

The great southern writer Flannery O'Connor writes, *There is a moment in every story in which the presence of grace can be felt as it waits to be accepted or rejected, even if the reader may not recognize that moment.*

O'Connor is one of my favorite writers, composing stories that often fit the Southern Gothic genre. Southern Gothic is a writing style in which characters are deeply flawed, eccentric, or disturbing and are poverty stricken, involved in crime or violence, or are otherwise alienated from their surroundings (and of course, are set in the South.) One of my favorite stories by O'Connor is called *Revelation* and involves a woman named Mrs. Turpin who is in the waiting room at the doctor's office. Mrs. Turpin feels very morally superior to most people—especially the poor and outsiders; at the doctor's office she sits next to a woman who is there with her daughter Mary Grace. The two women have similar views about people and talk together about how important it is to be clean, hard-working and have a good disposition.

As she and the other woman continue to talk, Mary Grace—whose face is acne-covered and who seems to have a bad disposition—gets madder and madder, especially when the other woman begins talking about her. She ends up throwing her book at Mrs. Turpin, cutting her above the eye, and is subdued and sedated by the medical staff. Just before the sedative takes effect, Mrs. Turpin approaches her expecting an apology; but all Mary Grace says is, “go back to hell where you came from, you old wart-hog.” Mrs. Turpin is shaken by the encounter and is afraid it is a message from God.

Later, at home, she challenges God, asking how she could be “the good, upright Christian woman” that she sees herself to be, and a wart-hog from hell at the same time. She shakes her fist at God and cries, “who do you think you are?” at which point she has a vision. In her vision is a road to heaven and on the road is a line of people. At the front of the line are the people who she looks down upon from her lofty moral standpoint, all of those she considers unworthy of God's love: the poor, the unclean, those of other races. At the back of the line are herself, her husband and her proper Christian friends, who appear ‘shocked and altered’ that they should be at the back of the line.

Reading this story in the context of the opening quote by Ms. O'Connor, my response is that grace is a funny thing. For those of us in the Reformed tradition, grace is a gift from God, a freely given forgiveness of sins for those of us who believe in Jesus Christ. In the context of Ms. O'Connor's quote, grace is something else: it is a point at which God can intervene in a character's life, perhaps changing them or exposing them for who they are. In the story *Revelation* Mrs. Turpin's moment of grace is when it is revealed to her where she is in God's salvation story: she is right there in the stream of the redeemed entering heaven, but she is at the back of the line behind all of the ‘reprehensibles’ she has, in her own mind, deemed unworthy of being loved by God. Does this moment of grace change Mrs. Turpin? The question isn't answered at the end of the story and we are left to wonder. As we might wonder about our own place in God's salvation story.

We have another story before us that can teach us about moments of potential grace and how we make choices to accept it or reject it. It fits in the arc about Jesus' ministry in Galilee, which, over the last few weeks we've heard about: how Jesus has healed people and challenged the religious authorities; how in Nazareth he is rejected and powerless; how when he leaves there he regains his power and authority and is able even to share it with his disciples. He then sends them out into towns and villages in the area, spreading the good news as the mustard plant spreads its roots and sprouts new plants, becoming the largest of all plants with large branches on which birds can make their nests.

So much has been going on with Jesus that he comes to the attention of Herod, commonly known as “King” Herod though he rules only one quarter of the kingdom (and is thus really a “tetrarch” presumably with less power and authority than a king.) People were talking: who is this Jesus? Is he Elijah? Is he a prophet, like the prophets of old? Or is he, as Herod believes, John the Baptist—who Herod had beheaded, raised from the dead? We hear echoes here—or foreshadowing, really—or Jesus’ question to the disciples: who do you say that I am? We hear other echoes as well, of the transfiguration with its vision of Elijah and Moses; of the baptism of Jesus, when John says that he isn’t worthy to untie Jesus’ sandals—we had a sense then, didn’t we, of a passing on of power, a new thing that God was doing. And now Herod wants to know who this Jesus is, believing that Jesus is John the Baptist raised from the dead.

