

AN AMERICAN HOME FOR O'CONNOR'S DISPLACED PERSON

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
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Today's gospel lessonⁱ has been referred to as "the commissioning of the seventy."ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus goes well beyond his disciples here in sending out seventy other missionaries to towns throughout Israel to preach his good news of the coming of the kingdom of God. He uses the agricultural metaphor of sending farm laborers out to bring in the harvest. It's time now to gather in the yield of the faithful from the seeds which Jesus has been sowing in his own travels throughout the land. The prophets of the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, had used harvest as a metaphor for the final judgment, and this may well be what Jesus is implying as well.ⁱⁱⁱ

Yet, Jesus makes it clear that this missionary work won't always be easy. Wandering as strangers in a strange land, the seventy may not be welcomed into certain host communities. In fact, Jesus proclaims "See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves."^{iv} The seventy are commissioned to be gracious themselves, though. Whenever they enter a house, they must first say "Peace to this house!" They should eat whatever is set before them, attend to the sick who are there, and explain that the Kingdom of God is near. If they are not welcomed, on the other hand, Jesus says they should go out into the streets and publicly say "Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe it off in protest against you."^v

Today's the great American holiday, the Fourth of July. It's a day to celebrate all that's best about this amazing country. We're a nation of immigrants. Except for Native Americans, we or our ancestors were all once strangers in a strange land. Hopefully we were welcomed here in the spirit of those magnificent words on the base of the Statue of Liberty: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

As philosopher Jacob Needleman has written in his recent book, The American Soul, this country is unique among the nations of the world because it's not an ethnicity but an idea.^{vi} It's the new Jerusalem, the new Israel, the new promised land, the beacon of hope pointing toward the Kingdom of God, as many of its earliest settlers would say. America has always been more than just the American dream of material prosperity. It's represented the promise of liberty and equality for all. As was written in our Declaration of Independence 228 years ago today: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

There's a wonderful short story by Flannery O'Connor, "The Displaced Person,"^{vii} which, I think, ties together the gospel commissioning of laborers to bring in the harvest for the Kingdom of God with the founding American vision, as our Pledge of Allegiance puts it, of "one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." Let me tell you about "The Displaced Person," in hopes of both shedding light both on the tenth chapter of Luke and on what we celebrate about America today, on this Fourth of July.

O'Connor's story is set on a farm in the rural South just after the Second World War. Mrs. McIntyre had been left the farm when her husband, known as the Judge, had died. She has two African-American farm hands, Astor and Sulk, along with a white couple, the Shortleys. She's had a lot of trouble making ends meet in her agricultural business, and so she makes arrangements with a local priest to bring over from Europe an industrious Polish worker, Mr. Guizac, and his family, who've been displaced in the Second World War. She and the others on her farm refer to him then as "the Displaced Person."

Mr. Guizac turns out to be, as she puts it, Mrs. McIntyre's salvation. He can operate all her farm machinery, including a new silage cutter, and he's an expert mechanic, carpenter, and mason. He's thrifty and energetic. He's scrupulously clean, and he doesn't drink or smoke. "At last, I've got somebody I can depend on,"^{viii} Mrs. McIntyre exclaims.

Symbolically, it becomes clear in the story that this man who's her salvation is a Christ figure.^{ix} Not only is he brought to the farm under religious auspices, but Mrs. McIntyre at one point explains that "Christ was just another D[isplaced] P[erson]."^x So, like one of the seventy commissioned by Jesus, this particular farm laborer is sent out to bring in the harvest, and he's indeed a stranger in a strange land. In fact, he's like a lamb sent into the midst of wolves; the other farm workers are at first suspicious of him and then some become openly hostile as they see how industrious and successful he is. Yet, he constitutes the American Dream. Mr. Shortley knows that Mr. Guizac is on the way up the ladder of success. As he sees it, the Displaced Person could leave Mrs. McIntyre's farm and "in three years he would own his own house and have a television aerial sitting on top of it."^{xi}

The Displaced Person also has a vision of freedom and equality that's not altogether welcome in the pre-Civil Rights South. He wants to bring over his orphaned sixteen-year old cousin, who spent three years in a concentration camp, and have her marry Sulk, one of black employees. This particular vision of "liberty and justice for all" does not sit well with Mrs. McIntyre. With expletives that I wouldn't feel comfortable quoting from the pulpit, Mrs. McIntyre calls the Displaced Person a monster and threatens, "if you mention this girl to Sulk again, you won't have a job with me."^{xii} In fact, this is the beginning of the end for the Displaced Person, because now it's abundantly clear that the stranger in a strange land doesn't fit in and he's no longer welcome. Mrs. McIntyre soon begins talking with the priest about her letting him go, explaining that "I have to have someone who fits in," and "Mr. Guizac didn't have to come here in the first place."^{xiii} Father Flynn simply responds, "He came to redeem us."^{xiv}

Now we move toward crucifixion, as Mr. Shortley says, "Revenge is mine, saith the Lord."^{xv} His dairy work has been taken over by the Displaced Person, and he's been reduced to farm work alone. He starts complaining to every person he sees, "black or white...in the grocery store and at the courthouse and on the street corner and directly to Mrs. McIntyre herself... 'All men was created free and equal,' he explains to Mrs. McIntyre, "and I risked my life and limb to prove it. Gone over there [in the war] and fought and bled and died and come back on over here and find out who's got my job -- just exactly who I been fighting. It was a hand-grenade come that near to killing me, and I seen who throwed it -- little man with eye-glasses, just like his [Mr. Guizac's]."^{xvi}

Then one fateful morning, as Mrs. McIntyre heads out after breakfast to fire the Displaced Person, she sees that he's under a small tractor, putting in a part. Meanwhile, nearby, Mr. Shortley is backing the large tractor out of its shed. He drives it toward the small tractor, then

stops on a incline, jumps off, and turns back toward the shed. Within seconds, the brake on the large tractor slips, and Mr. Shortley, Mrs. McIntyre and Sulk all watch it roll downhill toward the small tractor, their eyes coming "together in one look that froze them in collusion forever."^{xvii} Unaware of all this, the Displaced Person is killed as a tractor wheel breaks his backbone.

