

“PARKER’S wife was sitting on the front porch floor, snapping beans. Parker was sitting on the step, some distance away, watching her sullenly. She was plain, plain. The skin on her face was thin and drawn as tight as the skin on an onion and her eyes were gray and sharp like the points of two icepicks. Parker understood why he had married her — he couldn’t have got her any other way — but he couldn’t understand why he stayed with her now. She was pregnant and pregnant women were not his favorite kind. Nevertheless, he stayed as if she had him conjured. He was puzzled and ashamed of himself.

The house they rented sat alone save for a single tall pecan tree on a high embankment overlooking a highway. At intervals a car would shoot past below and his wife’s eyes would swerve suspiciously after the sound of it and then come back to rest on the newspaper full of beans in her lap. One of the things she did not approve of was automobiles. In addition to her other bad qualities, she was forever sniffing up sin. She did not smoke or dip, drink whiskey, use bad language or paint her face, and God knew some paint would have improved it, Parker thought. Her being against color, it was the more remarkable she had married him. Sometimes he supposed that she had married him because she meant to save him. At other times he had a suspicion that she actually liked everything she said she didn’t. He could account for her one way or another; it was himself he could not understand.”

So begins Flannery O’Connor’s famous story, *Parker’s Back*

Parker a man under pressure.

His wife was trying to save him, from everything he enjoyed and knew,  
tattoos and whiskey and the world.

He labored on a farm for a cheap old woman,

    who demanded good results from terrible equipment and worn-out land.

    Who accounted him just another part of her cheap supply of tools.

Parker disliked both the women in his life;

    he did not feel like a man, really a human in relation to them.

None of the joy of being a human was his.

And so he ran off to the city, to get another tattoo. We’ll come back to him later

Jesus, too, was a man under pressure, though men, rather than women, were his problem.

His journey toward Jerusalem was not going well.

Some villages refused to receive him; others were full of critics and naysayers.

Scribes, Pharisees, and run-of-the-mill skeptics, who cared not for the Kingdom of God.

His often power-hungry disciples has great ideas like burning them all up with fire.

And they fought about who among them was to be the greatest.

Growing within him was a conviction that his life would be given in the holy city.

And of course, in the reality of his humanity, the acceptance of his coming death was a great struggle.

And so he said:

“I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!”

Stressed-out Jesus is here for us today, and thank God.

We need to see and know stressed-out Jesus.

The Lord is not often depicted in this way.

Most paintings and statues give him a serene look, even crucifixes show him with look of confidence and contemplation.

We'd all like to exhibit that same calm exterior all the time; we'd like to be free of stress.

But we are not; to be a human being is to struggle through some things.

We can make choices that make life simpler; we can be disciplined in how we allocate our time and energy.

Much of the stress we deal with is the stress of seeking more than we need,

Of the spirit of maximization, the biggest, the best, the world-class, that is our age.

Many do not choose between the good things that life offers us.

Even if we do, there is undeserved suffering, election years, random illness, and the demands of work and family life.

In between the smooth patches, it is stressful to be a human being.

And what use would a Savior be who never knew our stress?

Who had never seen things not worked out as planned?

Who had never struggled to reconcile competing claims?

Who had never been troubled by the future that he was being drawn into?

We need a savior who knows us in our weakness,

a God who joins us in the real life of a human being, in the struggle of human community.

And so Jesus is, in the universe's greatest mystery, a real human and the real God;

The spiritual and the material; the imminent and the transcendent;

Entirely in communion with the Father, entirely in communion with us.

Stressed out and yet sure that God's purposes were being worked out in him.

Neither Parker nor his wife had the fullness of knowledge or all the wisdom of Christ.

But she was further off than he.

Isolated, in her lonely house on the hill, having cut herself off from the sinful world,

the one God so loves, her humanity was slipping through her fingers,

as she sought the sin-free, spiritual plane that she thought she was supposed to live.

Did Jesus come to save the perfect or to seek the lost?

Parker, for all his faults, only wanted to be a human.

There was too much whiskey, too much lust, too many of the wrong kinds of friends,

and yet what he wanted was to live fully as one made in the image of God.

If you've read the story, you know what Parker did.

He ran off to the city and found the best tattoo artist, one who had inked him before.

He chose a new tattoo for his back, an icon of Christ, in Byzantine glory.

A desperate attempt to please his wife, to connect his body and her spirit

To bring together the sacred and what she considered profane

It was a desperate act of love, ill-considered and beautiful.

It was exactly like God's decision to take flesh and come among,

to share in our stress and our joy.

And his gift was received with the same rejection that Christ often encountered,

with further stress, from those who said any divine incarnation is sacrilege.

“Parker’s knees went hollow under him. He wheeled around and cried, “Look at it! Don’t just say that! Look at it!”

“I done looked,” she said.

“Don’t you know who it is?” he cried in anguish.

“No, who is it?” Sarah Ruth said. “It ain’t anybody I know.”

“It’s him,” Parker said.

“Him who?”

“God!” Parker cried.

“God? God don’t look like that!”

“What do you know how he looks?” Parker moaned. “You ain’t seen him.”

“He don’t look,” Sarah Ruth said. “He’s a spirit. No man shall see his face.”

“Aw listen,” Parker groaned, “this is just a picture of him.”

“Idolatry!” Sarah Ruth screamed. “Idolatry! Enflaming yourself with idols under every green tree! I can put up with lies and vanity but I don’t want no idolator in this house!” and she grabbed up the broom and began to thrash him across the shoulders with it.

Parker was too stunned to resist. He sat there and let her beat him until she had nearly knocked him senseless and large welts had formed on the face of the tattooed Christ. Then he staggered up and made for the door.”

People give up on Christ, the church, and the life of faith, when they think the Gospel is the bad news, about how they must give up their humanity to become truly spiritual.

But the Gospel is the good news that God has become human, than humanity might join God in holiness.

That holiness will never deny our humanity, that we have been made and restored in the image of God.

The acceptance of that grace is our freedom from all stress;

The beginning of a new life and the peace that passes all understanding.