

**THE DECISION TO CHANGE
ISAIAH 55:1-9; LUKE 13:1-9
MARCH 11, 2007—LENT THREE
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Flannery O’Conner, the southern Roman Catholic writer of piercing short stories who died prematurely in 1960 was on a mission: she wanted to turn upside down our notions of the religious life, the life of faith.

In her story, “A Good Man Is Hard To Find,” an escaped convict and his cohorts execute a non-stop talking grandmother as well as her surly daughter, the daughter’s lazy husband and their selfish children.

The murders occur matter-of-factly after the family, forced to the roadside with car troubles, encounters the criminals in the back hills of Georgia.

In a revealing comment before he does them in the ring-leader says in response to the grandmother’s incessantly telling him he is a good man, hoping to dissuade him from the deed, “I ain’t a good man but I ain’t the worst either. My daddy said I was a different breed of dog from my brothers and sisters.

“Daddy said some can live their whole life out without asking about it and others has to know why it is and this boy is one of the latters.”^[i]

In O’Conner’s beguiling way she tells us even this ruthless killer knows himself better and takes life more seriously than the members of an average family. This is vintage O’Conner. She jars awake our sleepy notions of character and conscience and shakes loose the scales of spiritual pride from our eyes.

Flannery O’Conner and Luke are cut out of the same cloth. Luke with his outcasts, prostitutes, criminals, and tax collectors, like O’Conner, reveals more about faithful living than many who in his day were deemed righteous.

Both writers agree: faith and faithful living are not about going through the motions of ritual, keeping a list of do’s and don’ts, or polishing your image.

Faith and faithful living begin—in today’s story and my hunch is for many of us if we think about it—with fear. Not fear that paralyzes, but fear that gets us on our knees and opens us up for a deep moral inventory. Fear that leads to what Socrates meant when he said “know thyself” and again “the unexamined life is not worth living.”

I’d like to consider with you today this matter of having our lives disrupted by fear then opened up for honest examination and finally offered up to God for God’s purposes.

First, disruption by fear: those followers of Jesus from Luke this morning are like deer caught in the headlights by the recent news of Pilate’s massacring the gentiles—a common event in those days; and by the deaths of the innocent bystanders in Siloam when the tower fell on them.

When someone close to us or when we ourselves suffer the first thing we do is start looking for reasons why. Humans have concocted all sorts of explanations including the idea that suffering is God paying us back.

In other words, if someone is suffering, even though that person may be innocent or the victim of circumstance, still that person's suffering is caused by their having sinned somewhere along the line. This is God getting even.

Sound familiar? Even those of us who claim to know better, says one colleague, react the same way. Calamity strikes and we wonder what we did wrong. We scrutinize our behavior, our relationships, our diets, our beliefs. We hunt for some cause to explain the effect, in hopes that we can stop causing it. What this tells us is that we are less interested in truth than consequences. What we crave, above all, is control over the chaos of our lives.

This formula for depravity is appealing because 1. It answers the riddle of why bad things happen to good people: they don't, it says. Bad things happen to bad people. 2. It punishes sinners right out in the open as a warning to everyone. 3. It gives us a God who obeys the laws of physics. For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.^[ii]

But when this theory of suffering is proposed to Jesus as the reason for the gentile massacre and the tower of Siloam deaths rather than intellectual debate he wants honest self examination. And that's the second point today.

“Unless you repent you too will all perish like they did.”

You see, while he's not concerned with the cause of suffering he's not afraid to tell us to take advantage of our fear either. To look it in the eye. To use it to reflect on our lives, take an accounting, make needed changes. This is a different picture of Jesus: Jesus the Judge found in Luke after a long litany of warnings to his followers about hypocrisy, money, obsession with food and clothing, and reading the signs of the times.

We don't really like Judge Jesus. Jesus the political revolutionary and liberator is fine. Jesus gentle, meek and mild welcoming the children doesn't offend. But Jesus the Judge whose razor sharp directives cut to the core helps us assess our living.

