

“...but do not follow their example.”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Once upon a time, the great American writer, Flannery O’Conner, wrote a story called, “Parker’s Back.” It takes place in the South, where O. E. Parker and his wife, Sarah Ruth, live in a run-down, old shack.

Sarah Ruth constantly nags her husband, Parker, about his lack of religion. She also despises the tattoos that decorate his body.

One day, in a stumbling effort to improve his relationship with Sarah Ruth, Parker decides to have a large picture of Jesus tattooed on his back. When he comes home and displays his back to Sarah Ruth, she gives no sign of acknowledgement.

“Don’t you know who it is? It’s him! It’s God!” says Parker, excitedly, almost pleading for Sarah Ruth’s approval.

Sarah Ruth snarls belligerently:

“God don’t look like that! He’s a Spirit and no one’s ever seen his face.”

“Aw, it’s just a picture,” Parker groans.

“Idolatry!” screams Sarah Ruth. Then she grabs a blunt instrument and begins beating Parker, savagely, across the back.

The author, Flannery O’Conner, concludes her touching story by saying:

“Parker just sat there, letting her beat him until she nearly knocked him senseless; large welts had formed on the face of the tattooed-Christ. Then Parker staggered up & made for the door.”

Later, when Sarah Ruth glanced outside, her eyes hardened even more. There was Parker, leaning against a Pecan tree—crying like a baby.

What she didn’t know was ...Parker’s tears were not from the savage beating he had just taken. They were from the fact that he realized, for the first time in his life, there was nothing he could do to please his self-righteous wife.



Few stories better illustrate the two kinds of people Jesus most often dealt with in the Gospel.

What, exactly, are the two kinds of people Jesus most often dealt with in his life, you ask.

Well, I am glad you asked that question!

The two kinds of people Jesus most often dealt with are: **Self-righteous people and Sinners.**

For example: we see these two ‘types’ dramatically portrayed in the story of the Prodigal Son. The younger son clearly portrays the **sinner**, while the older son portrays the **self-righteous**. We are never told if the elder son ever came into the house.

The parable was addressed to the self-righteous Pharisees (the older son), who resented seeing repentant sinners (the younger son) being welcomed home by Jesus. We are left wondering if the older brother ever **‘got it’** and welcomed his younger, repentant brother home **or** did he (the older son) wind up leaving home himself.

We see these same two **‘types’** of people in several other, Gospel parables.

For example: consider the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector ^(Lk.18:9-14). Recall that both men went to Temple to pray. The Pharisee loudly proclaims:

“I thank you, oh God, that I am not like that tax collector over there.”

And he goes on and on, berating the tax collector, while praising himself ^(Lk.18:11-12).

The tax collector, on the other hand, stands off, afar, striking his breast, humbly mantra-ing:

“God, have pity on me, a sinner” ^(Lk.18:13).

This brings me back to Flannery O'Connor's story, "Parker's Back."

*Sarah Ruth portrays the **self-righteous** person and Parker portrays the **sinful** person.*

Sarah Ruth rejects Parker's childlike effort to please her (by having a picture of Jesus tattooed to his back).

Sarah Ruth not only rejects Parker's effort, but uses it as an occasion to impress upon him how religious she is and how irreligious he is.

Sarah Ruth ends by beating Parker's back until large welts appear on the face of the tattooed-Jesus on his back.

Consequently, we are left pondering the unforgettable words of Jesus:

"In so far as you did this to one of these, the least of my brethren, you did it to me." Mt. 25:40

What Sarah Ruth did to Parker's back ...she did to Jesus.

~~~~~

*I now close the same way Jesus closed today's gospel, which I read to you from St. Matthew. It is almost identical with the way he ends his parable about the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.*

*Jesus says:*

***"The greatest among you must be your servant.  
Whoever makes himself great—will be humbled,  
And whoever humbles himself—will be made great."***

*May our all-knowing, all-loving God bless you...*

*the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen*