

Sin can be very subtle in that often, it can sneak up on us, and we can become oblivious to its presence in our lives, all the while noticing it in other people. As such, how easy it can be to notice the splinter in our brother's eye and not the wooden beam in our own. And while God's mercy is always there for us, even if we might not admit it, sometimes subconsciously a person can begin to think that there might not be anything wrong with them, and that God's mercy is really needed for others but less so for themselves.

A woman who was quite aware of this was the Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor, who died due to the effects of lupus at the young age of 39.

Miss O'Connor wrote two novels and a number of short stories. She attended Georgia State College for Women and then the Iowa Writer's Workshop where she earned a Master's in fine arts in 1947. Her writing was clearly superior to others; fellow writers at Iowa recalled workshop sessions where fellow students would fall silent after her stories were read, but she never let it inflate her ego. Her first novel, "Wise Blood" was published in 1953.

Many of her characters are rural Southerners, and many struggle with pride, being quick to see others faults, but seeing nothing wrong with themselves.

One of her more famous short stories is "A Good Man is Hard to Find." It tells of a man named Bailey taking the family from Georgia to Florida for a summer vacation, but posing a problem on this is his mother, referred to simply as "the grandmother" in the story. She wants him to drive to East Tennessee instead, where she has "connections." She argues that his children have never been there, and shows him an article in the Atlanta Journal Constitution about an escaped murderer in Florida, implying that it would be dangerous to go there. She also sneaks her cat in a basket into the car on the back seat. Bailey also finds her sitting in the car in her best outfit with a ostentatious hat; she says that if she should die in an accident along the road, she wants people to see her corpse and know that she is a "lady." During the trip, she talks incessantly, and when the family stops at a diner she continues talking, this time to the owner of the diner.

When they are back on the road, she tells the kids about a mysterious plantation house nearby that has a secret panel that she remembers from childhood. Getting the grandkids to cause the father to take a side trip, on the way she realizes that she has the wrong house. But she doesn't own up to it. Instead she involuntarily kicks her feet when she realizes her mistake, bumping the cat who jumps up from the hidden basket onto Bailey's neck, who then flips the car over. Who should come along but The Misfit, the escaped murderer driving with two other armed men. When she starts talking again, identifying him as the escapee, he takes the lives of the family. At the very end of the story, when the grandmother is talking to him about Jesus, she touches his shoulder having said "why you're one of my babies, you're one of my own children." The Misfit then takes her life, saying, "she would of been a good woman if there had been somebody to shoot her every minute of her life." In this, he's saying he noticed she

was trying to preach the Gospel to him, but it only happened because her life was threatened. According to him, if she had lived her life held up at gunpoint, she might have lived a more righteous life.

At first it might seem depressing. But the theme of grace, conversion, but also of sin that goes unnoticed is a theme throughout her writing. Her take on humanity is that for all our evil, we have been found by God to be worth dying for. As she put it, she was a "Hillbilly Thomist." She wasn't afraid to write about violence because that's the reality of the world - as she put it "the stories are hard because there is nothing harder or less sentimental than Christian realism." Robert Coles, the author and child psychiatrist and Harvard professor said of O'Connor "she is stalking pride." Miss O'Connor saw the world as it was, through the eyes of God, and held that lack of faith is blindness and what brings on the refusal to embrace God's vision is pride. The grandmother was one of many characters who had pride in her work. O'Connor's characters are all afflicted by pride: Intellectual sons and daughters who live to set the world, primarily their ignorant parents, aright; social workers who neglect their own children, self-satisfied unthinking "good people" who rest easily in their own arrogance; the fiercely independent who will not submit their wills to God or anyone else if it kills them. And sometimes, it does.

The pride is so intense that it takes an extreme event to shatter it. The violence that her characters experience shocks them into seeing that they are no better than the rest of the world, that they too are poor, in need of redemption.

Yes, her stories had extreme violence in them, but she also knew that the blindness in the modern world was so deeply engrained and habitual, that extreme measures were required to startle people. As she put it: "I am interested in making up a good case for distortion as I am coming to believe it is the only way to make people see."

This week in our readings, we see the themes that Miss O'Connor expressed so well in her writings: namely that of our blindness to sin through pride, but also of how God's love will always triumph, but we have to have the right understanding of it and also be open to receiving it, as sometimes that love involves pain.

Our first reading from Chronicles this week is the story of the destruction of the Temple and the Exile in Babylon, which took place around 600 BC and lasted 70 years. What had happened is the people had fallen into pride. They weren't faithful to God. The prophets come and they ignore them. With some humility, they could have opened their eyes and seen that yes, they were chosen, yes they were loved by God, but they had not responded to that love appropriately.

We can be like them, because pride is always a temptation. As one preacher, Fr. Richard Conrad, a Dominican priest and professor at Blackfriars, Oxford, preaching on this week's reading put it, "The temptation to pride is insidious. Some Christian writers, some Christian artists, have implied: "We are not like those people of old, whom the Prophets told off. God rejected them, and rightly so. He called us in their place, and made us faithful to him. We Christians are better than those Jews, so God will never

have reason to reject us.” If we have such thoughts, we must re-read the Scriptures, and ask why the Liturgy gives us readings like today’s.

