
It's Free, But It Ain't Cheap

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A sermon by the Rev. Canon George M. Maxwell, Jr. The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 20A

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard told his manager to line up the workers and pay them, beginning with the last and going to the first. Those who came last got the daily wage. So, those who came first thought they would get more. When they were given only the daily wage they had been promised, they began to complain.

They sound a little like the Israelites in the wilderness, who complained to Moses as they longed for the security of the slavery they had left behind.

But, if we put ourselves in their position, we have to ask, why did the owner do this? Why did he make them look so ungrateful? If this is a story about grace, why is it so full of judgment?

I can think of no better answer to that question than the one Flannery O'Connor gives in her short story titled "Revelation." She shouts it, actually, as if we are all hard of hearing.

Ruby Turpin is a large, Southern, Church-going woman, sure of her own goodness. She has good skin, and the only wrinkles on her face are around her eyes from laughing too much.

Mrs. Turpin is bringing her husband to the doctor.

As she enters the waiting room, she does what she always does. She starts judging people. She uses her judgments of them to justify herself.

She notices, for example, the blond child in the dirty blue dress who was taking up too much room. She notices the lean, stringy man pretending to be asleep so he wouldn't have to give her his seat. And, she notices whose clothes are homemade, whose lips are stained with snuff, whose shoes are worn, and whose hair needs washing.

There is nothing that you could tell her about these people that she doesn't already know.

We're told that sometimes at night, when she couldn't go to sleep, Mrs. Turpin occupied herself by naming the classes of people. People of color were on the bottom. Next to them - not above them, really, just away from them - were the white trash. Above them were the people who owned their own homes. Then came the people like her who owned their own homes and some land. At the top were the people who had lots of money and owned bigger homes and more land.

There were problems with her scheme, of course. Some of the folks with money were common and should be below her. Some of the people of good blood had lost their money and had to rent. Some of the people of color - like the local dentist -- had money, owned their own home, and had some land.

She usually just imagined all of those people being crammed together into a boxcar, and taken off somewhere, never to be seen or heard from again.

In the doctor's office, Mrs. Turpin isn't content just to judge others. She also needs to let everybody know just

where she stands in the order of things. She talks about the nice things she owns and the difficulty of getting good help. It makes her feel secure. She has more than the poor folk, and wouldn't dream of giving up being a good woman for high society, more money, or less girth.

Whenever she counts her blessings she feels as buoyant as if she weighed one hundred and twenty-five pounds instead of one hundred and eighty.

There's one girl who isn't buying it, though. Her name is Mary Grace. She is, by Mrs. Turpin's reckoning, fat and ugly. Home from Wellesley College in Massachusetts, Mary Grace is sitting with her Mother, reading a thick book titled "Human Development."

Mrs. Turpin tries to ignore the girl, but just as Mrs. Turpin is proclaiming her gratitude for all that the Lord has given her, Mary Grace throws the book at her, hitting Mrs. Turpin directly over her left eye.

Before Mrs. Turpin can even make a sound, Mary Grace jumps on her, wrestles her to the ground and sinks her fingers into the soft flesh of Mrs. Turpin's neck.

Eventually, the doctor is able to restrain Mary Grace.

As they are both laying on the floor, Mrs. Turpin looks directly into Mary Grace's fierce blue eyes and realizes that the girl knows her somehow, knows her in some intense and personal way, beyond time and place and condition.

Mary Grace looks directly into Mrs. Turpin eyes, calls her a wart hog, and tells her to go back to where she came from.

Later, after Mrs. Turpin has gone home and is feeding her own hogs, she starts talking out loud. "Why me?" she asks. "Why did you send the message to me?" And, finally, "who do you think you are?"

She finds her answer in the sky. She sees a purple streak cutting through a field of crimson. The streak becomes a swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire, and carrying souls to heaven.

There were whole companies of white trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs.

And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable, as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.

The vision faded and she made her way on the darkening path back to the house. In the woods around her the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah.

What Mrs. Turpin realizes, I think, is the same thing that the owner of the vineyard is trying to teach the workers, the same thing that Matthew wants us to understand. The economy of God's grace is not what we expect.

Grace - the divine action in human life -- is not something that we can possess, as much as it is something that is available for our benefit. But, to benefit from it, we have to let it possess us. We have to let it fill us, move us, and guide us.

The only way to benefit from God's grace, in other words, is to let it make us grace-filled.

Grace, it seems, is free, but it ain't cheap.

The story of grace is so full of judgment, because, in so many instances, they are the same thing. As one reader of O'Connor's story has noted, God's wrath is couched wholly in terms of divine mercy. It is a mercy that is like a refiner's fire - cleaning rather than consuming.

Yet, this purifying fire of God's judgment of grace is what it takes, it seems, to break down our disciplined effort to deceive ourselves.

Left to our own devices, we would reduce the Kingdom of God to a place where we could simply forgive ourselves and forget about our sin. If given the option, most of us would choose to stay the same, though we would like to feel a little better about ourselves, or, perhaps, learn to cope with our emotions a little more effectively.

Thanks to Mary Grace, Mrs. Turpin is changed. Like the Prodigal Son, she loses her self-deceptive righteousness while she is feeding the pigs. She stops judging others in an effort to justify herself. She loses her status as a member of the privileged class.

She is now with the last group crossing the field of fire, and even her virtues are being burned away.

But, the story doesn't end there. Her other worldly vision fades and she must make her way back home down the darkening path of this world. She must return to her life, now fully aware of her sin and of her need of grace.

The economy of God's grace is not what we expect. God's wrath is couched wholly in terms of divine mercy. It is a mercy that is like a refiner's fire - cleaning rather than consuming.

We can't possess it. To benefit from it, we have to let it possess us.

God's grace is free, but it ain't cheap.

Amen

You might be interested to know:

"¢ The characterization of Flannery O'Connor as shouting at her readers is actually the author's self assessment. She said "to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the blind you draw large and startling figures."

"¢ The short story "Revelation" can be found in "The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor" (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1977) pp. 488-509.

"¢ Greg Jones offers an excellent analysis of "Revelation" and the judgment of grace in his book, "Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis" (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995) pp. 53-69.

"¢ The "reader" of O'Connor's story that I mention is Ralph Wood, a preeminent Christian literary critic. He makes this comment in his book "The Comedy of Redemption" (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1988) p. 131.

"¢ The description of grace as free, but not cheap comes from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote extensively against the trivialization and privatization of Christian life. He referred to these tendencies as "cheap grace." He defines cheap grace as "the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession." "The Cost of Discipleship," tr. R. H. Fuller (New York: Macmillan, 1963) p. 47.