

## Misery, Mercy, and the Fallacy of Self-Help

Flannery O'Connor, a twentieth century, southern American writer, is renowned for her stories of the queer, dark recesses of human life—the “grotesque” as she calls it. For example, one of her more famous stories, “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” depicts a grandmother and her family heading out on a vacation, when suddenly they are overtaken by “The Misfit” and his fellow bandits. The grandmother, visibly rattled, attempts to soften The Misfit, who utters nostalgically: “I never was a bad boy that I remember of, but somewheres along the line I done something wrong and got sent to the penitentiary. I was buried alive.”

“If you would pray,” the grandmother responds, “Jesus would help you.”

“That's right,” The Misfit says.

“Well then, why don't you pray?” she asks trembling with delight suddenly.

“I don't want no help,” he says. “I'm doing all right by myself.”

As the story goes on, the Misfit's comrades take the grandmother's kin into the woods, where gunshots are soon heard. The grandmother pleads with the Misfit to spare an old lady. They speak more of Jesus and how he raised the dead. The Misfit finally exclaims, “It ain't right I wasn't there [to see him raise the dead], because if I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn't be like I am now.” The Misfit looks as though he is about to cry, and the grandmother, filled with compassion, reaches out to touch his shoulder, saying: “Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!” Immediately The Misfit recoils and shoots the grandmother in the chest, somberly muttering minutes later, “She would of been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.” The end.

Admittedly, O'Connor's stories—not just this one—can be a bit of a “downer” on a first read—most progressing and ending in a similar fashion. There is something startling and raw about her depiction of reality, and it would be a gross understatement to say that she sugarcoats nothing. Yet there is a reason that O'Connor is one of the more renowned Catholic fiction writers of modern times. With patience, her readers may begin to see thin threads of light within her dark tapestries, and like a Rembrandt painting, the darker the backdrop, the more profound the light. If all were light, the colors or themes would blend and fade into obscurity, never given a second look. But Rembrandts never fade, and no one forgets a Flannery O'Connor story.



Unfortunately today, the educators of young people have turned to therapeutic, self-help methods of instruction and counseling. “You’re ok, just the way you are;” “Don’t change a thing about you;” “Believe in yourself.” With good intention, we often seek to affirm young people and thus to empower them to face the all-too-degrading world they inhabit. But young people are not stupid—one might even say they are thoughtful and restless. Young people know, just as you and I know, that they are not ok. They realize that something is wrong with them—terribly wrong. They (and, if we’re honest, we too) are an insecure bundle of good intentions and bad or just downright strange habits. So to implore the young to “believe in themselves” inevitably leaves them believing in what G.K. Chesterton calls “an awful emptiness.” Thus it should be no surprise, tragically, that since the emphasis on “self-esteem” has hit the classroom, suicide rates have skyrocketed, becoming the third leading cause of death among Americans between the ages of 15 and 24.

What, then, is our solution? In explaining her work, Flannery O'Connor writes, “There is something in us, as storytellers and as listeners to stories, that demands the redemptive act, that demands that what falls at least be offered the chance to be restored.” Every human life is a story that demands a chance to be redeemed. So long as we optimistically emphasize the “perfection” in young people, they will never understand how to cope with the sinfulness they know to be true. If they are their own hope—if they only must believe in themselves—they have no chance to be redeemed, and thus resort to mere “escapes”—drugs, alcohol, sexual promiscuity, or suicide—thinking that they have no need of change because they cannot change. This is all there is.



Yet redemption demands that we look our messiness in the face, and acknowledge that messiness in those we lead. “You’re a mess, you’re fallen, and that’s *not* ok.” BUT, we quickly respond, there is hope, and it is a hope found neither in you nor in me (thank God), but in Christ alone. Acknowledge the darkness, and the light will pop out from the page of your story; see your sinfulness, and therein Christ’s glory revealed. As Pope Benedict XVI wrote, “Dear young people, the happiness you are seeking, the happiness you have a right to enjoy, has a name and a face”—[and that face is not in the mirror]—“it is Jesus Christ.”

Jesus our *Redeemer* only makes sense if we *need to be redeemed*—if we see our sin and weakness, and abandon it all to the abundant mercy of Jesus Christ. Young people don’t need a “you can do it” pep talk—they know they can’t. They need a “He can do it” talk—a talk which is the very Gospel itself. As St. Therese writes, “In the evening of this life, I shall appear before you with empty hands, for I do not ask you, Lord, to count my works. All our justice is blemished in your eyes. I wish, then, to be clothed in your own justice and to receive from your love the eternal possession of yourself.”

The grandmother in “A Good Man is Hard to Find” was right after all—all The Misfit had to do was pray to Jesus. He couldn’t save himself, he couldn’t believe in himself—that only led him to a murderous and miserable life. But all such lives must be seen with compassion—we must see all young people, in their wretchedness, as “our babies, our children”; not because they need us, but rather because, in the words of St. Philip Neri looking upon a criminal sentenced to death, “But by the grace of God, there go I.” They are our children because we, like they, are nothing but misery—and, thank God, Jesus Christ is nothing but Mercy.

Thus we should make it our habit each day to pray as often as possible one of the most beautiful and ancient prayers of the Church—the Jesus prayer—“Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.” Unite the prayer to your breathing: “(inhale) Lord Jesus Christ, (exhale) have mercy on me.” Thus we may be reminded every moment of every day of our lowliness and consequently of our need for God. Then in the darkness of our lives, the light of Christ’s glory will shine forth—such is the life of a saint, and the life of a saint never fades, nor is their story ever forgotten.

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