But Mark wants us to know that this isn’t who Jesus is. And so we have this story of John’s death, a gruesome story really with characters straight out of a Southern Gothic short story. We have Herod, the minor king with minor power who nonetheless lords it over his people with all of the trappings of the Roman occupation; we have Herodias, former wife of Philip, who has a grudge against John the Baptist; we have the daughter of Herodias, Salome, who is often pictured as a mature young woman but was probably a young girl; John the Baptist, who has chastised Herod for taking his brother’s wife; and a host of courtiers who were in attendance at Herod’s birthday party.

The scene is set: Herod and John are not friends, but Herod is fascinated by John; even though he has John arrested he likes to listen to John. It is Herod’s birthday and he has a lavish party, at which Salome dances for the king. Herod is charmed and so are the guests; everyone is having a good time and, perhaps as a way of showing off to his guests Herod promises the girl anything she wants, “even to ½ of my kingdom” he says.

Salome goes to her mother: *what should I ask for?* Herodias, seeing her opportunity, tells the girl to ask for John the Baptist’s head on a platter.

And here is our moment of potential grace. Will Herod keep his promise to Salome and have John killed? Will he allow the violence and power of his position to make his decision for him? Or will he assert that he has no reason to kill John and that taking John’s life for the sake of a promise would be wrong? In that moment Herod has the potential to be the hero instead of the goat by saving John’s life. But can we really expect that a member of the Roman ruling class, with his pride on the line, with his “honor” on the line—human honor before human beings—will make the choice of grace, the choice to protect John and set aside Salome’s request?

Of course, even though he is regretful he honors his promise to the girl, has John beheaded and presents John’s head on a platter to the girl, who takes it straight to Herodias for approval. It is a grotesque scene straight out of a gothic horror novel. Grace, it seems, can find no foothold here. In the final act of the scene we find John’s apostles carrying to body to the tomb.

We are fortunate in that most of us are not exposed to such grisly and gruesome scenes—except, perhaps, in books and movies. Even Flannery O’Connor’s Mrs. Turpin, with her self-righteous judgment of her fellow human beings, isn’t faced with a violent end. And yet, it’s her very moral superiority that is her downfall when she realizes that morality without love of God and neighbor is empty. In a similar way, when Herod sees Jesus and believes John has come back—perhaps to extract justice for an unjust death? (I can imagine Herod thinking)—perhaps he is aware as never before of the mistake he has made, of the opportunity he has lost in choosing his pride and his power over the life of a righteous man.

Where, then, do we find ourselves facing the potential of grace in our own stories? I think it is in things great and small; small things like faking an illness to get out of work, or keeping extra change we receive at the store instead of returning it; and big things like turning away from evil when we encounter it in the world. Drug addiction is akin to having a demon—so why aren't we out there doing everything we can do, spending every dime we have on treating it? Child pornography and human trafficking are evil—what are we doing or what are we *not* doing about it? Turning away refugees is, to me, unconscionable; especially when our scriptures tell us to treat strangers in our land as if they were our own people; and yet when faced with the potential of grace what do we do? What choice do we make in the face of good and evil, right and wrong? How long do we argue and parse and split hairs over cheap grace when we know in our hearts that all grace is costly but that all are worthy of grace? But that we must accept grace by accepting the way of Christ, the way that leads to sight for the blind, mobility for the lame, home for the stranger and justice for all who are denied justice.

Next week the disciples will return and the Galilean ministry will come to a close. John is dead at the hand of Herod and Jesus is stirring up all kinds of trouble the closer he gets to Jerusalem. Between now and then let's be aware of the potential of grace in our lives, choosing to live in grace as we are called to do by God, the God who loves us enough to lay grace in our paths like palm branches, who loves us enough to give us large mustard seed branches to nest upon. Let us recognize that grace doesn't make us special; it is loving God and loving his children that offers us the special opportunity of grace, through the amazing love of God. Amen.