

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A
Ezekiel 18:25-28
Psalm 25:4-5, 8-9, 10, 14
Philippians 2:1-11
Matthew 21:28-32
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We know, as Christians, that we are not supposed to judge other people. That's God's job. However, when we *do* manage to refrain from judging someone, we tend to give ourselves credit for restraining our essentially *accurate* faculty for labeling other people as sinful or virtuous. We think something like, "Heaven knows I could judge him, or her, but by God's grace I'll somehow hold myself back." Our readings today suggest that, on the contrary, the reason we leave judgment of others to God, is that *we are no good* at it.

In our reading from Ezekiel, the people of Israel foolishly complain that the Lord's way is not fair. In the Gospel, Jesus stuns the priests and elders of the people, by saying to them, "I assure you that tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God before you." I'd like to tell you a story, by Flannery O'Connor, which touches on this subject. The story is called "Revelation."

During the 1950's, Claude and Ruby Turpin owned a few acres of farmland in Georgia. They lived on their land, in a small yellow frame house, surrounded by flowerbeds, between two giant hickory trees. They had some livestock, a couple of acres of cotton, some pasture land, and a small dusty woods.

Both Claude and Ruby were in their forties. They had no children. Claude Turpin was a sturdy, balding man -- a bit shorter than his wife.

Ruby Turpin was a large woman -- a bit self-conscious about her weight. She dressed neatly, and had a ready smile. She was a respectable, hardworking, churchgoing woman.

Mrs. Turpin, who was white, was not free from the racial prejudice common to her time and place. But she did not see people simply in terms of black and white. No, she thought there were many categories of people. Sometimes, in fact, she stayed awake at night, naming the classes of people, and arranging them on a scale from lowest to highest. She figured that she and Claude, as homeowners and landowners, were somewhere in the middle of the scale -- and that was enough for her.

Her philosophy of life was to help out anyone who needed it. She was proud to be able to say that she never spared herself when she found someone in need, whether they were black or white. But she believed that there were certain people that you couldn't help. No matter how much you did for them, they would never amount to anything. She had a saying about such people. She would say, "Help them you must, but help them you can't."

But more than anything, Mrs. Turpin was glad to be who she was. She would say, "When I think who all I could have been besides myself, and what all I've got. . . I just feel like shouting, Thank you Jesus for making everything the way that it is."

One day, everything seemed to go wrong for Mrs. Turpin. Claude had injured his leg, so she took him to town to have the doctor look at it. While she and Claude were sitting in the waiting room of the Doctor's office, Mrs. Turpin chatted awhile, with a pleasant lady who had brought her college-aged daughter to see the doctor.

While she and the pleasant lady were having their conversation,

Mrs. Turpin began to notice that the woman's daughter, whom Mrs. Turpin didn't even know, seemed to be scowling at her. As this continued, the young woman's mother became increasingly embarrassed by her daughter's behavior. Suddenly, for no apparent reason, the young woman threw the book she had been reading *at* Mrs. Turpin, and called her a really ugly name.

Mrs. Turpin went home with a nasty lump over her eye. She was confused by the young woman's actions. She couldn't imagine why anyone would say something so ugly about *her*. She began to suspect that God had been speaking through the young woman, and this thought made Mrs. Turpin very angry.

That evening, toward sunset, while she was tending to the livestock, Mrs. Turpin looked up and shouted at God: "Why did you send me a message like that?" "Why me? There's no one around here, black or white, that I haven't given to. And I break my back every day working. And I do for the church."

Mrs. Turpin stood staring awhile, while the sun slipped behind the tree line. There was a purple streak in the sky. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth, and upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. Leading the procession, dressed in white robes, shouting and clapping, were whole battalions of the very people Mrs. Turpin had always thought were beneath her. And bringing up the rear of the procession was a tribe of people she recognized as being like herself and Claude -- who had always had a little of everything, and the God-given wit to use it right. They were marching to heaven with great dignity, but she could see that they were surprised by the company they were keeping.

In a moment, the vision faded, but Mrs. Turpin remained where she was, immobile. Finally, she turned and made her slow way, in the gathering darkness, back to her house. . .