

Liturgical Readings for July 2019 – Cycle C

Theme: *Becoming Atypical i.e. not conforming to type, i.e. becoming different, peculiar, odd – i.e. living in a “state of grace”.*

Last month I began by defining the term type, saying an individual becomes typical – a type - in so far as he or she can be classified, identified as similar to other people in some abstract way – as a character out of central casting in one way or another. I have been often classified as your typical academic; faraway look, untidy garb, uncombed hair, tweed jacket, elbow patches included.

In his comments on Walker Percy’s novel *The Moviegoer* Paul Elie speaks of Flannery O’Connor’s observation that the literature of the American South at mid-20th century was set *against* the typical, that it was atypical of American life as a whole. The atypical novel she celebrates takes unusual, extreme, even grotesque behavior as its starting point.

For example

Consider the character Mary Grace in O’Connor’s story “Revelation” - a college girl seated in a doctor’s waiting room with a Mrs. Turpin and assorted patients. We are told Mary Grace is reading a book titled *Human Development*. Mary Grace manifests irritation as she listens to Mrs. Turpin comment on others in the waiting room – relative to their social status (beneath hers). When Mrs. Turpin declares climactically: *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.”*

The story continues: *The book struck her [Mrs. Turpin] directly over her left eye . . . Before she could utter a sound, the raw face came crashing across the table toward her, howling . . . There was an instant when she was certain that she was about to be in an earthquake . . . “What you got to say to me?” she asked hoarsely . . . waiting, as for a revelation. The girl raised her head. Her gaze locked with Mrs. Turpin’s. “Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog,” she whispered. Her voice was low but clear.*

Clearly, Mary Grace’s behavior was atypical – out of the ordinary as is the way God sometimes intervenes in situations you have been conditioned to expect or hope to remain the same. I mean, the Incarnation and Resurrection are odd ways for God to intervene in history, wouldn’t you say? For instance in the case of Jesus of Nazareth, a native son whom his neighbors had taken for granted, it says in Mark’s Gospel people were astonished at the change in him. *“Where did this man get all this? What kind of wisdom has been given him? What mighty deeds are wrought by his hands! Is he not the carpenter, the son of Mary, and the brother of James and . . . Judas*

and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. He upset their expectations.

The Moviegoer

Paul Elie sees Walker Percy's 1950's character, Binx Bolling, as an atypical person. Binx lives in New Orleans. He's a Korean War veteran, bearing a scar. He is a stocks and bonds broker, nearing thirty. As the story opens he narrates how things have suddenly changed. *My peaceful existence in Gentilly has been complicated. This morning for the first time in years, there occurred to me the possibility of a search. I dreamed of the war . . . woke with the taste of it in my mouth, the queasy quince taste of 1951 and the Orient. I came to myself under a chindolea bush. Everything is upside-down for me . . . What are generally considered to be the best times are for me the worst times, and that worst of times was one of the best. My shoulder didn't hurt . . . Six inches from my nose a dung beetle was scratching around under the leaves. As I watched, there awoke in me an immense curiosity. I was onto something. I vowed that if I ever got out of this fix, I would pursue the search.*

No sooner did he return from the war than he forgot all about it until one morning, after dressing as usual and as he placed his usual things into his pockets (wallet, notebook, pencil, keys, handkerchief, pocket slide rule for calculating percentage returns on principal) they suddenly looked unfamiliar yet laced with clues. He gazes at the little pile through a hole made with his thumb and fingers. He continues: *What was unfamiliar about them was that I could see them. They might have belonged to someone else. A man can look at this little pile on his bureau for thirty years and never once see it. It is as invisible as his own hand. Once I saw it, however, the search became possible . . . I . . . sat at my desk and poked through the little pile in search of a clue just as a detective on television pokes through a dead man's possessions, using his pencil as a poker.*

Binx Bolling continues; he asks: *What is the nature of the search?* And he replies: *Really it is very simple, at least for a fellow like me; so simple that it is easily overlooked. The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life.* [I wonder where he got that word from? Had Percy been reading Heidegger?] He continues: *This morning, for example, I felt as if I had come to myself on a strange island. And what does such a castaway do? Why he pokes around the neighborhood and he doesn't miss a trick.* [Like he or she comes to lectures on the liturgical readings of the coming month?]

To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be on to something is to be in despair. [And I might add: what's worse, not to know that you are not on to something; to live unconsciously.] Binx uses movies, assuming they narrate somebody's search, but they screw it up. The search always ends in despair. They like to show a fellow coming to a strange, curious place in a plot – but what does he do? *He takes up with the local librarian, sets about proving to local children what a nice fellow he is, (sounds like *The Music Man*) and settles down with a vengeance. In two weeks time he is so sunk in everydayness that he might just*

as well be dead. They lived happily ever after – THE END occurring right after the closing kiss. Absolute. As if there's no tomorrow? Search over? That's what the movies would have us believe – that "romance" is the answer?