God does not *make* us faithful; He gives us the gift of faith and it requires a response. The problem is through pride, from the grandmother in the story to the ancient Israelites who saw nothing wrong with themselves, pride can make us complacent. It can make us judge others and see ourselves as better than them. We can think “hey, I’ve done enough, I’m pretty good, all is well.” Well, all is not well with us. The grandmother in the story wasn’t all that bad of a person. But she hijacked her sons vacation, talked about herself and her desires constantly, and was completely blind to her sins. Like her, as she put on her best clothes for the ride so in the event of death she would be known as a “lady,” we can put a lot of energy into the outside, but not the inside. Pride is one of those things you rarely hear confessed, but it’s worth thinking about. So consider asking yourself the following questions (taken from an examination of conscience):

Do I refuse or resist admitting my weaknesses? Do I dwell on the failings of others? Do I judge/condemn others, in my thoughts or words? Do I rank myself better than others or demand certain treatment because of my “status”? Do I harbour hatred for another? Do I refuse to learn from others or reject their opinions, especially when they disagree with me? Am I stubborn? Do I Refuse to admit I am wrong or to accept that another person has a better idea? Am I arrogant? Do I hold others in contempt? Do I assume I am right and others are wrong without ensuring I actually understand them or their ideas?

With vanity, Am I overly concerned about what others think of me? Have I allowed this to influence my actions? Do I lie or exaggerate to make myself look good? Have I wasted undue time and money on clothes and appearance? Am I discontent with my lowly position, or have I resented the role that Christ asks of me? Do I experience frequent anxiety regarding how I am perceived? Do I allow this to influence my actions? Am I cowardly in when confronted with doing or saying something that should be said or done because of my concern for the perception of others? Do I cling to my own perception of myself instead of allowing others to help me understand how I really am?

As we think about these things in our lives, it’s also worth looking at the consequence of our actions, as ways that can jolt us to respond to the love of God. The grandmother in the story and other characters of O’Connor such as Ruby Turpin, the Southern woman who feels superior to persons of color and those she calls “white trash” from her story “Revelation” change only after some type of painful experience. Now of course there are many types of suffering that are no fault at all of the person who deals with them. But sometimes pride can lead us to blame God for everything - like Job who is angry (understandably) at God, but then God’s response is essentially who do you think you are, where were you when I created everything and did all of this, and Job is reduced to silence. Job also emerges a stronger man. Now his suffering was not through any sin on his part. But so often suffering in our lives is brought about because of our sin or neglect. And the sin that’s at the root cause of things like addictions, destroyed marriages, ruined friendships or even some health problems, sometimes when a person

hits rock bottom, they then emerge a better person. In Chronicles, the Temple is destroyed and the people are exiled. And this isn't because God is having a bad day or angry like we get emotionally angry. Rather, it is a purification and a cleansing. The suffering occurs and is allowed by God but is still all part of His deep love for us. Sometimes when we are suffering, rather than blaming God or giving up, we can look at what is going on and learn from it and use it as it was for the ancient Israelites, as a means of a cleansing and a new beginning.

Now at this point you might be thinking well this is pretty depressing. I have sin I haven't even thought of, and that sin can lead to suffering. Here's where it ends though: redemption. The Israelites go into captivity, but God uses another king to lead them out of captivity, King Cyrus. And our King, Jesus Christ, ultimately leads us out of captivity to sin too. As we hear in the Gospel: "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." God is always faithful to His covenant, and He will always lead us home. But that grace requires a response. In "Revelation," at the end of the story Ruby has a vision of redeemed souls going to heaven. But in that vision, she and the "proper" white Christians are at the back of the crowd, while in the front are those she considers unworthy of God's love. In her vision, she sees her face and her "proper" Christian friends faces as shocked and altered. The point is she does go to heaven, but not in the direct way she imagined because she needed to work with God and open herself up to becoming a better person. That is not just the point of Lent but indeed is the point of our journey - it's a process, and learning how to respond to God's love takes time. It takes introspection. Sometimes it takes pain. But ultimately it will lead to Easter if we are honest about who we really are - a sinner, yes, but also someone who is so loved by God. But that love isn't there to just make us "pretty good" or "not all that bad of a person" but perfect.

In writing about Flannery O'Connor in "Our Sunday Visitor," Amy Welborn writes of visiting her grave in Milledgeville, Georgia, that it's rather out of the way. A caretaker's rundown pickup truck took her from one end of the cemetery to the other, and he remarked to her "they still don't want to claim her, do they," reflecting on the complete lack of directions to the grave of one of the 20th century's most revered and discussed writers. She goes on to reflect: "You nod in agreement and wonder who placed the broken plastic olive-colored Madonna above the name on the flat marble slab. And if you are finally conscious now of your place in the O'Connor universe, you will know to brace yourself; for any moment, grace may strike — and, no question, it will hurt." That's such a key point for our faith. Grace is amazing. But grace can cause hurt too, because it can hurt to open our eyes to the fact that we have flaws, and just saying "I believe" is not a one-way ticket to heaven. God though in His love reaches out to us time and time again, redeeming us, and saying through the Son and the Spirit, let me show you who you can become. So let's open our eyes to the good and the bad, and remember that with humility, trust and perseverance, like our ancestors we too can emerge from exile where sin leads us to the heavenly kingdom.