

“Saved”

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

08 October 2023

Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Texts: Romans 1:16-17

John 8:1-11

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”

~ Romans 1:16

Prayer

Living God,

Speak to us this morning

For our deepest desire is to hear your word,

So rather than having things our way,

We learn to be a church that follows the Way of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

*“Revelation”*¹ – one of the last short stories Flannery O’Connor wrote before her death in August of 1964 is unquestionably one of her finest and also one my favorite among all her pieces. Most of the story takes place in the waiting room at a doctor’s office. It is there that Flannery O’Connor introduces us to the main character, Mrs. Ruby Turpin, whom the writer describes as a very large, Southern woman who prides herself on being a **“respectable, hard-working, church-going,”** kind Christian, married to a good man. No one seems to pick up on the judgmental, elitist, self-righteous, arrogant, and intolerant worldview that rages underneath the veneer of Mrs. Turpin’s well-mannered politeness except for a college student named Mary Grace. It is as if she were the only one in the waiting room who could somehow tune into Mrs. Turpin’s innermost thoughts.

There is no question that Mrs. Ruby Turpin has a very high opinion of herself. As soon as she walked into the doctor’s office, she began to mentally put all the other clients in their “proper categories.” And she thanks Jesus quietly and profusely for not being Black or white-trashy or poor or ugly or just common or for not having bad skin. In fact, the moment she set her eyes on Mary Grace sitting next to her mother, Mrs. Turpin wrote her off as a fat girl with a pitiful face **“blue with acne”** who wore **“Girl Scout shoes and heavy socks.”**

The casual racist and insensitive chit-chat that went on for a while between her mother and Mrs. Turpin infuriated Mary Grace. She tried to focus on the book entitled *“Human Development”* that she was reading for one of her classes at Wellesley College until Ruby Turpin burst out in a smug and self-congratulatory prayer, thanking Jesus out loud for giving her a little bit of everything and for making everything in such a way that benefitted people like her and her husband. In a moment of unmitigated and fully-fledged

Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

outrage, Mary Grace hurls her textbook at Mrs. Turpin striking her on the brow and, before anyone could stop her, she lunges forward and begins to choke Ruby Turpin. Mary Grace's mother and a nurse manage to pull her away and hold her down long enough for the doctor to sedate her. Looking directly into the girl's eyes as if hoping for some kind of revelation, Mrs. Turpin asks, "**What you got to say to me?**" And it is at this point that we hear one of the great zingers in the story. "**'Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog,' [Mary Grace] whispered. Her voice was low but clear. Her eyes burned for a moment as if she saw with pleasure that her message had struck its target.**"

The Turpins go back home right away, but Ruby Turpin cannot get Mary Grace's words out of her mind. She is upset that among all the other people in the waiting room, she was singled out as the old wart hog from hell. Later on, while she is hosing down the hogs on her farm, Mrs. Turpin gets angry with God. "**What do you send me a message like that for?... Why me?**" She hadn't realized yet that she had been hit by saving grace. Right about that time, Mrs. Turpin has a vision that opens her eyes to a different reality and truth. She sees "**a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire.**" To her surprise, the vast horde of souls climbing toward heaven are led by the people she has been looking down upon all her life. She sees "**whole companies of white-trash... bands of [Blacks] in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics**" going ahead of the respectable and well-adjusted religious people like her who always had a little of bit of everything and considered themselves much more deserving of God's blessings and heaven than everybody else.

Although the title of the short story is "*Revelation*," it is clear that Flannery O'Connor hoped that we would read in its lines something of the mysterious grace of God that can and often do strip humankind of our grand illusions of moral, cultural, racial, gender, economic, and religious superiority to offer us the chance to live lives worthy of the people God created us to be. Anne Lamott was onto something when she said: "**I do not at all understand the mystery of grace – only that it meets us where we are and does not leave us where it found us.**"² For O'Connor though, there was never any doubt that grace takes human beings to a deeper awareness of our addiction to being less than our true selves. Our meditation on Genesis, chapter 1 two weeks ago, reminded us of the human vocation to be bearer of God's image and likeness in the world, but we keep missing the mark of the true self, of the very best "I" God places deep inside each one of us. This is by the way what the Church calls "sin."

This language of sin that we continue to speak in the Church may sound too accusatory, fault-finding and even out of place in our post-Christian, post-modern world. Especially, in a society like ours where people are outward-focused and remain alarmingly out of touch with their inner selves, there is a tendency to measure ourselves in terms of our possessions, achievements, social standing, jobs, education, and external life and neglect to pay attention to our interior selves that hold our true God-given identity and worthiness. And so, we keep on living without giving much thought to whom we really are in our core self. We keep giving our ego total control over our loves, passions, desires, our

fears and our dreams. Like Ruby Turpin, we put most of our energy into creating a self that we hope stands out when compared to others. We define our own self-worth against those things people around us have or do not have. We go on denying that we share the same humanness with people we have been taught to avoid, dislike, discriminate, judge, and condemn. We keep sinning, missing the mark. As the Apostle Paul put it in his Letter to the Romans, sin keeps sabotaging our best intentions. We keep doing the bad we do not want to do instead of the good we would very much like to do.³

