

**Yr. C, Proper 23**  
**October 14, 2007**  
**Preached by Furman Buchanan**  
**St. Martins in the Fields**  
**1954 words**

**Lessons:**  
**Psalm 113**  
**Ruth 1:1-19a**  
**2 Timothy 2:3-15**  
**Luke 17:11-19**

It is opening night of the most important performance of your life. You are no longer playing some minor supporting role. You are the lead performer. You are center-stage. You made it! By the grace of God, you've made it! So relax! Take a deep breath. You are ready to perform!

Those of you who worshipped here last Sunday heard the preacher tell the Gospel-truth—the “Good News” truth—about your salvation. “You don’t have to work for it. You *can’t* work for it. The Good News is that Christ already has done all the work necessary to get you here. So relax—you’ve made it.”<sup>1</sup> By the grace of God, you have arrived at this spectacular moment.

And you’re standing center-stage, only two paces behind that thick, heavy velvet curtain trying to breathe deeply and relax. There is the tiniest little crack where the curtains meet and a thin sliver of the bright spotlight is about to sear a hole in your chest. You try not to look down. Remember—deep breaths. Relax. By the grace of God, You’ve made it this far. You can do this. You really can.

And then the curtain rises on the first of three, one-act plays. You feel a slight shiver come over you as the spotlight attacks the stage around your feet and quickly creeps up your body as the curtain disappears above you. Relax. By the grace of God you’ve made it this far.

You can feel the audience receive the full thrust of grim tension in your face. This is a tragedy, after all. Famine and disease have decimated your homeland during the last ten years. You, your husband and your two sons fled as far and as fast as you could. You literally ran for your lives, desperately seeking nourishment and some security. And you made it. By God’s grace you and your family escaped the massive starvation that came upon the land of Judah in the area of Bethlehem.

Then, *more* tragedy strikes. Your husband dies. You and your sons try to pick yourselves up and keep living. It has not been easy living as a foreigner in a strange land. But your sons get married. Orpah and Ruth join you, and your modest dwelling begins to feel more like a true home. You’ve made it. By God’s grace you have begun to wrestle through your loneliness and despair.

And then, tragedy strikes again. Both your sons are taken away. The cold dark cloak of sadness has covered you. And there is not even time to grieve their untimely deaths. You are now a widow. Worse still, you are a widow with no sons. Your *own life* is in peril. You might just starve to death yourself if you don’t quickly get on your feet and pull yourself together.

The audience can feel your despair. You are a desperate woman barely grasping at the edge of sanity, clinging desperately to your life and especially to your grief—because frankly, your grief is more reliable than your own life right now. You are searching for some glimmer of hope, some small crag in which to place your trust.

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<sup>1</sup> The Rev. Canon Mark Clevenger, Canon to the Ordinary, Diocese of Upper S.C., preaching at St. Martin’s in the Fields Episcopal Church, October 7, 2007.

There is a rumor that the crops have yielded wheat once more near Bethlehem. Could it be that there is bread to be found there? Could it be that there is new life to be found there? You set your face toward Bethlehem and go.

But first, you must dismiss your daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. It is the honorable thing to do. You're an old woman. You can't give them the security they need and deserve. You can't steal them away from *their* homeland. Their odds at survival are ten times better in Moab, among their own people, with prospects for remarriage. They would be doomed tethered to an old, feeble woman like you.

You are center-stage, wailing and clinging to these dear young girls you've come to love. And because you love them, you know you must set them free so they can have a chance at new lives for themselves.

Crying bitterly, Orpah and Ruth slowly walk off the stage. The spotlight dims on your whimpering loneliness, and the audience anticipates the curtain to cover your grief.

When from offstage, Ruth screams, "NO!" and rushes toward you. "Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people will be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried!"<sup>2</sup>

You walk together until you come to Bethlehem. You made it. By God's grace, you've made it back home at last. And you did it faithfully, honoring God and one another in the midst of a most profound tragedy—a story filled with bitterness, and yet *overflowing* with fidelity.

The curtain begins to fall. And the audience erupts into cheers and applause. The audience is utterly filled with delight!

After a brief intermission it is time for the second play. This one, a comedy!

The scene begins with you, along with nine other crumpled and pathetic men, indecently exposed, covered with sores and lesions, clustered together on the edge of a village. You're telling dirty jokes and making the kinds of crude comments that get made when priests and women and decent folk are at a safe distance. And let's face it, when you are a leper, these folks are *always* at a safe distance.

You and your friends have been written off by the world. And when you are part of a group that has been written off, you tend to hang together.

And then this foreign man enters the scene. He looks fairly healthy, but he is by no means clean. It is obvious he has been traveling through dust and dirt of Samaria for several days (if not longer). You and your pathetic bunch laugh boisterously as you curl your face and belch out, "He ain't from around here, is he?"

