

The Order of Grace (Summer Saints: Flannery O'Connor)

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on July 26, 2026

Covenant Presbyterian Church

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other, for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

(Luke 18:9-14, NRSVue)

A doctor's waiting room is probably one of the last places anyone expects divine revelation.

Yet that's where Flannery O'Connor begins her short story "Revelation": in a cramped room of hard chairs, old magazines, fluorescent light, plastic ferns, and southern gospel music playing from a radio. Ruby Turpin has brought her husband, Claud, to have an injured leg examined, and because all the seats are taken, she remains standing and begins taking stock of those around her.

Mrs. Turpin is outwardly pleasant, and she makes conversation easily. She smiles, exchanges observations about the weather and farming. But beneath the manners, she's noticing everything: shoes, clothing, manners, speech, cleanliness, education. Each detail helps her determine where someone belongs. She regards poor white people with disgust and Black people with the easy paternalism of someone who has never questioned her own position above them. The waiting room, then, becomes a little map of the world as Ruby Turpin understands it. Everyone has a place, and she's confident that she and Claud occupy a comfortably respectable one.

The funny thing is, Mrs. Turpin doesn't think of herself as cruel. She thinks of herself as generous, discerning, hardworking, and maybe most of all, grateful. At night she sometimes lies awake considering all the other people God might have made her, and when she has finished surveying the alternatives, she thanks Jesus that she has been made exactly as she is. Sounds sort of familiar, like a line from a scripture text we just read, doesn't it?

Flannery O'Connor was born in Savannah in 1925 and spent most of her adult life outside Milledgeville at Andalusia, the farm where she lived with her mother after being diagnosed with lupus at the age of twenty-five. The disease had already taken her father's life and would end her own at thirty-nine. But during those brief years, she famously raised peacocks, carried on a vast correspondence, sustained a serious Catholic Christian faith, and wrote two novels and some of the most original and unforgettable short stories in American literature.

Her stories are populated by prophets and frauds, criminals and grandmothers, wandering preachers and bible salesmen, resentful children, and even some perfectly respectable people. Her stories also belong unmistakably to Georgia, and to the South: to its red clay, back roads, farms, small towns, racial wounds, and religious pieties.

Yet O'Connor's South is never merely a region on a map. It is a spiritual landscape, filled with people who believe they know who they are until some fierce mercy tears open the story they've been telling about themselves. She wrote with the conviction that the ordinary world is charged with mystery: A waiting room may become a place of judgment ... a hog pen may become a sanctuary ... a grotesque encounter may crack open a life that respectable religion has left untouched. Grace in her fiction is often startling because the human heart has become so skilled at protecting itself from anything that might truly change it.

In fact, O'Connor herself did not stand outside this world she saw so clearly, or beyond the need for this grace she described. She had been formed by that world and carried some of its prejudices and spiritual distortions – her letters make that painfully clear – and that contradiction should not be smoothed away. Yet neither should it turn us away from a story such as “Revelation.” It should lead us further into it. Here, O'Connor turns her sharpest vision upon the very white Christian respectability that so deeply made up her own world. Like every figure in this Summer Saints series – and like every one of us – she remained entangled in realities her art could sometimes expose more clearly than she could recognize in herself. No writer of revelation stands beyond the need for revelation.

And perhaps that's why the parable Jesus tells in Luke speaks so searchingly to O'Connor's world – and to ours. Jesus offered his parable “to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.” In it, two men go to the temple to pray. One is a Pharisee, a serious and observant religious person. He fasts. He tithes. These are honorable practices, and we should resist the old Christian habit of turning the Pharisee into a simple caricature, rife with hypocrisy. Jesus is speaking within his own religious tradition about a temptation that appears wherever faithful people begin to treat their faithfulness as some kind of personal possession.

But the Pharisee's trouble is revealed in the shape of his prayer: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector." He is speaking to God, but his attention remains fixed upon everyone around him. His prayer requires comparison. He knows himself to be righteous because he has assembled a company of unrighteous people against whom his goodness may shine. The thief, the adulterer, and the tax collector have become scenery in the drama of his virtue.

But the tax collector stands at a distance and will not even lift his eyes toward heaven. Tax collectors were hardly innocent public servants misunderstood by their neighbors. They profited from an oppressive imperial system and were understandably hated for their exploitation of their own people. Yet this man doesn't make excuses, tell God that he is misunderstood, or that others are worse. He simply begs, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

Jesus declares that he alone of these two goes home justified – that is, made right before God. It's not that he has performed humility so beautifully that God rewards him for it. His humility would then become merely another spiritual achievement to display. He goes home justified because he has abandoned the attempt to justify himself. He places his life, without disguise, inside the mercy of God.

Back in O'Connor's waiting room, across from Mrs. Turpin, sits a young woman named Mary Grace who is home from college for the summer, her face marked by acne, her eyes seeming to smolder over the pages of a book called Human Development. Her mother apologizes for her disagreeable disposition, while Mrs. Turpin continues talking, utterly unaware of the fury gathering across from her. Mary Grace's gaze fixes upon her with an intensity Mrs. Turpin cannot understand, as though this stranger knows her in some ancient and personal way.

At last, Mrs. Turpin's "gratitude" rises to its full religious expression. She praises Jesus for having made her life and the world as they are:

If it's one thing I am, it's grateful. When I think who all I could have been besides myself and what all I got, a little of everything, and a good disposition besides, I just feel like shouting, "Thank you, Jesus, for making everything the way it is!" It could have been different!

