

MAUNDY THURSDAY MEDITATION

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As the disciple reclined at the table with Jesus on the night of the Passover, little did they realize that in the next few hours they would all fail their teacher. If ever there was a script for self-hatred, the disciples had one. Judas would betray his friend and master. Peter would deny knowing him. I can only imagine the intensity of feelings and emotions that would transpire over the next 24 hours for Jesus' disciples, family and friends.

For almost three years things had gone, for the most part, incredibly well. Palm Sunday was really a pinnacle event for Jesus' followers. The disciples felt aligned with the most powerful and popular man of the day. How quickly things can turn. How quickly they seem to turn for each of us. One day we feel blessed and the next we imagine we are being punished for some former sin. We have a tendency to think that when things are going particularly well, that God is shining his light on us. When things turn sour, we may think that God has turned vindictive or ugly. It's hard for us to grasp a God that is as fully present in the negative and bad as he is in the good. I wonder what the disciples were thinking, other than extreme fear, as they huddled behind a locked door hoping they wouldn't be the next victim on a cross.

I'm reminded of a short story by Flannery O'Connor called *The Turkey*. The Protagonist or anti-hero of the story is a little boy named Ruller. Ruller has a poor self-image because nothing he does seems to turn out right.

One night Ruller happens to hear his parents analyzing him. "*Ruller's an unusual one,*" his father says. "*Why does he always play by himself?*" His mother answers, "*How am I to know?*"

One day while playing in the woods by himself, Ruller spots a wild and wounded Turkey. He decides that he will catch the turkey and take it back to his parents as a prize. He is determined to prove his worth even if it means chasing the stupid turkey across the state line. He can imagine himself coming home with the turkey slung over his shoulders and the praise he will receive from his parents. That's if God doesn't screw things up for him.

Finally, after running after the Turkey for several hours it collapses from its gunshot wound and Ruller tackles it. This is great he thinks to himself. Maybe I should retract some of the things I was thinking about God, he wonders to himself. Maybe God allowed him to catch the bird before he thought or said some things he shouldn't. He should be thankful to God. He thinks to himself.

“Thank you, God,” he says. ***“Much obliged to you. This Turkey must weigh ten pounds. You were mighty generous.”*** Maybe catching the turkey was a sign or something. Maybe God wanted him to be a preacher.

Ruller enters town with the turkey slung over his shoulder. Two men approach him and whistle an exclamation. ***“How much do you think it weights?”*** They ask Ruller.

“At least ten pounds, Ruller answer proudly.

Ruller can't wait to get home and show the turkey to his parents. He feels so good at this point that he gives away his only dime to the ***“beggar woman.”***

Then he is approached by several boys from the town.

“Where did ya git that turkey?” they ask.

“I found it in the woods. I chased it dead.”

“Lemme see it,” One boy says. Ruller hands him the turkey. Suddenly the turkey’s head flies into Ruller’s face as the boys run off with his prize. All he can do is watch as they disappear down the street.

Ruller walks for a bit and then, noticing it is dark, suddenly begins to run. O’Conner tale ends with these words:

“He ran faster and faster, and as he turned up the road to his house, his heart was running as fast his legs and he was certain that Something awful was tearing behind him with its arms rigid and its fingers ready to clutch.”¹

The story needs little commentary. When things are good we feel blessed and we want to bless others. When it turns bad, we feel as if we are running in the dark night being chased by a demon. Surely, the disciples had similar thoughts.

The problem is that we have a distorted view of God. It was hard for the disciples to imagine that God was present in the horribleness of the cross as much as he was when they were with their friend and master in Galilee. As we come to this table, let us remember that God is here. For most of us, it is God present in a life filled with many blessings. For some, though, it is God present in the mess. It is God present in failing health. God present in the stress of financial struggles because of the loss of a job or a salary cut. Maybe it’s God present in the midst of the loss of a loved one.

Whatever it may be, know that when you come to this table that God has experienced it all through his Son. God can take the worst that the world can dole out and turn it into resurrection. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

¹Flannery O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* (New York, NY: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1971), 42-54.