

*Whoever Saves One Life Saves the World Entire:
On the Parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin*

Sermon for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Luke 15:1-10

September 11, 2022

Trinity Episcopal Church, Asbury Park

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“Whoever saves one life saves the world entire.”

As I’ve reflected this week on the parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin, my mind kept going back to Oskar Schindler. Schindler was not a perfect man, but he is credited with saving the lives of over 1,200 Jews who worked in his factory during World War II. He was a member of the Nazi party and was an opportunist who hoped to profit from the cheap labor of Jewish prisoners. But over time he began to shield his workers from arrest, deportation, and near-certain execution, using bribes to Nazi officials. He eventually ran through his entire fortune to save his workers. Near the end of the film *Schindler’s List*, Schindler has persuaded the SS not to execute the workers before the Soviet Army arrives. Schindler himself must then flee to avoid arrest as a war criminal, but before he leaves, the workers assemble and his secretary, Stern, presents him with a ring, inscribed with a quote from the Talmud, “Whoever saves one life saves the world entire.” Schindler, overcome with emotion, drops the ring and quickly finds it and places it on his finger. He says, “I could have gotten more out, if I’d just I don’t know...”

Stern says, “Oskar, there are 1200 people alive because of you.”

“If I’d made more money...I threw away so much money.”

“There will be generations because of you.”

“I didn’t do enough.”

“You did so much.”

Schindler breaks down as he points to his car, saying it would have bought a dozen more lives. Holding out his gold Nazi pin, he says it would have bought two more lives, or at least one.

“A person, Stern. For this. One more. I could've gotten one more person. I didn't.”

As he falls to the ground in tears, he is embraced by Stern and then several other workers.

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“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?

"Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me.'”

There are a few strange things going on in these two parables in tonight’s gospel readings. “Which of you,” Jesus begins, implying that this is normal, even

expected behavior from the shepherd. But is it? Of course the shepherd goes after his lost sheep, but as the story goes, the 99 are still in the wilderness. One would expect that he would get the other 99 to safety, then go after the lost sheep. But the puts 99 sheep at risk, leaving them with no protection or shelter, to seek out one that was lost. That's not normal. And when he finds the lost sheep, he hustles the whole flock home and calls his friends and neighbors to join in his celebration. We don't know, but there's a good chance they might be celebrating by dining on one of these sheep.

Likewise, when the woman who only has 10 coins searches diligently to find her lost coin, you would think she needs to hold onto all of her money. But she throws a party, maybe spending more than the one coin she lost.

There is a strangeness at the heart of both of these parables that makes it less noticeable that Jesus has compared God's rejoicing over a repentant sinner to an animal and an inanimate object that are incapable of sinning. The sheep has wandered away, without malicious intent. In fact, it's probably scared. The coin doesn't have feelings or intentions of any kind, of course. So it's quite strange that Jesus tells these parables to the Pharisees and scribes who were grumbling about him, saying this fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.

Because of all these pieces that don't quite add up, I think the point of Jesus' parable is not really so much to talk about sin as it is to talk about God's love. In the parables, the shepherd and the woman with 10 coins represent God. They go to extraordinary lengths to look after one of the precious things entrusted to them. It's worth noting that in Jewish mysticism, 100 is viewed as a perfect number. The 99 sheep were incomplete without the 1. The one is just as important as the 99. Those who look after the lost sheep of humanity, those in danger from others and those in

danger from themselves, are acting as the hands and feet of God in this world. In the compassionate love of Jesus, the sinners that he dines with are just broken people in need of compassion and love. As we all are.

The inscription on the ring that Oskar Schindler's workers gave him comes from a teaching from the Talmud. The full quotation is "Whoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world. And whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world." Following the pattern set by Schindler's ring, when the State of Israel bestows the honor of Righteous Among the Nations on non-Jews who risked their lives for others during the Holocaust, they are given a medal inscribed with the words, "Whoever saves one life, it is as if he saved an entire universe."

Along with Schindler, a lesser known recipient of the Righteous Among the Nations honor was Varian Fry.

