

Eleanor Rigby

One Monday morning (about 2 decades back)...God...got my attention!

The chairman of a Pastor Nominating Committee e-mailed me and, of a sudden, all systems were “go”...for my joining Center Presbyterian Church, McMurray, PA...as Designated Term Pastor. By 11 a.m. I decided to call him...and celebrate. Then, then I got so excited at this new vista which had opened in my life....that I decided on a whim to bop down to Center Church a day early, pop my head in and introduce myself to the staff, say hello to whomever might be in. And since I was going anyway I thought, ~my last day off, I’ll take some boxes for the study...then stop at the Galleria Mall on the way back for lunch at London Grille and maybe a movie.

I picked up my first box...of first choice, my sermons for the previous fifteen years, and happily headed down the stairs...and....missed...the last – step

Disaster. Pain. ***Screams of anguish***. My Pekingese puppy came to my rescue and lay against my back as I lay collapsed in a puddled heap of quaking agony. It was bad I tell you.!

For the next twenty-four hours...I couldn’t move...without pain. And therein...lies the lesson.

I have never been that low...on the helplessness ladder before. I couldn’t get pain pills, go to the bathroom, cook supper, anything...by myself. I was upstairs in bed almost all that time...and I had a lot of time...for thought.

It made me think of Mary Bell Smith**, a shut in from my previous church. She lived in Kade Nursing home in McKeesport, and weighed about four hundred pounds. She had diabetes and couldn’t move, could not be lifted...without two attendants and a harness and chain. When I visited Mary Bell...she always made sure she had been moved from her oversized lift-a-chair (where she slept upright at nights) : to her extra wide, wheel-chair...before I got there. She was alive....but no one, hardly anyone it seemed...cared. She’d see me in the doorway and smile a hello. I’d crawl up on her bed (the only place to sit in her cramped room) and we’d talk awhile. I never felt like I gave *her* much, but she just...lit up...when I came. She’d eventually say, “Want to take a tour?”

And we would. I’d push her carefully through the doorway into the long hall...and we’d start our ambling. Talking, seeing sights. She loved Christmas...and we always had to see each Christmas tree and the scores of decorations in each of the three living rooms where residents gathered for dinner or tv.

She lived...for her grandson, a young, Jewish boy who, at only eleven years old, was already starring onstage in Broadway productions in downtown Pittsburgh at the Benedum. She hardly ever saw him; but she had a copy of his every stage bill. She had two daughters in Pittsburgh...but they didn't come often to visit.

Most of her life...she waited. Alone. Waited for attendants who didn't come....to answer her call button. (Sometimes she had to call the front desk on her phone....when she had tried getting attention for more than an hour with her call button.) She waited on help to place a phone call, - - or scratch her foot, or back, or clean her in the mornings...because no one came at night...when she needed to go to the bathroom. And her rashes in response to such neglect were yards wide by now...

I saw her the week before she died...and noticed she had asked a nurse to give her some hand-towels (you know those, rough, brown paper dispenser towels from a rest-room)...and she had taken each and laboriously with an ink pen....drawn phone numbers so large..filling each towel....that she could see them....if she studied them.

I took out my Daytimer and wrote them all down myself. Then I went back to the church and opened the computer. Forget 72 point font; I widened the lettering up to 150...as large as it would go...and filled the page... (you know, like 824 on the top half...and 5600 on the bottom half...and Rev. Hopson, or her daughter's numbers, or the pharmacy, or the desk number at the nursing home for when she really couldn't get any help.

~ ~ I took me a couple days to get to it, and then get them in the mail, but she got them...two days before she died.

.....We are onto something here, friends. Something sacred. **Take the shoes from off your feet...for we are standing on holy ground.**

The Interpreter's Bible calls the Twenty-second Psalm...."a prayer...for a lonely soul". David's - song - here...is a unique and moving portrayal of the sufferings of someone despised and forsaken, torn by affliction. ***This psalm is a supreme example of individual lament.*** It must have so deeply impressed itself on the mind of our Lord that, in the agonies of his last hour, he used the opening words of the 22nd Psalm...to express his sense of abandonment.

There are two, major sections in this Psalm... and a divide between them.

In the first 21 verses the Psalmist cries to God in agony, then without explanation, he turns the last nine verses into a hymn of praise and thanksgiving...for deliverance.

His physical sufferings in the first segment are made even harder by the mystery of God's ways to him. "Why - are - you - so - far...from my words of groaning?", he asks. When he writes, "I wail in anguish" he means literally "***my anguish roars with torment***". ***I am abandoned.***

And then comes what seems...a psychological impossibility: the Psalmist jumps to a tone of thanksgiving. The scene suddenly changes, and the man who *was uttering* a cry of despair – now begins a hymn of contentment and trust....as if somehow he knows God – will answer. “From You comes my praise”, he says, or better said, “Your faithfulness....is my praise!”

~ ~ It’s a tough psalm...with sweet salvation at the end. ? But - - what happened in that gap...between verses 21 and 22?

Such....a *severe*.... mercy...

(Well) Back in the sixties many of us heard of someone whose life was sung with just such lament

In the church where a wedding has been

Lives in a dream

Waits at the window, wearing the face

That she keeps in a jar by the door

Who is it for?

All the lonely people

Where do they all come from?

All the lonely people

Where do they all belong?

Father McKenzie, writing the words

Of a sermon that no one will hear

No one comes near

Look at him working, darning his socks

In the night when there's nobody there

What does he care

Eleanor Rigby died in the church and was buried along with her name

Nobody came

Father McKenzie wiping the dirt from his hands as he walks from the grave

Was anyone saved?

All the lonely people (ah, look at all the lonely people)

Where do they all come from?

....So many... lonely people....

Where do they all belong?

They belong here....in the heart of God.

Amen.