Making the Way of the Good Samaritan a Way of Life

Oskar Schindler, popularized in part through the film “Schindler’s List,” is known for his heroic actions that saved over 1,000 Jews from the Holocaust. However, in some respects he could not have been more different than the people he helped save. So, who was this man, really? And what led him to do what he did?

He was born in 1908 in Czechoslovakia into a prominent and wealthy family, and had neighbors and friends who were Jews growing up. But by the 1930s, due to the Depression, he was bankrupt. In 1939, the Nazis rolled into his country, and he, as did many others, joined the Nazi party, seeing perhaps an opportunity. He got on good terms with the local Gestapo chiefs, and was recruited by the German Intelligence Agency to get information about Poles, which he did well that made him even more impressive in the eyes of the Germans. As the war went on, he moved to Krakow, taking over a Jewish family’s apartment. Through the use of bribes and black market goods, he took over a Jewish-owned enameled-goods factory, where he employed Jewish workers, presumably at first because they were cheap labor.

However, as the war went on, and he saw the brutality of the Nazis accelerate with murder, violence and terror, Schindler underwent a change. He didn’t just see the Jews as cheap labor, but as real, human people – mothers, fathers and children who were exposed to a ruthless slaughter. And so, he decided to risk everything to save 1200 from certain death. He used his wits against Amon Goeth, the SS officer who headed the brutal death camp at Krakow, Plaszow, by convincing him to let Jews working at his factory be part of a sub-camp near the plant. This allowed Schindler to have food and medicine smuggled into the barracks with less danger. The guards did know of this though, and Schindler bribed them to keep quiet. At the factory, he lived there in case the Gestapo would come in when he wasn’t there so he could intervene if needed. He gave his workers more food than anywhere else; when food begins to dwindle, great sums of money are spent by Schindler to get food to people. He also registered older workers as being 20 years younger than they were, and children as adults, for the older and younger were the more likely they were to be murdered. Lawyers, doctors and artists are also registered as metal workers on his part, because without this being done they too would have been deemed expendable.

He could have walked away, still wealthy and let people die. But instead, he would spend every penny he had in bribing and paying off Goeth and other Nazi officials to protect and save Jewish lives. The rest of the money that didn’t go to bribing went to feeding and protecting the Jews in any way he could. As the war turned against Germany, Schindler still refused to walk away. He continued to bribe and beg, and got permission to move the factory and even take his workers with him, which was unheard of. These were the 1,098 on “Schindler’s List.” Every penny was spent on them. He was joined by his wife, Emile, who sold her jewels and looked after the sick. He even cared for those who died, having a Jewish burial in a hidden graveyard that he had established and paid for. And inside the factory, he also tried to make sure the Nazi’s collapse would be hastened. He His factory made countless shells, but none were

usable. Instead, they made false military travel passes and ration cards. Even so, he got the Gestapo to send him 100 more Jews to assist in the “continuing war industry production.”

It came to an end in May of 1945, when the Russians moved into Brunnlitz, Czechoslovakia.

He would die in 1974, and asked to be buried in Jerusalem. When his friend Poldek asked him why, his response was “because my children are here.” His remains were taken to Israel, where his lead coffin was carried through the streets of Jerusalem. He was buried in the Catholic churchyard on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, in the presence of hundreds of the people he saved. No one knows why he did what he did; he wasn’t the most religious of people; and by outward appearances he lived a rather carefree life. But in his words, "I knew the people who worked for me... When you know people, you have to behave toward them like human beings.” He did that and much more.

This week in the Gospel, we have the familiar story of the Good Samaritan. The Samaritan could not be more different than the man on the side of the road, presumably a Jew, who is passed by the priest and Levite (a fellow Jew). Instead the Samaritan helps him out. It’s a challenge to us to remember that as the disciples were sent out on a mission last week, so too are we - and this mission requires a radical commitment to love of God and neighbor.

As a starting point, we need to remember the commandment Jesus gives us to love one another doesn’t have conditions with it, meaning we cant love some of the time and not others. This does not mean we can’t have emotions or be frustrated or even angry with the actions of others, but it does mean we try to see others always through the eyes of Jesus.

The basics include making sure we try to respect others and not dehumanize people through gossip, racism, or hatred based on politics, ideology, etc.. Disagreeing is well and fine - there are people I do not see eye to eye with and have strong opinions on various issues - but we should always strive to remember that the person we disagree with is also loved by God and created in His image. Like Schindler who underwent a change, we, too, should examine our consciences and ask ourselves are we changing into being more caring and loving, or more angry and intolerant? Are we objectifying people more based on their body or their function in society, or seeing through to the soul?

We also have to be constantly challenging ourselves to pay it forward, taking the love God has for us to all we meet. It means challenging ourselves to do little things like avoiding gossip; apologizing and swallowing our pride when we’ve said something we regret, or picking up on signs that a loved one needs us to be there with them because they’ve had a rough day or are going through a difficult situation. It could mean doing works of charity too, like helping the less fortunate.

This parable is a reminder of how easy it can be at times to judge people. There's a lot of judging going on it would seem in this Gospel. The lawyer in the story who asks the question is depicted as a rather mean person who just wants to trick Jesus; hence it's easy to put him in a box. All the audience who heard this parable had to hear was "Samaritan" and they knew all they needed to know. But the reason Jesus answers the lawyer's question is while on the surface at that moment might be someone with ulterior motives and a mind seemingly closed, Jesus sees the capacity for good in him. How many people must have quickly judged Schindler who didn't know the real man, but just saw the carefree man who knew how to buy people off to get what he needed. Below the surface though was a man who saw what so many others missed and who did such good things with his life. We have to judge actions in life and use common sense – actions have consequences. But we have to balance that by remembering it can be so easy to judge a book by the cover, and also remember that over a lifetime, people can change for the better or the worse, as the life of Schindler shows us.

Also, let's never forget "love" means many things, but comes down to willing the good of the other. There is the actions of mercy, like Schindler. But there is also the actions we do when we challenge others with love to live the Gospel; to look at their choices they make. Sometimes when we shine a light on someone they may not react in a very positive way - remember last week when Jesus said we are being sent like sheep among wolves! - but fortitude is such an important virtue. It's what Schindler exhibited, but it's what we do as well when we testify to the truth in a world where our faith is so counter cultural. Deep down, I truly believe people are searching for the truth, asking that question of the scholar of the law "teacher what must I do to inherit eternal life?" - but the answer to loving God and neighbor with our whole heart, mind and soul is one of many layers. Ultimately we need to do both the corporal and spiritual works of mercy to help the entire person body and soul.

Lastly, remember at times we are that person left for dead. Sometimes we are spiritually dead because of choices we've made, and need to listen to others who are coming to us out of love to change our lives and make better choices to turn away from sin. Sometimes we are dead because of suffering we've endured and just need comfort and love, and to be vulnerable, opening up our hearts to our pain and get over our ego and pride. When we are like that man left for dead, we have to not fear asking for help and seeking people out.

Love has the incredible power to transform. May we let it do that to us; the love of God that comes to us; the love that others bring us, and the love that we bring to one another following the example of the Good Samaritan remembering what a radical thing that love is.

God bless,

Fr. Paul