Mrs. McIntyre faints, and she's never the same after she comes to. Her first feeling is that of becoming a stranger in a strange land herself: "She felt she was in some foreign country where the people bent over the body were natives, and she watched like a stranger while the dead man was carried away in the ambulance." Then within the day both Mr. Shortley and Sulk leave the farm forever, and Mrs. McIntyre comes down with a nervous affliction and has to go to the hospital. She ends up losing her farm business. She also contracts a numbness in one of her legs, develops tremors in her hands and neck, has deteriorating eyesight, and eventually loses her voice entirely. It's as if the departing Displaced Person were saying, "Even the dust of your land that clings to our feet, we wipe it off in protest against you."^{xviii} In the end no one visits Mrs. McIntyre except the priest, Father Flynn. "He would come in and sit by the side of her bed and explain the doctrines of the church."^{xix}

In Kathy Ku's reading this morning,^{xx} the prophet Isaiah speaks for God: "Thus says the Lord... Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her -- that you may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast."^{xxi} America is the new Jerusalem, according to many of its early settlers. We may and should rejoice over the hope for its people and for the world that America represents at its best. We may and should mourn when America falls shorts of its moral ideals. Both Mrs. McIntyre and the Displaced Person seem to get the American Dream right in the sense of the hope of material prosperity here. Mrs. McIntyre also seems to get the American Dream right, at least initially, in terms of the welcoming words on the Statue of Liberty: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free."

What we may and should mourn is that Mrs. McIntyre only understood a piece of the idea of America. She missed the part about liberty and justice for all. Racism destroyed the American Dream on her farm. She was decade and a half too early to hear Martin Luther King, Jr.'s words at the Lincoln Memorial: "I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed -- we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was the promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."^{xxii}

Jacob Needleman reminds us in the first line of his book The American Soul that America was once the hope of the world. "The deeper hope of America was its vision of what humanity is and can become -- individually and in community."^{xxiii} Individually our personal independence and freedom allows us here to discover our authentic selves, to strive for the highest and best of which we're capable, including -- in the words of the Declaration of Independence -- rectitude of intentions under Nature's God, the Supreme Judge of the World. In community, America, as political philosopher Michael Walzer has explained, is a people deeply steeped in biblical Exodus symbolism. God has led us all out of oppression into our promised land of America. In turn, we have a communal responsibility to continue to welcome into our

midst the stranger yearning to breathe free.^{xxiv} As it's put in biblical language: "You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the heart of a stranger, seeing you were strangers in the land of Egypt."^{xxv}

Flannery O'Connor's Displaced Person is the test for all of us on this Independence Day. Do we stand true to the idea of America expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the Statue of Liberty? Each displaced person, each stranger in our midst, can be our salvation (in Mrs. McIntyre's words), seen to have come to redeem us (in Father Flynn's words). Will he or she be treated like a lamb in the midst of wolves? Or will each be welcomed as if he or she were commissioned by God to come among us? In biblical language, the harvest depends on what we do; the final judgment depends on what we do. "Come, thou fount of every blessing. Tune our hearts to sing thy grace."^{xxvi} "America, America, God shed his grace on thee. And crown thy good with brotherhood, from sea to shining sea."^{xxvii}

NOTES

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- i. Luke 10: 1-11.
 - ii. The New Interpreter's Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), Vol. IX, p. 218.
 - iii. Ibid., p. 219.
 - iv. Luke 10:3.
 - v. Luke 10:11.
 - vi. Jacob Needleman, The American Soul: Rediscovering the Wisdom of the Founders (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 2002), p. 46.
 - vii. Flannery O'Connor, "The Displaced Person, in A Good Man is Hard to Find (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1981), pp. 197-251.
 - viii. Ibid., p. 208.
 - ix. Nadine Brewer, "Christ, Satan and Southern Protestantism in O'Connor's Fiction," Flannery O'Connor Bulletin 14 (1985), pp. 103-111.
 - x. O'Connor, "Displaced Person," p. 243.
 - xi. Ibid., p. 242.
 - xii. Ibid., p. 235.
 - xiii. Ibid., pp. 237, 239.
 - xiv. Ibid., p. 239.
 - xv. Ibid., p. 248.
 - xvi. Ibid., p. 247.
 - xvii. Ibid., p. 250.
 - xviii. Luke 10:11.
 - xix. O'Connor, "Displaced Person," p. 251.

xx. Isaiah 66: 10-16.

xxi. Isaiah 66: 10-11.

xxii. Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream" (Washington, D.C: 1963), as reproduced in James M. Washington (ed.), A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr. (San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1986), pp. 217, 219.

xxiii. Needleman, American Soul, p. 3.

xxiv. Michael Walzer, Exodus and Revolution (New York: Basic Books, 1985), pp. 6, 31.

xxv. Exodus 23:9.

xxvi. Robert Robinson, "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing" (1758).

xxvii. Katherine Lee Bates, "America the Beautiful" (1893).