The English Christian philosopher and writer G.K. Chesterton pointed out that sin is an observable fact in human life and history. We can see it in the streets.⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, the great American theologian of the twentieth century, noted that “***the doctrine of original sin is the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith.***”⁵ Even if the language of sin makes some of us uncomfortable, you and I know that humankind keeps missing the mark. Next Sunday, our youth group, confirmation class, and I hope most of you will join our neighbors from Beth Elohim Synagogue in the Walk against Hate. Faith communities are coming together to stand against the wave of anti-Semitic incidents that are happening of all places at the High School. You would think that young people who know the history of the twentieth century, the two World Wars, the concentration camps, the Holocaust, 9/11, the consequences of religious intolerance and racial discrimination in this country would do everything possible to avoid the mistakes of the past, but we are still missing the target. We still do not know how to nurture and grow our foundational being, our true self, the image of God in us and value the human sameness we share with each other. This is why humans live with a “***homesickness***” that Franciscan priest Richard Rohr calls “***a gnawing desire for ‘ourselves.’***”⁶

In Flannery O’Conner’s story, it is an action of grace that opens Mrs. Turpin’s eyes to her true inner self. She is able to see that her arrogance, prejudice, racism, moralism and self-righteousness are only symptoms of a much deeper problem. She is allowing the personal identity she fabricated along with all the boundaries of her own making to suppress her vocation as a human being to love God and love the world. And I would say that the climax of the story happens when God comes and gives Mrs. Turpin a vision of all the people on the stairway to heaven that, we hope, changes her life. In the Christian tradition, the word we use for that unexpected moment of grace that rescues Ruby Turpin from her mistaken identity is “salvation.”

If you go around town asking people, “*what is Christianity all about?*” It is very likely that the answer most of them will provide is based on a formulaic “plan of salvation” that took hold of Evangelical Christianity and became imbedded in the wider culture – If you confess your sins and accept Jesus as your personal Savior, you will be forgiven and your soul will live happily in heaven after you die. For a significant number of Christians around the world, salvation means an eternal life with God far from the reality of this world, which the Bible says God created and declared good. In this view of salvation, Jesus is a means to an end. He dies on the cross to forgive our sins and build that stairway to heaven for

Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

those who are saved. The only difficulty with this prevalent understanding of salvation is that it is not biblical.

The First Testament does not say a word about the soul leaving the body and this world to inhabit a celestial dimension where God is for all eternity. Our own Christian Scriptures never connect heaven with the notion of a place of unending bliss where the saved go after death. There is that beautiful passage in the Gospel of Luke, which we read every Maundy Thursday, where Jesus promises the criminal hanging on the cross that on that same day the two of them will be in paradise together.⁷ But in this context, “paradise” is not the ultimate destination of the human soul. It is only a beautiful and peaceful garden where the dead wait for the new heaven and a new earth that John envisions in the Book of Revelation.

Jesus does talk a lot about being saved in the gospels. Time and again, he reassures those he meets that their faith has made them well or has healed them or has made them whole or has saved them. It is clear that in Jesus’ own lips, salvation means more than confessing sins, dying and going to a nicer place than this planet. Rather than inviting us to imagine a stairway from earth to heaven, Jesus, through his birth, his life, and the resurrection, gives us a more robust vision of salvation that is very much grounded in the two Testaments. And, of course, when we look at the Bible as a whole, we see that the point of the Biblical story is not to show us how humans get to their eternal heavenly bliss but to tell the story of how God creates the world out of love and chooses to dwell with us, among us and in us. This is the message we hear in John 3:16, ***“This is how much God loved the world: God gave God’s Son, the one and only Son... so that no one need be destroyed, but by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life.”***⁸

God’s ultimate purpose for humankind is a full life; it is restoring us to our very best “I;” it is rescuing us from being wounded, hurt, and destroyed by our own tendency to miss the mark of our true selves and sin. In Jesus Christ, God came to us, hoping that we would understand that salvation means rescuing something in us that is a big mess and needs to be better; something that is hurting and needs to be healed; something that is broken and needs to be mended; something that is lost and needs to be found. This Divine movement toward us through creation, prophets, the Law and Christ is what we call grace because it is a gift of love from our Maker to all humanity and to all creation.

Christians tend to forget that we are all saved by God’s amazing grace. On the Protestant side of Christianity, especially during the month of October, we love to lift up with great pride the revelation that changed Martin Luther’s life and set the Reformation into motion – we are saved by faith alone in Jesus Christ because of God’s grace. But, there is always a little of Ruby Turpin in good religious folk and churches often do push people into categories of worthiness and attach conditions to the faith – the faith that makes us aware that what defines the God who came in Christ and still comes to us through the Holy Spirit is not control, but love; not condemnation, but mercy; not accusation, but forgiveness; not hellfire, but salvation.

