

Right Between the Eyes

Flannery O'Connor tells the story of a middle aged southern woman who spent most of her life congratulating herself that she wasn't like so many of the people around her.

She rarely said it out loud, she rarely said it directly, it just oozed out of her; that sense of "Thank you Jesus, for not making me like them!"

One day, this lady is sitting in an over crowded doctor's office on a sweltering summer day.

A fat, acne scarred teenager is sitting directly across from her.

After listening to the lady ooze away for half an hour or so, after scowling at the lady every minute of that half hour or so, suddenly, and without warning, the teen throws the heavy book she's been reading, hitting our lady right between the eyes.

The teenager isn't done.

She leaps out of her chair, she's got the woman by the throat, crashing to the ground, leaning into our lady's ear, a voice that is deep and hard -- it whispers: "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog."

And son of a gun....

The lady, for the first time in her life, sees herself for what she has become after too many years of oozing self-congratulations; after too many years of holding her nose at what she was fond of calling white trash and worse.

She sees herself -- after being smacked right between the eyes.

It is, as the title of the story says, a Revelation.

And it changes her.

Jesus, back in his hometown, is today the fat, pimply-faced teenage girl as he too smacks his neighbors right between the eyes, hoping that they too will come to see themselves as they are, and in the seeing, be changed.

Today is homecoming day for Jesus.

He's been out and about doing wonderful things, and the coconut wireless is going crazy about healed outcasts and demons run out of town, water turning to wine and jaw dropping wisdom coming from the mouth of this hometown boy.

They expect, it seems, that Jesus will in turn sing their praises, or at least congratulate them for being on the inside track.

He doesn't, and the crowd itself becomes something like a wart hog from hell, as they try to bum rush him off the cliff – something we will see again in just a few weeks, when the cheering crowds of Palm Sunday turn into the jeering mobs of Good Friday.

The gospel for us today is a stark reminder that, wish as we might, folks today aren't much different from folks back then when it comes to Jesus smacking us between the eyes -- so that we too might come to see ourselves as we are -- and change.

It's why we gather here week in and week out.

Our natural inclination is to avoid looking at ourselves, to thank God for not making us like all those other folks, to expect the special treatment that comes from, after all, showing up here, in these pews, week in and week out.

Except with Jesus, it just doesn't work that way.

One fellow defines the Mass, our liturgy, our Sunday service, as "an attempt to remedy humanity by weekly gathering a potential lynch mob and habitually disarming them as they look upon the One whom they have murdered."

A sobering description of what we are doing here; one the church agrees with, as every Palm Sunday the entire congregation is called upon to yell out with one voice: "Crucify him!"

Jesus has no illusions about us, and his call to us to follow him is a call to drop the illusions that we have about ourselves.

And so Jesus today echoes John the Baptist who, just weeks ago, told the curious that God can make children of Abraham out of stones; with Jesus

today telling his neighbors that this hometown boy doesn't favor his homies: the hard work of transformation comes to roost on everyone's front porch.

That transformation starts not with harsh physical discipline, like our Buddhist friends practice; it doesn't require rigorous fasts like our Muslim friends engage in; it begins with a surrender of ego, of "me-first" and with a relinquishing of comparisons, a relinquishment of control.

It is, in short, a matter of letting go -- so that in the letting go, God may have God's way with us.

The trouble we get into, the emotions that create the murderous mob, all come from the oh so human REFUSAL to do just that: to let go -- so that in the letting go -- we might become who we truly are.

Often, it takes a smack right between the eyes to get fists to unclench, judgments to cease, arrogance to surrender.

That's what Jesus is up to.

Several months ago, the Dalai Lama was in Honolulu.

You and I saw the news coverage, and it was blissful and serene.

Everywhere His Holiness went, it seems, peace and calm entered the room.

It's not that way with Jesus.

When Jesus shows up, there's usually pandemonium!

Because Jesus goes deep, to the way things, to the way we, really are, for it is in the depths that we slowly begin to see.

