Samaria and Galilee, not by accident or coincidence, but because He was on His way to Jerusalem. Because He had purposefully and faithfully “*set His face to go to Jerusalem*” (Luke 9:51) – to go to the cross. To give us the mercy that we needed *most of all*, by laying down His life for the

forgiveness of our sins. That was not the kind of mercy many were expecting from their Messiah, and so many rejected Him for it. And many still today. For while our Lord never fails to have mercy on us, it may not be exactly the kind of “fairy tale, happily ever after” mercy we expect. His mercy to **Ruth** came in the context of great sorrow and tribulation. His mercy to **Paul** came in the context of great suffering and the chains of prison. And His mercy for you? *It may not be as you expect. But it is sure.* And faith relies not on what is seen, but on the promises of God. The ten lepers were not instantly healed by a wave of Jesus’ hand, but by faith in Jesus’ Word went to show themselves to the priests. And by faith in His Word we so live. The journey may be long or it may be short – when we start it, none of us knows. But His mercy and keeping, His love and forgiveness, is never in doubt.

Never in doubt, because the seal of the tomb was broken on Easter morning. There is no power greater than our Saviour. No sin, no death, no demon, no grave, can hold Him in its power. *And so nor can they hold us!* For as St. Paul also proclaimed to us: *if we have died with Him, we will also live with Him.* Our life and hope is as sure as His death and resurrection. His death and resurrection to which we were joined in Holy Baptism, and His death and resurrection given to us here in the very body and blood that once hung on the cross and burst the bonds of the grave . . . *through these means our Lord still coming to give life and hope to us who have no life and hope, by giving us Himself.* No gift withheld. No sin unforgiven. No mercy denied.

And having received in faith all that our Lord has to give, like the leper, we rise and go. We rise and go, blessed in the journey, now free to have mercy on, and be a blessing to, others. We rise and go, secure in our Saviour’s mercy. For as he came in flesh and blood in the Bethlehem manger, so He comes today in flesh and blood in the manger of bread and wine, and so He has promised to come again in flesh and blood in glory, when we will finally see Him face to face. When what we now *believe* will then be *revealed* for all to see.

Until then, we rise and go. It may not be easy, but we know that it is good. Or as we pray in one of our church’s collects: in this life, we go “*on ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. [So] [G]ive us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go but only that Your hand is leading us and Your love [Your mercy] supporting us; through Jesus Christ, our Lord . . .*” (LW p 262, Collect for Evening Prayer)

In the name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.