Binx wonders whether what he seeks is God. But then he calculates that 98% of his fellow Americans claim to have found God and the other 2% are atheists and agnostics – *which leaves not a single percentage point for a seeker.* But then he wonders: *Have 98% of Americans already found what I seek or are they so sunk in everydayness that not even the possibility of a search has occurred to them?* Which is a way of saying: has the reality of God been swallowed up into the everydayness that benumbs our souls?

It's hard to say whether Binx completes his search within the limits of this novel. He seems exhausted at the end. He seems to have settled into the everydayness that disturbs him – taking care of his new wife who struggles with mental problems, maybe looking for clues in the everydayness of life *itself* for revelations.

On the closing page of the story he sees a young black Southerner drive up *in a florid new Mercury* and enter a church on Ash Wednesday. He is well dressed: *more respectable than respectable; he is more middle class than one could believe.* He has been conditioned, it seems to me, to become typical – as middle class as the mainstream of America, invisible among the throngs on some Broadway or Freeway. Binx watches him exit the church wearing the ashes and Binx wonders: is he here at this intersection in New Orleans *because he believes that God himself is present or is it part and parcel of the complex business of his coming up in the world* – becoming typical - as his goal in life. Then Binx thinks – maybe *he is here for both reasons:* to become typical, to blend with the mainstream - and – *by some dim dazzling trick of grace* – to initiate within himself a search beyond the typical – *as God's own importunate [compelling] bonus.*

It is impossible to say, says Binx in the final line of the story. Binx has reached a limit that will allow him no rest. The search goes on – possibly right under his nose as when, wounded in Korea, he contemplated that dung beetle scratching around under some leaves of a chindolea bush.

The timing of this novel

I ask myself why this 'catholic' novel, after delivering a clear sense of the aimlessness of modern times, ends on a note of frustration if not doubt. Could it be because it was authored in the Church of the 1950's – pre-Vatican II? There is some liturgical background to the book. The story takes place during the season of Epiphany and ends on Ash Wednesday. But to me he doesn't seem to exploit his liturgical and biblical resources – because they were still dormant back then – prior to Vatican II. Speaking from my own experience and that of many I know, the liturgy was muted back then. The Eucharist was recited in Latin and kept within the same cycle of Scripture readings – year after year – and this before we had benefited from

the renaissance of liturgical and biblical scholarship that would soon release the Eucharist and the Bible from what was a generally *literal* hearing - to reveal the depth of what has been called their “words with power”.

And so Binx makes little reference to what he hears out of his Catholic tradition. You could say it's not only the everydayness of modern existence that stymies him but the everydayness into which his religious tradition itself had fallen, a Sunday obligation. It did not resonate. If he had been exposed to the liturgical and biblical revival which was just getting under way during the 1950's and blossomed during the 1960's and thereafter - he might not have concluded his novel as to whether his search led him anywhere with the remark: *It is impossible to say.*

The Readings

So we have left Binx Bolling in a limit situation, at the extreme extent of the everydayness that leaves him somewhat stuck in life. An everydayness, the same old, same old day after day in every regard, be it the news of the day, the cascading development of new inventions, applications that somehow leave us still treading water, the monotony of eating out as an escape from the monotony of eating home - indeed the monotony of *eating* despite new, exotic recipes being broadcast everyday. The search remains.

Unless we enter the liturgy, the world of the biblical text wherein things can happen like experiencing the state of grace in a more profound way than our catechisms defined it.

July 7th - 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time - Cycle C

First Reading: Isaiah 66: 10-14

This poetry, dating back to around 500 BC, reflects a time when the Jewish exiles and their children were allowed to return to their homeland from their Babylonian captivity. They had returned full of hope - inspired to reform their past, to rebuild their temple, revive their tradition in a genuine way, reverse the behaviors that brought on the destruction of their old kingdom. But, mixing with the Jews who had remained in Judah and others of Gentile cults, they slipped back into superstitions, rivalries, lip service to their creed . . . so that the poet addresses God: *Would that you might meet us doing right, / that we might be mindful of you in our ways! . . . / We have all become like something unclean, . . . / We have all withered like leaves . . . / For you have hidden your face from us . . .*

The Hebrew poet in some way echoes how Binx Bolling feels about his world of the 1950's - which seems to have lost sight of what's real, what's true, what's holy amid the blur of its everydayness. But Walker Percy's whole novel is itself a quest, *searching* for what's real - what biblical interpreters call “the world of the text” - and what kind of world does the ancient poetry of Isaiah 66 disclose to us? Listen as he beholds a renewed Jerusalem, even Nature itself - if only we could understand existence in its deepest sense:

Rejoice with Jerusalem [this universe of ours] and be glad because of her, / all you who love her; / exult, exult with her, / all you who were mourning over her! / Oh, that you may suck fully / of the milk of her comfort, / that you may nurse with delight / at her abundant breasts! / . . . As nurslings, you shall be carried in her arms, / and fondled in her lap; / as a mother comforts her child, / so will I comfort you; / in Jerusalem [this real world] you shall find your comfort. / When you see this, your heart shall rejoice / and your bodies flourish like the grass; the LORD's power shall be known to his servants.

