

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, rcl yr a, 2020
Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

*Truly I tell you,
the tax collectors and the prostitutes
are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you*

Flannery O'Connor, one of the most celebrated short-story writers of the 20th century, was a Roman Catholic—and Christian themes, drawn from the religious life of the American South, often appear in her work.

One of her most beloved stories—“Revelation”—is no exception. One of two main characters is Mary Grace, an unattractive young woman, home for summer from university up north, who scowls at the world from behind a book.

The second main character is Mrs Turpin, a good Christian woman (in her mind), she’s one of the good and kind white people (in her mind), doing all she does for the church after all. She might not really like all those other people she imagines as below her station, looking down on everyone from above, with what is (in her mind) her Christian duty of a superior sort of kindness.

As O'Connor tells the story, bookish and sullen Mary Grace meets the kindly but quietly judgmental Mrs. Turpin at the doctor’s office. Mrs. Turpin gives the last chair in the waiting room to her sick husband (out of Christian charity of course) and silently judges the woman who doesn’t ask her child to give her a seat (some people just don’t know how to be polite, after all).

And Mrs. Turpin makes friendly chit-chat with everyone, while taking silent judgment over everyone. Until all chaos breaks loose when a suddenly angry Mary Grace throws her book in the face of Mrs. Turpin, hitting her square in the eye. Mary Grace then lunging at Mrs. Turpin from across the room to grab her by the throat. Orderlies are called, and as Mary Grace is subdued, Mary Grace says to Mrs. Turpin, to Mrs Turpin’s great surprise: “Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog.”

And Mrs. Turpin is affronted that good and kindly as she is, she might be called such a thing; but as we turn the pages, we see her become deathly afraid that Mary Grace might be right. She is perhaps not so kindly and

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good as she thought, and that Mary Grace may have given her a message from God. She might not be so morally superior at all.

This begins Mrs. Turpin's very very difficult conversion—a conversion where she has to reevaluate where she belongs in the moral universe. Where once she thought herself better than the rest, and sure of it, now her sense of rightness crumbles before her eyes in a vision of where she truly belongs in God's redemption of the world, a vision of the words we read from Matthew, today: "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you."

For Mrs. Turpin, it's a vision where all the "proper Christians" like her are bringing up the rear, and all those people *she* judged as lesser than her, march and dance their way into the kingdom of God well ahead of her.

We are in a time of a particular kind of cultural upheaval—historical and political figures like John A. MacDonald, and cultural icons like JK Rowling, are under great scrutiny. While folks on one side of this upheaval would say that we are in a time of radically re-assessing some of our cultural avatars; others, on the other side of things, and less sympathetic to such reassessments, are simply calling this phenomenon "cancel culture."

And for some of us—especially those of us who hold fast to the Christian life—we find some of our core concerns, like the Christian doctrines like grace, forgiveness, and repentance, finding a strange and tortured place in public discourse. With the world, we wonder, what does grace and forgiveness look like at this particular time? Does grace mean *overlooking* the faults of others? Or does grace mean *forgiving* the faults of others, but leaving them to occupy the same place in our cultural imagination? Does grace mean *striking a balance*, where the good someone does outweighs the evil that has been done? Is there even room for forgiveness, repentance, and grace at this time?

Flannery O'Connor has been caught up in this cultural moment, and perhaps for good reason. Her fiction will likely remain important stories about radical grace and transformation, like the story of the difficult conversion that comes to Mrs. Turpin after the revelation that she was not

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favoured by God as much as she thought, but rather that God favoured the very people she looked down upon.

But O'Connor's biography contains some unsettling revelations of their own. From her letters, we find that as a young woman she was disturbed by African-Americans in her cousin's class and people of colour on her subway car. Worse yet, later on as an adult, we discover that she would tell a friend that she wouldn't be able to see James Baldwin, African American man of letters and activist, in her home state of Georgia. "It would cause the greatest trouble and disturbance and disunion," she writes. "In New York it would be nice to meet him; here it would not. I observe the traditions of the society I feed on—it's only fair." The tradition she refers to here is the genteel exclusion of African Americans from her social life—a tradition of racist exclusion.

Do we say that Flannery O'Connor's willingness to go along with the racism in Georgia doesn't matter, because after all, she wrote so many important short stories? Is Flannery O'Connor's racism forgivable, seeing as she was just a product of her own racist time and culture? Or are her short stories so important that they outshine her racist attitudes?

I can't confess to solving this problem. What I would add to this conversation though is two things: First, forgiveness and grace are real; second, we are accountable for what we do. Forgiveness and grace don't erase the evil has been done in our name and sometimes even at our behest or with our cooperation. We are under God's judgment for what we do and have done—Flannery O'Connor, John A. Macdonald, JK Rowling, and the rest of us.

And this may mean, for historical figures, that some are no longer revered in the same terms—coming to terms with the sins of the past means coming to terms with the sins we've overlooked in *our* history, and the people who committed them in our name. And our stock in figures like John A. MacDonald, and Flannery O'Connor, may well fall. Because grace is hard sometimes, often giving us pause to reevaluate who we think we are in very difficult ways.

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But neither are we beyond grace and redemption, unless we put ourselves outside grace and redemption; on this side of life we are asked to *convert*—to change our minds, to come to terms with what we have done, and to undergo the very difficult work of repentance.

It's hard to know whether all those historical figures whose statues are being torn down ever showed signs of repentance, or openness to their own faults. Flannery O'Connor, though, does give us one possible way forward. Late in her short life, she reflected on that life and her own complicity, her own sinfulness even. And she did not do so as a person looking down on others, or as a person who was entirely comfortable with her own place in the world. She identified herself, rather, with a falsely humble and a truly arrogant woman, signing one of her last letters not as Mary Grace, but as Mrs. Turpin.

She claimed, for herself, that she was not under cheap grace, but under the sort of grace that feels like a violent rending of who we thought we were, of who we think we are. A grace that can come like a book in the face, and in the voice of an unpretty person telling us things about ourselves we don't want to know.

And while this is a difficult prayer, I would ask the same for us, as Canadians, as citizens of the world, and as Christians—may we find opportunities not so much to rationalize our own behaviour, or even the bad behaviour of others—but to take the opportunities given for that very very difficult self-reflection, and the opportunity for conversion that comes with it. May we too, see the *truth*—and let it transform us, like the Mrs. Turpin's of the world, surprised by a wrenching, but *sanctifying* grace;

in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

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