

Epiphany II year C 2019

So I'm on an English major roll these days... so I beg your indulgence... again. Maybe it's because I'm teaching a course in the Odyssey program right now at the University of South Alabama. Some of you are enrolled. The course is entitled *Flannery O'Connor and her Kin*. We'll be reading some selected stories of Flannery O'Connor, and we'll also read some of Cormac McCarthy. Both of these writers are of the so-called Southern Gothic genre... a term coined by some nameless literary critic back in the day. 'Southern Gothic' according to the experts is a style that relies on the 'grotesque', a style that finds meaning in the darker, and sometimes sinister elements of the life experience. The genre emerged in the post-Civil War South; in a landscape in which its inhabitants had tasted bitter defeat; and it matured full blown in the early and mid-twentieth century. But the term Southern Gothic was not meant as a compliment. It was meant as a negative characterization of the Southern writer whining about the decaying grandeur of the American South; the poverty; the accusations of racism; the shame of slavery. One critique was that it was self-indulgent, and that it exaggerated the extremes of the human experience. I beg to differ of course. Any Southerner knows that life is 'exaggerated' by nature. These so-called Gothic Southern writers have

weathered the test of time. O'Connor, Faulkner, Percy, Williams among many others have written some of the finest literature in American letters.

So it was with delight that I began reading Flannery O'Connor again. It's like catching up with an old friend... like continuing an almost forgotten conversation from the past... but the conversation still fresh and alive and so very rich. It's been years since I've read her, and I'm thinking again about what makes her so formidable, what puts her among the greats of American Literature... She is, for example, adept at mimicking in her writing the way we speak in the south; she can ascribe mythic proportion to a red dirt road, or even a common chinaberry tree. She excels at creating characters that are both broken and heroic; shamed but resilient; and despite her precision and economy of language her work is rich with pathos and emotion.... But what makes her great, and what makes all great writers great... is that they know that at the heart of a great story; just as it is at the heart of life itself... is the mystery of transformation; that life is a process of becoming and change; alchemical change, as it were, improvised in the mythic imagination of God and our own... and transformation is unruly, lavishly unpredictable, sometimes grotesque. Since the beginning, before memory recollects, we continually pass from death in its many disguises only to be transformed for new life; the old passes away and becomes the new; suffering

becomes joy. If we're paying attention, we know that life is not a prescribed linear order at all, but a field of infinite possibility; that despite a seemingly random existence there is beauty and truth, and connection... and such transformation is not without pain. It's like birth... painful, mysterious... amazing.... and that brings us to the Gospel assigned for the second Sunday of the Epiphany, the famous story of the miracle at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. John refers to it as the first of the signs of Jesus being the anointed of God; the first of the signs of the coming of God's reign in earth. And thus it is a story of transformation.

The story is familiar: Jesus and his mother and brothers, and disciples, we are told, are guests at a wedding in the Galilean town of Cana. The marriage feast has begun and, wouldn't you know it, the wine runs out and Jesus' mother tells him to do something about it. He complains that it's none of his business, but at her urging he collaborates with the stewards and the servants and has them fill six large jars with water... and lo and behold the water is changed into wine... good wine, the writer says... Now John here has donned the mantle, not of historian, but of theologian. Y'all get that, right? Lots of images here in a few terse lines: There is an obvious baptismal motif at work, water the image, and not coincidentally, this story in John occurs immediately after Jesus' baptism. Death to sin by water, and raised to new life. Transformation. Jesus' hesitancy to act

