

## FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S *GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND*

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan  
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This gospel reading from Luke today<sup>i</sup> is about being awake and alert, rather than unaware and complacent. From Jesus' perspective, the Kingdom of God is around us and within us, with the potential to break through at any moment in the fullness of power, and we need to have our hearts, minds and souls concentrated on its presence and not on everyday trivia and social conventions. Jesus uses metaphors to help us understand: "Be dressed for action and have lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks."<sup>ii</sup> The reading from Isaiah<sup>iii</sup> makes a similar point but with a social justice dimension: God doesn't want to be honored with the regularity of worship conventions like burnt offerings and incense; he asks that people honor him instead by jumping to do good: "Rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow."<sup>iv</sup>

There's a wonderful short story by Flannery O'Connor called "A Good Man is Hard to Find," which elaborates powerfully on this biblical lesson of being awake and alert to what ultimately matters rather than only to social trivialities. I'd like to share my thoughts on it in hopes that the lectionary readings will be illuminated and enhanced for you.

A family from Atlanta, Georgia, is taking a vacation car trip together. Stuffed into the automobile are a grandmother, her son Bailey and his wife, their children -- June Star, John Wesley and a baby -- a cat named Pitty Sing, and a lot of luggage. Everyone assumes that this is a trip to Florida, except for the grandmother, who wants to visit some people she knows in East Tennessee, and lobbies hard to go in that direction. She tries to scare everyone with a newspaper report of a criminal called "The Misfit" who's escaped the Federal Penitentiary in Atlanta and is said to be headed toward Florida. The family sets off for Florida anyway.

Let me describe this grandmother. Although everyone else is dressed informally for the trip, the grandmother comes with white cotton gloves and a navy blue dress with white organdy collars and cuffs trimmed with lace. In her mind, "In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady."<sup>v</sup> She makes casually racist comments along the way, like referring to a black child standing in the door of a shack as a "cute little pickaninny."<sup>vi</sup> She doesn't garner much respect from other family members because she's demanding and judgmental, especially in matters of etiquette.

Along the way the grandmother is able to convince everyone to take a detour down a dirt road to see a plantation house she thinks she visited as a child. Along the way the cat suddenly jumps onto Bailey's shoulder while he's driving, startling him, and causing the car to go into a ditch about ten feet below the road level. A few minutes after the accident, another car comes by with three men in it, all armed with guns. The grandmother shrieks that the oldest of the three men is the Misfit. Once he's been recognized, it becomes clear that the Misfit is going to kill the whole family. Realizing the severity of the situation, the

grandmother asks, “You wouldn’t shoot a lady, would you?” The Misfit responds, “I would hate to have to.” Then, the grandmother almost screams, “I know you’re a good man. You don’t look a bit like you have common blood. I know you must come from nice people!” The Misfit responds, “Yes mam, finest people in the world.”

Soon the Misfit has his two younger accomplices take Bailey and his son, John Wesley, into the woods. Again, the grandmother says desperately to the Misfit, “I just know you’re a good man. You’re not a bit common!” But the Misfit responds, “Nome, I ain’t a good man.” Before long two pistol shots are heard from the woods. Now the grandmother, very perturbed, starts turning to religion: “If you would pray, Jesus would help you.” But the Misfit says, “I don’t want no hep. I’m doing all right by myself.” Next, the mother and baby are taken off to the woods by the two younger men, along with the daughter, June Star. After a piercing scream and another pistol report, the grandmother begins crying out, “Jesus! You got good blood! I know you wouldn’t shoot a lady! I know you come from nice people! Pray! Jesus, you ought not to shoot a lady.” The Misfit begins a theological monologue about Jesus at this point, claiming that he’s thrown everything off balance and wondering whether or not he raised the dead. The Misfit gets himself so worked up emotionally that he’s hitting the ground with his fist and crying out, “Listen lady, if I had been there [with Jesus] I would of known and I wouldn’t be like I am now.” As his voice cracks and it seems he’s going to cry, the grandmother’s head suddenly clears, and she reaches out for him, murmuring, “Why you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children.” As she touches him on the shoulder, the Misfit springs back as if a snake had bitten him and shoots her three times through the chest.

When his two accomplices return from the woods, with the whole family now dead, one of them says about the grandmother, “She was a talker, wasn’t she?” The Misfit responds, “She would have been a good woman, if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.”

So, the grandmother was caught up in trivialities and social conventions almost to the end: “You got good blood. You ought not to shoot a lady.” But then her head clears. She becomes aware for the first time. She wakes up, in effect. And she touches something deep and meaningful within herself. She feels genuine sympathy and love for this most odious murderer as he struggles to grasp the meaning of life. She says, “You’re one of my own children.” And she reaches out to comfort him. But her own awakening to what really matters is very short-lived, because it’s too much for the Misfit. Nonetheless, he understands that she’s reached this moment of clarity beyond etiquette and conventionality only when the threat of imminent death has become undeniable. What if she could have lived every moment of her life as if it were her last, rather than wasting it on trivialities?

“Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit,” instructs Jesus. “Be ready.” Usually we aren’t. “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean,” instructs Isaiah in the name of God. “Learn to do good; seek justice; rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan.” Usually we’re just trying to get through our own day ourselves.

Roshi Shunryu Suzuki, the founder of the Zen Center in San Francisco in 1962, wrote a now-famous book called *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*.<sup>vii</sup> He claimed that the essence of Zen Buddhism is to try always to maintain the alert mind of the beginner. As his successor, Richard Baker, explained: “The mind of the beginner is...open to all the possibilities. It is the kind of mind which can see things as they are, which step by step and in a flash can realize the

original nature of everything.”<sup>viii</sup> The spiritual task is to try to maintain this attitude always, through meditation and through the rest of one’s life activities. It asks for full attention, and its reward is deep joy. I wonder if this isn’t at the center of what Jesus means by being dressed for action and having your lamps lit.

Suzuki-roshi described the beginner’s mind as the mind of compassion, a mind in sympathy with all living beings.<sup>ix</sup> He also explained that “We die, and we do not die.”<sup>x</sup> To not lose ourselves, “We must exist right here, right now!”<sup>xi</sup> Unfortunately, though, “In our everyday life our thinking is ninety-nine percent self-centered: ‘Why do I have suffering? Why do I have trouble?’”<sup>xii</sup> Instead, we should be practicing non-attachment to ourselves and radical openness to others. I wonder if this isn’t at the center of what Isaiah means by washing ourselves clean and then learning to do good.

But then, as now, and always, a good man is hard to find.

## BENEDICTION

(In the words of the Zen Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh:)

Let us be aware of the source of being, common to us all and to all living things.

Evoking the presence of the Great Compassion, let us fill our hearts with our own compassion

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Towards ourselves and toward all living beings.

With humility and with awareness of the sufferings that are going on around us,

Let us practice the establishment of peace in our hearts and on earth. AMEN.

## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Luke 12:32-40

<sup>ii</sup> Luke 12:35-36.

<sup>iii</sup> Isaiah 1:1, 10-20.

<sup>iv</sup> Isaiah 1:17.

<sup>v</sup> All quotations are from Flannery O’Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find* (New York: Harvest, 1983).

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>vii</sup> Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* (New York: Weatherhill, 1970).

<sup>viii</sup> Richard Baker, Introduction to Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>ix</sup> Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, p. 22.

<sup>x</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.