

**Christ Church, Georgetown**  
**Sunday, July 30, 2017**  
**Pentecost 8, Proper 12, Year A**  
**Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52; Romans 8:26-39**  
**The Reverend Timothy A. R. Cole**

Immortalized in Spielberg's famous 90's film "Schindler's List," Oscar Schindler was a Sudeten German industrialist, a German spy, and a member of the Nazi party. I think this film is one of the best I have ever seen. As I am sure many of you will remember, it depicts how this rather flawed and self interested man became the savior of some 1,200 Jews in occupied Poland in the later stages of World War II.

Schindler became the owner of a ceramic factory which had a large Jewish workforce. Initially he preferred Jewish to Polish workers simply because they were cheaper to hire. His interest was not ideological; it was just to make money. In time, however, he became sickened by what he saw happening to the Jews in the concentration camps nearby and he began to protect his own workers and others as he could. He had made a great deal of money but, as the war wore on, he spent more and more on bribes and accommodations with the camp authorities to protect his workforce. In the end, he had nothing. After the war his various attempts at making money all ended in failure and, ultimately, bankruptcy.

The film has two most powerful scenes, I think. The first is of Spielberg's single use of color in an otherwise completely black and white film. One little girl's red coat stands out in the crowds of people being rounded up in the Krakow Ghetto to be taken away for extermination. It just highlights so powerfully the fragility of innocence and the value of every individual life in the face of the dark tide of human evil.

The other scene that stands out is the one that gives the film its name. In it, Ben Kingsley, who plays Schindler's administrative assistant, Itzhak Stern, is holding the list of names of those they are rescuing from the camps. Schindler is wracked with guilt and despair that they cannot find a way to make the list longer, but Stern holds it up and says, "This list is an absolute good." In other words, no limitations around it, no failure to make it longer, no amount of evil that surrounds it can alter the fact that it is a pure piece of goodness that stands apart for ever, unassailable, as a light in the darkness.

Schindler was no saint. He was a deeply flawed and mostly self interested man. Yet he largely made possible that list of life in the face of so much death.

The Bible is full of deeply flawed characters like Schindler. We heard about Jacob last week, and we might think of the Apostle Peter in the same light: Peter, the impulsive one; the one who keeps getting it wrong, who tries to tell Jesus that there is another way, other than the cross; Peter the one who swears he will die for Jesus and then, the same night, denies him three times, abandoning him in Christ's darkest hour. And yet, he was the Rock and later did die for Christ, crucified outside another city wall, and the bones of this imperfect fisherman now rest beneath the largest church in Christendom.

Perhaps one of the harder challenges of being a Christian today, I think, is trying to hold together the two clear messages that our two readings give us today.

First, in St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, we hear his great affirmation of the indestructibility of God's love for his chosen ones despite all their flaws.

"Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn?" ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

We preachers speak a lot about God's love and about how nothing we can do will alter the fact that he loves us. Rightly so, for that is a message that sits at the heart of the Gospel. And yet, there is always the danger, isn't there, that we might think, "Oh well, God loves me no matter what I do. No point in getting too worked up about right and wrong and the drift of my life into the shadows at times. He will accept me in the end anyway."

This is not what St Paul is saying, of course, but there is a danger that the Gospel of Love can become a gospel of complacency and compromise, a retreat into mere emotionalism.

But against that, we also have to hold the words of Jesus in today's Gospel. The kingdom of heaven is like a tiny mustard seed that grows into the greatest of bushes, or like the trace of yeast that leavens the great quantity of flour, or like the treasure or the pearl hidden in the field that is worth selling everything you have to possess, or it is like "a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Here, the Kingdom is thing of great power. A tiny trace of its pure essence, like the little girl's red coat in the film, changes all that is around it. It is worth giving literally everything we have in order to possess it. It is a matter of life and death. The angels will come and sift the world and us at the end of the age, and the good will be brought into the light and the evil will be burned.

How can we hold these two truths together? That nothing can separate us from the love of God, even our own sinfulness, and that this way we follow has both life and death hanging on the choices we make?

Well, I think that Schindler and Peter have something to say to us about this. St. Paul, as well, for that matter; remember he says, "For the good that I would, I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do.... Wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?"

Each of these three men, like you and me, were deeply flawed and sinful human beings, and yet they were all able to be part of an absolute good because they were all, in the end, after many failures and halting attempts, prepared to sacrifice everything. Schindler, in the end, sacrificed all his money and his big chance to be a success in life. Peter and Paul, both ended up as martyrs because, for all their flaws, in the end, they made the choices that really mattered when they really mattered.

So as you and I come here each week, we know we are in large part the tares of last week's Gospel and the bad fish of this week's one. And yet, like Peter, Paul, and Schindler, we still have the opportunity and yearn to make the right choices when they really matter. We come, I think, as George Herbert most truly and wonderfully describes in his poem, "Love III," not as people who think the Gospel of Love means that what we choose does not matter. We come, not presuming on God's forgiveness and grace, but rather hoping against hope that all our wrong choices will not stop us from being able to be part of the absolute good that Christ is making now.

LOVE (III), by George Herbert

Love bade me welcome, yet my soul drew back,  
    Guilty of dust and sin.  
But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack  
    From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning  
    If I lack'd anything.

"A guest," I answer'd, "worthy to be here;"  
    Love said, "You shall be he."  
"I, the unkind, the ungrateful? ah my dear,  
    I cannot look on thee."  
Love took my hand and smiling did reply,  
    "Who made the eyes but I?"

"Truth, Lord, but I have marr'd them; let my shame  
    Go where it doth deserve."  
"And know you not," says Love, "who bore the blame?"  
    "My dear, then I will serve."  
"You must sit down," says Love, "and taste my meat."  
    So I did sit and eat.

So let us sit and eat, and then go out from here to serve, to look for the little girl in the red coat in the turmoil of our world today, to look for the mustard seed and the leaven that seem so small and pathetic now and yet are more powerful than all the money and the power there is. Let us look for the pearl of great price and the treasure hidden in the field that is worth all that we have to give.