would remind the hearer of this story of the hesitancy of Elijah in performing his first miracle at Shiloh, placing Jesus in the line of the prophets... prophets whose vocation is to name the transformative moments in Israel's history... The writer says the wedding takes place on the third day, a not so hidden allusion to and foretelling of the resurrection. Transformation. Wine of course is a symbol of the divine life throughout Hebrew scripture. Wine is the transformed product of our labor in the vineyard... Israel's deliverance from their oppressors over biblical history is likened to the flowing of fine wine. The prophet Jeremiah refers to the Torah, God's law; the ethical paradigm by which the people of Israel may live together justly... He refers to it as the wine from heaven. And then of course there is the overarching rubric of hospitality, so central to the faith of the tradition. Hospitality transforming stranger to guest... So, like the Synoptic Gospel writers, John is speaking in particular of the transformation from the deathly oppression of the people of Israel at the hands of the empire to their deliverance into freedom and dignity. A wedding is the symbol of such a consummation. Often in the Gospels Jesus is referred to as the bridegroom... Israel the bride. At a wedding right order is engendered; wholeness restored. In Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, *and A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *and twelfth Night*, the chaotic world is restored, transformed to order, symbolized by a wedding. One may deduce that

the way of Jesus, the way of hospitality, and sacrifice, the way of friendship, compassion and mercy is the way to restore the broken order of the world. Some scholars see a Eucharistic allusion in the story... all of these interpretations are plausible, though we'll never know the intention of the writer... but I want to suggest something more... something to think on.

I see this as a story describing the spiritual quest, and not just the personal spiritual quest; I'm thinking more of our collective spiritual quest: the quest of a collaborative people of faith... I see this story as a story of our deepest longing... a quest for our true humanity. Rabbi Abraham Heschel, the great twentieth century theologian and philosopher who marched alongside Martin Luther King, Jr. in Selma puts it this way... I actually saw this quote on Facebook this week... so it must be true... He says that the spiritual quest is a journey into radical amazement. Imagine the amazement in the back-country of Galilee at water become wine. Our lives are an amazing cycle of transformations towards spiritual maturity; and as maturing people of faith a belief system is just not enough... catechism is for the novice. Dogma just doesn't serve us anymore, but amazement does. We just have to be open and aware to it. Flannery O'Connor's stories are stories of the amazement of transformation amid life's extremities. In other words she doesn't insist on some moral proclamation, a point noted by her

critics.... She simply leads us into the mystery at the heart of things; and we are amazed. Artists and mystics know this; and they know that to experience amazement, one must face, the Gothic, the grotesque, and the sinister, along with the light. This kingdom of God, not reserved for another hour, some future dawning, but here and now,... the kingdom of God includes the brightness of life and the dark. It is both beautiful and broken. I am convinced that to be amazed we must go to the dark and grotesque corners of our world and be the transformation that is required there. Brothers and sisters it is Love that is the engine of transformation. It is Love that takes us to the heart of the story.. It is Love that transforms the deathly waters of chaos into life giving wine. We are wedding guests witnessing and affirming and participating in the consummation of heaven and earth, the restoration of our world, whose hour has come in our own day and age. Now is the apocalypse. Now are the end times. The kingdom of God is now, and it is luminous with possibility and humming with mystery... We are collaborators with urgency, filling the water jars, so that the world might have wine.... a world fragmented by loss, and losing hope.

I want to think of the church, the people of God gathered, as a school for amazement. In other words to be amazed takes some intentional practice. It requires honesty and humility; it is sprung from gratitude, and it takes courage

and persistence..... and, hear this, it takes the intentional and artful practice of praise... But we practice this together... because together we're stronger. Where two are three are gathered there is mystery and amazement. God's alchemy is not a solitary enterprise. And together, as enlightened community, we live to give ourselves away for the sake of those who endure the grotesque and sinister beast of injustice. Our Baptismal vocation is to be about turning water into wine.... Our vocation is the world's transformation... we are protagonists at the very heart of the human epic:... to bind up the broken hearted, to give sight to the blind, to heal the sick, to clothe the naked, to release the captives and the detained; to bless the lonely and the lost, to proclaim the year, the hour, of God's favor towards the people God Loves; to just bring a measure of dignity to the ones carrying the burden of shame... That would be some story. That would be something to see.... That would be, well.... Amazing.