From the withered state (morally and otherwise) into which people have fallen we shall now begin to flourish like grass. That is said of us as much as of the audience of the prophet back then. And note the feminine characteristics of the world into which we are introduced: birth giving and nurturing, flourishing, flowering – all of us rooted in the same Ground reaching into the air we breathe together. Living in a state of grace in even more than a moral sense; a state of graciousness; yourself no longer just typical, a face in the crowd, but a face to be loved.

Which reminds me of that poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins – a Jesuit who wrote into the 1880's. He too imagined our real world in terms of the feminine in his poem: *The Blessed Virgin Compared to the Air we Breathe*.

Wild air, world-mothering air, / Nestling me everywhere, / That each eyelash or hair / Girdles; goes home betwixt / the fleeciest, frailest- fixed / Snowflake; that's fairly mixed / With, riddles, and is rife / In every least thing's life; This needful, never spent, / And nursing element; / My more than meat and drink, / My meal at every wink, / This air, which, by life's law, / My lung must draw and draw / Now but to breathe its praise / . . . I say that we are wound / With mercy round and round / As if with air . . .

That's an inspired way of describing the Being – what philosophers and saints can't help but call the Holy - that endows each of us with his and her particular being and holiness.

Such metaphors so well describe the world into which we are called by our faith, our tradition, and the vision to be found in the poetry, in every sacrament, the real music of humanity. Immerse yourself in it, in thought, word and deed. Become a-typical.

Gospel Reading: Luke 10: 1-20

Christ always in the Gospel stands at the threshold of a world that exceeds the world of everydayness that befores our lives day after day. He has called his disciples to join him in crossing that limit into an experience of fullness of life – even as ancient Israel had been summoned to undertake an exodus to a world no longer under the influence of a sphinx but flowing with milk and honey. And what kind of behavior does he expect those of us who emerge from everydayness into fullness of life?

Well first of all, expect to be ridiculed (*I am sending you like lambs among wolves*). Don't delay your progress, yielding to every how-do-you-do, every little distraction you encounter. Say "Shalom" to every place you enter – otherwise try the next house; don't bog down, don't feel rejected, don't force the issue, acquire a bounce. Accept generosity; thankfulness is a virtue – but don't dictate the menu – if the dish looks strange, give it a try; who knows what discoveries you will find. Don't flit from here to there. Settle into reality, savor it – no new Hyundai every 3 years . . . no new faces all the time (*I've grown accustomed to your face / you almost make the day begin / . . . Your smiles, your frowns / your ups, your downs / Are second nature to me now / Like breathing out and breathing In // I was serenely independent and content before we met / Surely I could be that way again and yet / I've grown accustomed to your look / Accustomed to your voice, accustomed to your face.*)

No longer in a rush, able to relax and get accustomed to things, the leaves of a particular tree, a sidewalk, a sky, a stranger on a bus. Slow down, don't move from house to house, from event to event . . . don't *avoid* those whom everydayness makes sick – show interest, care . . . And if people give you the cold shoulder, shake not only the dust from your feet but shake their hand to save them from turning into pillars of salt.

July 14th – 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle C

First Reading: Deuteronomy 30: 10-14

In our introduction above we hear Binx Bolling figuring 98% of current Americans claim to have found God – yet he remains a seeker. Has he somehow been left behind? Or have 98% of Americans reduced God to a faraway thought while they are consumed by the everydayness of life as usual. And does Binx himself scan some far away horizon where God may be found? Today's Scripture reading tells us that both 98% of Americans and even a faraway seeker like Binx are all off target. Today's Scripture reading says God; the Source of our being *is not too mysterious and remote for you. / It is not up in the sky, that you should say, / Who will go up in the sky to get it for us / and tell us of it . . . / Nor is it across the sea, that you should say, / Who will cross the sea to get it for us / . . . No, it is something very near to you, / already in your mouths and in your hearts . . .*

The Source of all our being is that close, vibrating from within us as well as within everything around us, even that cat in the corner – if we would but disengage our minds from so much junk and *listen* – and begin to even *see* the Holy everywhere.

