

Disruptions of grace

By [Gracia Grindal](#)

March 1, 2015

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Grindal's current Living by the Word column as well as past magazine and blog content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

It's hard to deny these little echoes of the synoptics which John reshapes for his own dramatic purposes. It seems narratively wrong for Jesus to cleanse the temple at the beginning of his ministry rather than at the climactic end. It makes more sense if one hears Luke in the background ever so slightly—Jesus' claiming of the temple as his father's house and his identity as the Son. Here in John, he has just performed a miracle at his mother's behest, bringing spirit into the most fleshly event of human life. Now he goes to what is supposedly a spiritual place and finds only flesh. No wonder he is annoyed.

So as always in John we have two different dimensions or realities, the heavenly and the earthly. The cleansing of the temple is maybe the most violent clash between them until Gethsemane and the cross.

The violence may be unsettling to some because it contradicts our notion of Jesus the gentle king. Flannery O'Connor thought a lot about the violence of grace, or at least the disruptions of grace in normal life. Most of her stories shock us because such disruptions are made vivid in the lives of her characters. Jesus uses violence here, showing us how extreme his breaking into our mundane "getting and spending" lives really has to be.

How to talk about John's two realms so that people don't see it as merely a conflict a flesh vs. spirit? It's really the theological problem of Christ's two natures, also a problem for artistic representation: how to show Christ as not only human, but also divine. The spirit does "break in" to our humdrum lives. This is the mystery of the Incarnation, human and divine, God deep in the flesh.

One (of many) O'Connor stories that comes to mind here is "The Displaced Person." *The American Short Story* adapted it for TV in the 1970s. The priest character (John Houseman), a representative of the incarnate one, keeps muttering about Purgatory, to the great irritation of landowner Mrs. McIntyre (Irene Worth), whose feet are firmly planted on her land. Many realities—race, class, ethnicity—violently collide, and plenty of this is screamingly funny at the same time as it's terribly disturbing. Humor comes when the expected ending of a story turns and goes another way.

I once showed the episode to a pastors' conference. They were outraged that the priest doesn't call social services to get more help for the family of refugees who work for Mrs. McIntyre. While they weren't wrong to want to attend to the worldly needs of the displaced person, they didn't seem to get that it is the priest whose Christian faith has seen to it that the family has gotten help in the first place. At Mrs. McIntyre's deathbed, the priest murmurs about Purgatory—though she probably cannot hear him "explaining the doctrines of the Church."

In poetry there is Wallace Stevens's "Sunday Morning," which describes a world completely secular, but in which the object of the study says, "But in contentment I still feel/ The need of some imperishable bliss."

Today the writer who does that the most for me on the issue of flesh and spirit is Christian Wiman. Some months ago, I was startled awake by Krista Tippett interviewing Wiman on *On Being*. As I dimly recall she was pushing him to say his spirit would always be here, and he replied with something like this: you know, that isn't enough for me. I want to be in this body, to be flesh.

Yes. There are not many who get this quite as elegantly and searingly as Wiman does—maybe because of his long battle with cancer, the failings of his own flesh. Almost nothing I have read in a long time speaks so deeply of the mystery of the Incarnation, the final enemy, death, and our fierce longing for life, eternal life—as Bunyan's pilgrim cries out at the start of his journey.