Like Flannery O'Connor's convict Jesus disrupts our comfortable living with a harsh saying, “unless you repent you will perish.”

You have to look hard I think to find a church or synagogue or mosque willing to be that direct and honest. Like the pastor of what some call a ‘new paradigm’ church—this one burgeoning and located in Southern California—who was asked to what he ascribed the phenomenal growth of his congregation. “I think,” he said, “we've got a generation of young adults that never had anybody look them in the eye and say to them, in love, ‘You really suck.’”^[iii]

I'm not sure I'd say it quite that way but I know what that pastor means. We've told one another for so long that we are basically good, that we're nice people who always mean well but know better, we now have a generation who know it's a lie and want the truth.

There are churches today, some on TV, that don't have a cross anywhere in sight or say the prayer of confession.

But humans are flawed. It's time to be honest, take an assessment, change.

Finally, thirdly the change we're to make is change that offers up our living for God's purposes. His appeal to his listeners is to change their hearts. "Do you think that because all these people suffered that they were worse sinners," he asks, "no I tell you. Unless you repent, you will all perish like they did."

This is not an intellectual argument. This is a warning. Use fear like a holy compass, Jesus says, and set out in God's new direction for your life.

In the parable of the fig tree the tree is not allowed to just take up space and use resources. The gardener pleads with the landowner to give him one more season to water and feed the tree to see if it produces. The imagery is simple and direct: just as the fig tree is not allowed to take up space and use resources, you and I are not here, as God's people, to take up space and use resources—without bearing fruit.

The problem is we live in an age of consumption. It's a buyers market. Corporations get us to buy more by satisfying every whim and fancy. But while consumers are supposed to take up space and use up resources, fig trees and God's people are not.

Consumer religion has nothing to do with the God of Israel. Consumer religion looks to the church or synagogue or mosque as only to meet personal needs. Consumer religion is big business: books, DVDs, political lobbies, speaking tours. Yet, a faith community is where I hear God's call and claim on my life.

Our national political and economic machines are driven by opinion polls and consumer surveys. But I wonder sometimes if we've lost the whole reason we're here, if our direction as society isn't endangering the planet.

Just yesterday the *New York Times* took evangelicals to task for not taking global warming seriously. It chided them a bit for placing a specific set of what they call moral issues at the top of their agenda: homosexuality and abortion for example.

"Humans busy thinking about their own lives," the editorial said, "have the power to destroy huge numbers of species, whole landscapes of habitat and, in fact, the balance of life on earth. The greatest moral issue of our time is our responsibility to the planet and to all its inhabitants—not just humans."^[iv]

If we are ever to get that and live in harmony with the earth and one another, Jesus was right, it's time to turn around lest we perish.

In conclusion, Flannery O'Connor's convict, before he kills the grandmother, lets her in on his reason: "Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead," he says "and He shouldn't have done it. He thrown everything off balance.

If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him; and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness."^[v]

That strikes me as a prophetic commentary for our time. On the one hand we are a society lost in its own self-focused, self-justifying consumption. On the other hand, we are still being given an invitation to "throw away everything" trusting God's mercy to allow another season for us to get it right.

I can't think of a more important time for members of three faith communities to gather not just for one day of caring a year but for a whole new way of being God's people together.

Isaiah, from which Rabbi Cohen read this morning, said it best: "Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them turn to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, for our God will abundantly pardon."

Such is the ancient living truth that gives individuals and congregations new life. Amen.

^[i] Flannery O'Conner, *A Good Man Is Hard To Find and Other Stories* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976) 28.

^[ii] Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Road* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1999) 69.

^[iii] William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, Vol 35, No. 1, January – March 2007, 44.

^[iv] The New York Times, March 10, 2007, "Evangelical Environmentalism" Editorial Page, A26.

^[v] O'Conner, 28.