Second Reading: Colossians 1:15-20

And is not our first reading echoed in Paul's Letter to the Colossians? *Christ Jesus is the image of the invisible God [the incarnation of our divine origin], the firstborn of all creation. / For in him were created all things in heaven and on earth, / visible and invisible, . . . / He is before all things, / and in him all things hold together, / . . . For in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell . . .* Remember when I described the

memories of my youth as so many scattershot incidents, events without evident coherence – until I realized they emerged from that Source, that Holy of Holies that gives them meaning after all? Paul and we see in Christ the very appearance of that Source upon the face of this earth that helps us make sense of it all.

Gospel Reading: Luke 10: 25-37

First of all, today's Gospel illustrates the difference between the way scribes taught and Jesus. The text begins with Jesus quoting the Old Law in its "thou shalt" do this and this and this mode – as a command. And then what happens? Jesus tells a story that dramatizes the Law in a way that one can experience what it's like to live it. He tells that classic parable of the Good Samaritan.

You all know it so well, I won't repeat it – except to say that once we pass over into the "world of the text" from the everydayness of our usual existence, we change, we become alert, we yield to inspirations to do good, to care – and to care extravagantly even for a stranger – as does this Samaritan, paying for his motel, seeing that he gets medical help. In other words we "change" – become more alive not only to Nature all around us but to people and to people in need. We become other Christs. We cease to be mere passerby's through life – avoiding concern over victims scattered along our path.

July 21st – 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle C

Gospel Reading: Luke 10: 38-42

I am focusing on the Gospel reading today in so far as it offers a contrast to the first reading from the Hebrew Book of Genesis. There we see Abraham demonstrating hospitality similar to that of Anthony Quinn who played a Bedouin sheik in *Lawrence of Arabia*. The host welcomes these strangers, provides refreshment, offers some food (insisting it will be no burden, just of little of this and that) and then has a tender, choice steer brought in – along with curds and milk – a blowout – and allows his guests the leisure to rest and dine . . . So hospitality is to be characteristic of anyone who steps into a world of awareness away from the rat race that reduces others to a blur.

And in the Gospel we find Martha exemplifying that same gift of hospitality to Jesus – to the point of exhaustion – and then some bitterness that her sister Mary is dilly-dallying at the feet of Jesus entranced with his discourse. To which Jesus says Martha – in effect, your hospitality, your activity, your activism is indeed praiseworthy; don't lose the gift. But Mary has taken the time to think, ponder, listen, search like Binx Bolling – to seek dimensions beyond immediate demands. Sometimes people use activity as a means of delaying any search, using up time as if it had to be consumed, was not be wasted – but time need not be swift, it has depth besides transience – sometimes it requires that one "take time" to ponder who and what and where we are . . . in some profound, ultimate way.

July 28th – 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle C

First Reading: Genesis 18: 20-32

Speaking of slowing down, this passage from the Hebrew Testament illustrates the Lord himself behaving precipitately – provoked to slap down Sodom and Gomorrah in one stroke – fire and brimstone. But it is Abraham, the human being, our traditional ancestor, who creates a delay. Like some attorney he negotiates God's reaction to Sodom and Gomorrah. He causes God to pause over the fact that maybe not everybody there is guilty – so what's the justice to be found in a clean sweep. Put the broom away. *What if I find fifty innocent people . . . or forty-five . . . or forty . . . on down to at least ten?* Would God not spare them all for the sake of ten? By this time God has cooled off – a neat tactic by the patriarch. It's as if the ethic of Jesus, of grace has advanced into the very beginning of Genesis to change our concept of God into one of gracious God – in anticipation of the God of Jesus and Paul – for which we should be thankful.

Gospel Reading: Luke 11: 1-13

And maybe our concept of God over the centuries has indeed needed some re-configuration; that God is not a God quick to judge, a God punitive, ambiguous, ambivalent enough to make – as Binx Bolling suggests – 98% of people not only believe in him but also ignore him as someone inhumane. God is not like the neighbor in today's parable who resents being awakened at midnight with cries for help, for three loaves of bread with which I might feed some guests. A God to shout: *Do not bother me; the door has already been locked and my children are already in bed – this is a grave inconvenience to me . . .* In effect this parable of Jesus is itself telling the remote God who would rather sleep than care about us – to WAKE UP and be the God of grace, mercy, intimate concern, personal love that really underlies this universe – and is manifest in the behavior of Jesus. No more playing games: *You want a fish? Here's a snake. You want an egg? Here's a scorpion.*

Were that the case, how could anyone doubt that this universe plays games with us; the world is a rigged casino – in which case what's the point of anything. But no: biblical literature – and much secular literature – and our heart of hearts say otherwise.

Heartbeat

Rainer Maria Rilke

Only mouths are we. Who sings the distant heart
which safely exists in the center of all things?
His giant heartbeat is diverted in us
into little pulses. And his giant grief
is, like his giant jubilation, far too
great for us. And so we tear ourselves away
from him time after time, remaining only
mouths. But unexpectedly and secretly
the giant heartbeat enters our being,
so that we scream ----,
and are transformed in being and in countenance.