No sooner have the words left your mouth when you recognize that *he's* the guy everyone is talking about. He's supposedly healed all these people from Bethsaida to Nazareth. And guess what, for some reason there are no crowds following him this afternoon.

"Come on boys, now's our chance!" You and your crew run over in a disgusting, yet hilarious parade; but still keep a respectful distance as you shout, "Hey Jesus! (And for good measure you tack on a title of respect) Master! Have mercy on us!"

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<sup>2</sup> Ruth 1:16-17

This character knows something about how to delegate, and so he shouts back at you and your buddies, “I tell you what—Go show yourselves to the *priests!*” The audience roars with laughter. They can already imagine the reactions of those who—by Law—must keep fastidiously clean, being bowled over by this bunch of slimy, low-life yahoos!

But then the plot shifts. This fumbling, bumbling, bunch of losers begins to recognize that they really *can* be clean. Indeed, as they look at one another and then themselves, they are mystified to discover that they *are* clean. The joke is on them! And what a radical, life-giving joke it is!

You immediately turn and run back toward this Jesus fellow, shouting and singing and praising God. You know you must sound obnoxious, but you just don’t care! You fall face down at Jesus’ feet. “My God, look what you’ve done for me! Thank you. Thank you. A thousand times, thank you!”

Jesus asks, “Hey, where are your nine Jewish friends? Were they not made clean too? I mean for heaven’s sake, they are actually the *sons of Jacob, the children of God*. You’re not even supposed to understand all this business about cleanliness and praising God and yet, you’re the only one to say thank you!”

And then Jesus helps you up off the ground and looks you straight in the eye. And then he says something you’ll never forget as long as you live. “Relax. You made it. By the grace of God and by your faith and trust, you have been made well. Now get out of here and go in peace to love and bless the Lord with your lips and with your brand new life!”

You both turn and bow before the audience. And once more the audience roars with approval, responding with overflowing applause, laughter and cheerfulness.

It’s time for the third, one-act play. It is opening night of the most important performance of your life. You are no longer playing some minor supporting role. You are the lead performer. You are center-stage. You made it! By the grace of God, you’ve made it! So relax, take a deep breath. And consider this metaphor which I stumbled across while reading a novel entitled *Gilead*. The protagonist in this novel mentions a metaphor from the writings of that 16<sup>th</sup> century reformer named John Calvin.

And this is what he says,

“Calvin describes each of us as an actor on a stage and *God* is the audience. This metaphor makes us artists of our behavior, and the reaction of *God to* us might be thought of as aesthetic rather than morally judgmental in the ordinary sense. How well do we understand our role? With how much assurance do we perform it? Calvin’s image suggests how *God* might actually *enjoy* us. I believe we think about that far too little. It would be a way into understanding essential things, since presumably the world exists for *God’s* enjoyment...”<sup>3</sup>

So relax. You’ve made it. By the grace of *God*, you are just like Ruth and Naomi bowing to thunderous cheers and applause. The audience—*God*—is utterly filled with delight! What a show of fidelity!

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<sup>3</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* ( NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2004 ), p. 124-125.

Take a deep breath. You've made it. By the grace of God, you are just like that spotless guy standing alongside Jesus, bowing. And once more the audience—God—roars with approval, responding with overflowing applause, laughter and cheerfulness.

This is the Gospel-truth—the “Good News” truth—about your salvation. You don't have to work for it. You *can't* work for it. The Good News is that Christ already has done all the work necessary to get you here. So relax—you've made it. By the grace of God, you have arrived at this spectacular moment of salvation.

Your response is nothing *more* and nothing *less* than a thanks-giving—an *encore performance* for this audience of one in which you understand your role and you perform it with assurance and delight. It is not *work*. It is *gratitude*.

And it starts at *this* altar. St. Martin's is a place where actors in this drama gather regularly for a Holy Thanks-giving, a Holy Eucharist.

This week we will kick off the Pony Express, our annual stewardship season. This is another chance for you to play your role with assurance and make a holy thanks-giving with your pledge to God, to this faith community, and to those we reach with our mission and ministry.

This week you are going to encounter friends and neighbors, and—probably—enemies. This is yet another opportunity for you to play your role and share a holy thanks-giving.

The curtain is about to rise on the most important performance of your life. But relax. You've made it. By the grace of God it is your special chance to creatively perform your very own drama of thanksgiving.

And the audience is just dying to cheer you on. I mean it—your audience really has *died* in-order-to cheer you on.

Now do what Jesus said to do. “Get up and go in peace to love and bless the Lord—with your lips and with your brand new life!”

Amen.