And with that, the disturbed Mary Grace can bear no more. She hurls the book across the room, striking Mrs. Turpin above her left eye. (Do notice that O'Connor's humor can be merciless: "Human development" has arrived, and it smacks you on the head!). Having thrown the book, the troubled Mary Grace then lunges across the table and seizes Mrs. Turpin by the throat. In the commotion she also kicks Claud's already injured leg before the doctor and nurse restrain her and give her a sedative. But before she's taken away, Mrs.

Turpin leans toward her. She has somehow become convinced that this young woman knows something about her, something beyond ordinary knowledge. She waits for a message with the force of revelation.

And then the message comes. Mary Grace fixes on her with a terrible gaze and says, Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog. These shocking words strike their target, and so much so that Mrs. Turpin doesn't dismiss them as the ravings of a lunatic. She receives them with the terrible intuition that they have somehow been addressed to her from beyond, and she goes home hurt, indignant, and deeply unsettled.

Notwithstanding the deep bruise above her eye, her deepest wound is spiritual: Of all the people in that waiting room, why was she singled out? She is quick to point out that she is respectable. She works hard. She gives to the church. She helps people. Surely that message belonged to someone lower down the scale. Even in her humiliation, the old order – deeply rooted in her – remains intact.

Toward evening, she walks down to the hog pen, takes the hose from Claud, and waits until he is out of sight. Then she begins an argument with the Divine. Her anger rolls across the pasture, as though God himself had called her a hog! She readily rehearses her virtues, her labor, her generosity, all the evidence that God has picked the wrong woman to judge!

Understand that Mrs. Turpin's crisis reaches far deeper than the discovery that she has sometimes been unkind. Her entire identity has depended upon knowing where she stands in relation to other people. Her virtues, her property, her race, her religion, and her good sense have all been fitted together into a self that seems solid because so many others have been placed beneath it. But if God does not recognize that order, Mrs. Turpin no longer knows who she is! This is what grace sometimes feels like before it feels like freedom: the collapse of a constructed self we had mistaken for our own soul.

Finally, she shouts into the reddening sky, Who do you think you are?! The question crosses the pasture, the highway, and the cotton field. But then it returns to her clearly, "like an answer from beyond the wood." And she opens her mouth, but this time, no sound comes out of it. And the evening light deepens, and Mrs. Turpin looks down at the hogs gathered around the old sow, their bodies suffused with a strange red glow, and for a long moment she sees them differently. The creatures she had used as symbols of filth now appear to pulse with a secret life. The world held down beneath her judgment is becoming mysterious again.

Then she raises her eyes. Across the crimson sky, she sees a vast swinging bridge rising from the earth through a field of living fire, and a great throng of souls is moving toward heaven. At the front are the people Mrs. Turpin had spent her whole life placing at the

bottom: poor whites, and blacks, and those regarded as strange or damaged, all the sorts of people she had always dismissed. They move upward with a wild joy, “shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs” toward God!

And only at the rear of this grand procession come people she recognizes as her own kind – people like herself and Claud: responsible, churchgoing possessors of good order and common sense. They march with great dignity, and they alone remain perfectly on key. Yet their faces are shocked and altered because “even their virtues were being burned away.”

That may be the most brilliant and disturbing sentence in the whole story. O’Connor is not saying that generosity, responsibility, and discipline are worthless. She’s showing us how easily even our virtues can become servants of pride. We take what was given for the good of others and turn it into evidence for our own superiority. We begin to imagine that goodness somehow belongs to us as an achievement or a possession, rather than coming by grace.

But the vision does more than place the people at the bottom on top. It reveals that the whole brittle order of human worth must pass through the fire! Understand, Mrs. Turpin is still in the procession. God has not cast her away. The grace that exposes her is also the grace that refuses to leave her imprisoned within the narrow self she has built. What burns is not her humanity, but everything that has kept her from recognizing the full humanity of others. Grace gathers a procession we never could – and perhaps never would – arrange.

Now, people like us might hear this story and quickly offer our own version of the Pharisee’s prayer: “O God, we thank you that we are not like Mrs. Turpin.” But of course, there’s the trap. Our convictions may be different from hers. They may sound more educated, more inclusive, more politically informed. Yet we too can organize the world according to those who understand and those who don’t, those who are enlightened and those who are hopeless. The vocabulary may easily change, but the heart doesn’t.

Now, none of this means surrendering our moral discernment. Racism, cruelty, dishonesty, exclusion, and abuses of power must be called out and resisted. People who are threatened must be defended. Justice requires courage and truth-telling. But contempt is not courage, and it’s not the truth. It’s a weak parody of both. Contempt reduces the mystery of another human being to a prejudice, a vote, a slogan, or the worst thing they’ve done. It may give us the warm sensation of moral clarity while quietly rebuilding the same old order Jesus came to overturn. The moment I need another person subordinated to me, in order to know that I am in the right, the Pharisee’s prayer has become my own.

Christian worship calls us out of that arrangement. We confess our sin because mercy frees us to tell the truth without trying to defend ourselves. We don’t have to arrive before

God with evidence that we're better than the person beside us. We come with the tax collector's prayer, trusting that the mercy of God is wide enough to hold the truth about us and strong enough to change us.

The church is not a gathering of people who have successfully separated themselves from everyone who is wrong. It's a community in which our illusions of superiority are being patiently undone by grace. For a sermon series called Summer Saints, perhaps that's an appropriate place to end: Saints are people whose lives are being rearranged, again and again, within the order of grace – an order stranger and more beautiful than any we would make. Its living fire burns away the distinctions by which we secure our place, until we discover that belonging to God has never depended upon standing above anyone else.

At the close of the story, Mrs. Turpin turns off the water and walks slowly toward the house. The vision has faded, but the world has not simply returned to what it was before. In the woods, the crickets begin their evening chorus, and she hears in their sound the voices of souls climbing into the stars and shouting hallelujah – to the glory of God! Amen.