

On Flannery

Flannery O'Connor said, "Your beliefs will be the light by which you see, but they will not be what you see and they will not be a substitute for seeing."--Flannery O'Connor

Let's talk about what she's saying.

The nature of evangelicalism puts belief in a category that is different from what Flannery is putting it. We are guilty of doing something similar with the Bible.

What do we have to give up in order to agree with Flannery?

Our beliefs tend to be the thing we see.

We spend a lot of time affirming our beliefs, tweaking them to make sure they are right and conferring with one another to make sure we are good to go. It's a lot of navel gazing that serves to make us feel more confident about our religion but it prevents us from actually living out our religion. Rowan Williams' book "Being Christian" is great because it doesn't unpack what Christians believe. It unpacks what Christians do and in that doing what they become. It skips over belief, the navel gazing and goes straight to the living it out. It uses belief the way O'Connor is using it, as a light by which we see. We could, if we wanted, sit back and analyze Williams' book to examine the belief presuppositions that drive him. The engine under the hood if you will. But it's much more fun to go along for the ride. He's driving fast and it's exciting. It's what our beliefs are meant for.

Someone is going to ask (and should from time to time) "Why do we do this?" and we should be able to quickly trace back for them the beliefs which motivate our actions.

Our beliefs tend to be a substitute for seeing.

Our sermons tend to be self referential in that they affirm the things we believe rather than take those beliefs and work them into our imagination in such a way that enables us to live a certain way. A sermon that merely reminds us what we believe is not a good sermon. That is a sermon that makes belief a substitute for actually seeing. A good sermon makes us see differently and it uses the things we believe in order to help us see what it is we want to see.

"Jesus is the typological answer to this OT story." That tends to be the punch line to a lot of sermons these days. It comes out in phrases like, "Jesus fulfilled this." These phrases are merely affirmations of things we already believe and to be pointed to these beliefs isn't bad it's just not the point. The point is, why is it crucial for your life that this is the way things are? And the answer can never be, "Because you risk an eternity in hell."

The answer must liberate people.

The answer must surprise people.

The answer must be grace.