A few of us are editing a book about the struggles of the Hansen's disease patients at Hale Mohalu that happened right here in the late 1970s and the early 1980s.

As many of you know, Hale Mohalu was a home away from home for Kalaupapa patients who had to be in Honolulu for medical treatment.

Many of the patients had been taken from their families years earlier, some as small children, and relocated to Kalaupapa - a place of exile.

After years of intentional neglect, the State, in 1978, decided to close Hale Mohalu and relocate the patients to a hospital, so that a sports complex could be built on the site.

One section of the book deals with the contrast between all of the official niceties shown to the late Father and now Saint Damian, who gave his life in service to those in Kalaupapa, and the miserable way the same government leaders were treating the children of Damian, the patients who lived at Hale Mohalu.

On April 15, 1978, during the annual Damian Day parade, there were high school bands, the governor was there, dancers and music and even the Roman Catholic Bishop; all together to celebrate the legacy and service of Damian.

The Hale Mohalu patients came as well, with signs protesting the closing of their home at Hale Mohalu.

The newspaper reports that "just as the audience was beginning to leave, a red-faced Damian High School mother stalked up to [patient leader Bernard] Punakai`a and said:

"The Damian planning committee worked for months on this celebration and your group disrupted it. It was in very poor taste! You're just trying to push your issue, and it has nothing to do with this event!"

Honolulu Advertiser, 4/18/78.

The Discovery Channel the other night talked about seeing, as in vision, as in light.

They noted that we see only what we call "visible light," and yet, there are a myriad of other forms of light that are invisible to us: ultra violet, infrared, gamma, and that, if all the forms of existing light made up a belt wrapped around the whole earth, what we are able to see makes up only one inch on that belt!

The reason I think that Jesus keeps hitting us between the eyes is so that we can remember, every day, that what we think we know, what we think we see, is only a tiny part of what is Really Real.

That Damian High School mom, I'm sure, worked really hard to make a successful Damian Day celebration.

But she was so focused on her one inch of reality, that she missed the bigger reality that the man they were honoring with bands and balloons and cupcakes was in fact, standing right before her eyes: that day, Bernard **was** Damian.

I don't blame the irate mom.

Facing ourselves so that we might have the eyes to see the larger Reality sends Jeremiah today doing all he can to bow out of the task: "Thanks for the invite God, but I'm too young!"

Who can't relate to Jeremiah?

"Thanks for the invite God, but I'm too busy, too tired, too old, or just plain too scared."

It is here that Paul reassures us that for all of our excuses, all of our fears, the God who is nearer to you than your breath need not be feared.

Paul assures us that God isn't rude or irritable or resentful or nitpicking.

To the contrary, God is determined to have each and every one of us, and so brings each of us face to face with ourselves within the embrace that is love: the love that "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

To follow Jesus is to do our best, one day at a time, to put on the cloak of love, and to live it to the best of our ability.

CS Lewis tells the story of a married couple who have died and they find themselves on the frontier of heaven.

The husband has always had a hard time forgetting old slights, forgiving past wrongs.

His wife, on the other hand, seemed to be able to let go of such things.

As they stand at heaven's edge, the husband can't help himself but complain and whine and pick at old resentments.

As he does, he begins to get smaller – a fact his wife notices immediately.

She begins to plead with him to look at the beautiful vista just waiting for them, pleading with him to let go of the trivia that has always consumed him.

But the more she pleads, the louder he complains, and the smaller he becomes – while she – in her reaching out to him in love, finds herself growing larger and larger – until at the end, he has become so small that he disappears into the tiniest of holes – the hole that contains all of hell – which she, despite her love for him, cannot enter, because hell is too small for those who love.

When Jesus smacks us between the eyes, when we willingly take up our own crosses in love, vistas that were once hidden suddenly open; understanding that was once absent suddenly blooms; and a peace that passes understanding becomes our companion on this, our journey, into the Kingdom of God.

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