In 1940, shortly after Paris fell to the Nazis, a 32-year-old American editor and humanitarian worker named Varian Fry checked into a small hotel in Marseilles, France where he initiated a clandestine operation to rescue some of Europe's most famous artists, writers, and intellectuals who had fled to France. Among them were many whose names were on the Nazis' most wanted list. Once he went to work, he recognized that the need was much greater. Consequently, he expanded his mission to rescue many more in flight from the Nazis and their collaborators.

Over the next 13 months, Fry and a small team of Americans and French helped at least 1,500 refugees escape from France to Spain and provided aid to more than 2,000 others. Among those spirited out of France were the painters Marc Chagall and Max Ernst, the philosopher Hannah Arendt, and Nobel Prize winning medical researcher Otto Meyerhof.

After a year, the collaborationist Vichy French government learned of Fry's efforts. In August 1941, he was expelled "for helping Jews and anti-Nazis. On his return to

New York, Fry sounded the alarm about the Holocaust but met with some resistance and denial. He wrote:

There are some things so horrible that decent men and women find them impossible to believe, so monstrous that the civilized world recoils incredulous before them. The recent reports of the systematic extermination of the Jews in Nazi Europe are of this order... we can offer asylum now, without delay or red tape, to those few fortunate enough to escape from the Aryan paradise. There have been bureaucratic delays in visa procedure which have literally condemned to death many stalwart democrats... This is a challenge which we cannot, must not, ignore.

The shepherd and the woman with the coin represent God in the parables of the lost sheep and lost coin. Oskar Schindler and Varian Fry and all who give of themselves for the sake of others, for the 1 other, are acting as the hands and feet of God in the world.

But parables have many angles. There is not just one meaning. The shepherd and the woman represent God, but they also represent someone who has messed up and lost what is entrusted to them. Lost sheep represent sinners, but they also represent victims in need of help. At one time or other, we are all the the lost sheep and the shepherd. Rescued and rescuer. Innocent victim and guilty perpetrator. Sinners and agents of the divine. Oskar Schindler and Varian Fry were heroes, but they were complicated. They were human. And they were broken. Schindler went on to rely on the monetary assistance of Jewish charities. Fry had difficulty holding down a job and holding together marriages and was later thought to suffer from untreated bipolar disorder. They were shepherds, but they were also lost sheep themselves.

Twenty one years ago, on this day, September 11, terrible things happened. So many lost their lives, including residents of Monmouth County and parishioners of the Diocese of New Jersey. First responders bravely risked their lives and who gave their lives to rescue their fellow human beings...the 1 in 99. We rightly honor

those brave people today, just as we mourn all those lost. But unfortunately some invoke the memory of that terrible day in a campaign of fear and intolerance. We do not honor the lost lives and the bravery of September 11 by painting an entire religion as violent. Violence in the name of religion is not true religion. Islam is no more violent in its history and sacred texts than Christianity or Judaism. It's worth noting that the quote from the Talmud that is used to honor the Righteous Among the Nations is but one version of the teaching. Another one goes like this:

"Whoever destroys a soul from Israel, the Scripture considers it as if he destroyed an entire world. And whoever saves a life from Israel, the Scripture considers it as if he saved an entire world."

All our religions have exclusivist tendencies, but within the religions themselves there is also a counter-narrative that preaches wider inclusion and greater compassion. Jesus himself is doing this in his welcome of those the religious establishment scorned, and Paul later defies Jewish and Christian orthodoxy by sharing the message of Jesus with the gentile world.

Those who commit violence in the name of religion are misguided and misled by false teachers. They have bought into an exclusivist version of religion that becomes extreme. That extremism twists into hatefulness. These captives of an oppressive religious ideology are lost sheep in need of a shepherd. Terrorism is evil, but its perpetrators are human. Very broken humans.

We can honor those who lost their lives on September 11, and those who risked their lives, by building bridges, by striving to build peace. We are not rescued by repaying evil for evil. We become lost sheep ourselves if we do that. God cares not only about Americans and westerners, but also immigrants and refugees and everyone. God cares not only about Christians, but also Jews and Muslims and Hindus and Buddhists and people of all faiths and no faith. God loves everyone, and we are called to be agents of love, We are called to be God's hands and feet and healing embrace in the world. We don't have to solve all the world's problems

ourselves, but as we each do our own part, we contribute to peace and to the healing of the world.

“Whoever saves one life saves the world entire.”