I like to believe that the early church preserved the story of the woman caught in adultery because you and I have to be reminded of what happens when religious people like you and me lose touch with our best God-given “I” and turn God’s Law of love and grace into instruments of abuse, shame, and punishment. This is indisputably one of the saddest sins of our religion, that is when people wield the Bible to inflict pain, stoke up prejudice, spread hate and cause unnecessary suffering.

Jesus knew that the scribes and Pharisees were using the woman as a legal prop in their attempt to get him to say something that might go against the Law of Moses. It must have pained Jesus to see those men, those elders, those religious leaders so blinded by their animosity toward him that they were willing to bend the Law of God, which was meant to bring people closer to God and one another, to incriminate him. Their sense of moral superiority and self-righteousness made them completely indifferent to the woman’s wellbeing. Her life did not matter. So, Jesus does something for which they were not prepared. Jesus makes them face their own serious sin. Those religious leaders are not abiding by the Law either. In fact, they are very intentionally flouting what Moses commanded in the law, which required both the man and the woman to face the death penalty together.⁹ However, rather than shaming the scribes and Pharisees as they were doing to the woman, Jesus gives them a chance to get in touch with their true selves, ***“Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”*** I wonder if that was a moment of salvation for those religious leaders who dropped the stones and walked away one by one.

There is no question that physical, emotional and spiritual salvation is what the woman experienced. Jesus does not condemn her, instead he only asks the woman to claim her identity as a child of God, as a bearer of God’s image, as a human being created to live a full and good life. When he said, ***“Go your way, and from now on do not sin again,”*** Jesus was not just telling the woman to never commit adultery again, he was helping her understand that adultery was a symptom of a way of life that was preventing her from experiencing the gift of God’s saving love that wanted nothing more than to give her a whole, meaningful and lasting life of hope and dignity. And here again, we stumble on a moment of pure grace.

In our Bible study last Wednesday, not one single person thought that Christians today, especially Evangelical and fundamentalist Christians, would drop those sinful stones of judgment, intolerance, bigotry, and hatred. And that is why it is so important that we know the meaning of sin and salvation and grace. Humankind and certainly the Church need people who know about the mysterious grace of God that saves the world through compassionate love. As Bryan Stevenson, the founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama, said in an interview with Christa Tippett, ***“at a time when it’s just become so easy to judge people in these really harsh and extreme ways. And even people of faith have been pulled into this habit, this instinct for condemning the others who don’t share their beliefs and views; for reducing people to their worst act... some of us are going to have to be stone catchers.”***¹⁰

Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

My prayer is that you, I and our church may always allow God's Spirit to guide our lives so we may be our very best selves; stone catchers who love God and the world because we know beyond doubt who we are and whose we are.

Several years ago, while I was walking along Copacabana Beach a young American man with a Brazilian interpreter by his side approached me and asked if I wanted to accept Jesus as my Savior. I smiled and kept on walking. They pushed a tract into my hand and encouraged me to read the sinner's prayer so I could be saved and have a place in heaven. I never read the prayer, but as I was writing this sermon, I asked myself what I would say to God today in my own version of the sinner's prayer and then this song popped into my head. As you hear these words, I hope you may reflect on the beauty of grace that saves our lives and the lives of the Ruby Turpins, the angry religious leaders, and all the sinners like us in the church and the world.

***"Help! I need somebody, [and it's you, God]
 Help! Not just anybody, [it is you, God]
 Help! You know I need someone, [it's you, God]
 Help!
 When I was younger, so much younger than today,
 I never needed anybody's help in any way,
 But now these days are gone and I'm not so self-assured,
 Now I find I've changed my mind, I've opened up the doors.
 Help me if you can, I'm feeling down,
 And I do appreciate you being 'round, [God]
 Help me get my feet back on the ground,
 Won't you please, please help me?
 And now my life has changed in oh so many ways,
 My independence seems to vanish in the haze,
 But ev'ry now and then I feel so insecure,
 I know that I just need you, [God] like I've never done before.
 Help me, [help us, save us, we know only you can, O God.]" Amen.***

¹ Flannery O'Connor in The Complete Stories, "Revelation," pp. 488-508 [Kindle edition].

² Anne Lamott in Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith, location 1542 [Kindle edition].

³ Romans 7:19.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton in Orthodoxy, "The Maniac," Chapter II [<https://www3.nd.edu/~afreddos/courses/439/orthodoxy2-3.htm>]

⁵ Quoted by Daniel C. Richardson in The Christian Century, "From the Editors," 25 June 2014 [<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2014-06/unoriginal-sin>].

⁶ Richard Rohr in Falling Upward, loc. 170 [Kindle edition].

⁷ Luke 23:43.

⁸ John 3:16 [the Message].

⁹ Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22.

¹⁰ On Being with Christa Tippett in Finding the Courage for What's Redemptive, with Bryan Stevenson, 03 December 2020, [<https://onbeing.org/programs/bryan-stevenson-finding-the-courage-for-whats-redemptive/>].