Where the Water Is

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RING AROUND THE ROSE

Around and around, never ending, never ceasing.
The deep, luscious colors of silent agony surround circling figures.

POCKET FULL OF POSY

Fragrant flowers cover the smells of death.
A facade of simplicity over a scene of chaos.

ASHES, ASHES

From dust to dust, death protrudes from
A light, corrosive film that covers the pain.

WE FALL DOWN

Life ends, children play, time continues
Around and around, never ending, never ceasing.

Story 1: Remember those long, long Jerry Lewis MD telethons? Forty straight hours the man would have been on his feet when some grinning vice president (in a $500 suit) would stretch out a five-foot long company check for $100,000. Jerry would laugh (or cry—he’d be fairly shot by then) and say, “God bless you! Wow, folks! Isn’t this beautiful? Let’s give So-And-So, Inc. a huge round of applause.”

I wonder if Jerry ever thought, ‘You corporate fraud. You fake. This is low-budget advertisement not sacrifice.’ If he did he never let on. His worry was “his kids” and money was money.

Story 2: A man walks into a library with an overdue book and a guilty smile. The person behind the desk is an old friend and, with a keystroke, cancels the $5 fine. Instead of the expected “Hey, thanks!” the man says, “You’ve covered my debt and that’s great. But there are people a lot less able to pay than me. Here’s a twenty. Pay some fines with it and make someone’s day. But don’t say where the money came from.” And since most who read this know what Jesus thought about the Pharisee’s public gift and the poor woman’s private gift, we can move on.

I think we understand that shouting, “Look at me: I’m holy,” is about as problematic as “You’ll do what I say because I’m in charge!” My dad never said that and, oddly enough, I never wondered who was. But where true authority has no need to puff itself up, true holiness is incapable of doing so. Christlikeness must begin in belief and end in behavior. In imitation of God, the true believer commits holy action because the source of his or her being is holiness. All else is play-acting and anyone can do that (The devil can act like an angel of light but, from snout to toenails, he’s still the devil.)

And, with what’s happening around us as I write this, I can’t help running America as a people through that same equation: the more we hold ourselves up as examples of truth and justice and godliness the less chance we have of actually being “little Christs” to a world who may know better than to confuse us with kindly neighbors. Angels of mercy we are not, but redeemed we can be.

I’m convinced that our belief in Whose we are (as Christians) is wonderful but dangerous. It leaves us particularly susceptible to vanity and self-deception. Maybe that’s part of why our way is called the “narrow way.” It’s so easy for us to think we’re hot stuff. (Recall the posturing of the Salem witch trial judges or, more recently, the perverse arrogance of the several varieties of so-called “Prosperity Gospels.”)

The late Clifford R. Horn, missionary and Concordia University professor, once said, “I’m nobody. I’m just one beggar trying to lead another to water.” Hear that? It’s the sound of someone who actually knows where the water is.