

Grace Episcopal Church
20th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev Brian C Justice

Jeremiah 14.7-10, 19-22
Psalm 84.1-6
2 Timothy 4.6-8, 16-18
Luke 18.9-14

Us and Them

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Holy God
Help us to remember
that all of us,
the humbled and the exalted,
are glory bound
together
as one.
Amen.

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As Ruby Turpin entered the doctor's office, she looked around and sized up the people in the waiting room. The dirty child. The stylish lady. The teenage girl reading a book. The stringy old man with rusty hands pretending to be asleep or dead. The woman with snuff-stained lips.

After making self-righteous small talk in the waiting room, Ruby Turpin proudly pronounced to everybody, "If it's one thing I am it's grateful. When I think who all I could have been besides myself and what all I got, a little of everything, and a good disposition besides, I just feel like shouting "Thank you Jesus for making everything the way it is! It could have been different!" ... and a terrible pang of joy rang through her. 'Oh thank you Jesus, Jesus, thank you!' she cried aloud."

Sometimes Ruby Turpin "occupied herself at night naming the classes of people" and sorting out who was at the bottom of the heap and who was at the top. "Usually by the

time she had fallen asleep all the classes of people were moiling and roiling around in her head, and she would dream they were all crammed together in a box car, being ridden off to be put in a gas oven.”

In her short story called “Revelation,” (from which I have just quoted) Flannery O’Connor speaks with a prophetic voice. Through the character of Ruby Turpin, she names a particular sin, a pestilence that sickens human community: the segregation of human beings into two camps, Us and Them.

The evidence from world history and from our current political culture would suggest that we as human beings are prone to do this. Leaders and their populations label and lessen ... divide and distance themselves from targeted, ostracized groups of people. And the narrative is always Us and Them.

This sickness, this sin is certainly with us now and seems to be endemic in human society.

But in today’s Gospel text, Jesus tells a parable that reveals a very different reality ...a vision of unity within the Kingdom of God.

“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

The Pharisee, like Ruby Turpin in Flannery O Connor’s story, prays the sinful prayer of pride and arrogance and self-righteousness, segregating himself – in his own mind – from “thieves, rogues, and adulterers,” from the tax collector, from everyone whom he wishes to subordinate. The Tax Collector prays no such prayer; rather he confesses himself a sinner and pleads for divine mercy.

Jesus, in the exegesis of his own parable, reveals that in the Kingdom of God those labels by which we de-personalize and de-humanize the other person will be obliterated. In the Unthinkable, Unimaginable, Unlimited Love of God the exalted will be humbled and the humbled will be exalted. All shall be One. All shall be well.

The realization of this kind of unity *is* the mission of the Church. The Book of Common Prayer says this explicitly in the Catechism on page 855:

Q. What is the mission of the Church?

A. The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.

So, the human act of dividing people into Us and Them is an illusion. There is no Us and Them. There is no Us and Them because there is no Them. There is only Us. We are all Us no matter our age, gender, race, color, religion, sexual orientation, language, nationality, ethnicity, or anything else. Every single person is God's beloved child.

In the Endless Love that is the Kingdom of God, everything and everyone has a place.

At the end of Flannery O'Connor's story, Ruby Turpin is hosing down the hogs at the farm when she has a revelation:

"At last she lifted her head. There was only a purple streak in the sky, cutting through a field of crimson and leading, like an extension of the highway, into the descending dusk. She raised her hands from the side of the pen in a gesture hieratic and profound. A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were tumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of (poor) white (people), clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black (people) in ... robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself, ... had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been

for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces even their virtues were being burned away. She lowered hands and gripped the rail of the hog pen, her eyes small but fixed unblinkingly on what lay ahead. In a moment the vision faded but she remained where she was. At length she got down and turned off the faucet and in her slow way on the darkening path to the house. In woods around her the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah.”

Amen.