

## **Lost in America**

Three killings in quick succession have dominated national attention. On August 22, Ukrainian refugee Iryna Zarutka was fatally stabbed on a Charlotte, North Carolina commuter train, with video of her horrific murder released this week. On August 27, there was a mass shooting at Annunciation Catholic Church in Minneapolis killing two children. This week, on September 10, Christian conservative leader Charlie Kirk was assassinated on the campus of Utah Valley University. His death has sent shock waves around the nation and even the world.

However, there were other shootings not widely reported. The day before the Annunciation shooting, another mass shooting took place in the same city, close to Christo Rey Jesuit High School, killing one and injuring several others. The same morning of Kirk's assassination, there was a shooting in Colorado.

And yet, the three recent atrocities that made national news were particularly brutal. Iryna Zarutka was killed for no reason on her way home from work. After fleeing the violence in Ukraine, she thought she was safe here in the U.S.A., but her young life was tragically cut short. The young children attending the Eucharist in a church could not possibly have imagined bullets shattering the stained-glass windows killing two of them. The bullet that killed Charlie Kirk came without warning as he was speaking to thousands of students, and sadly his wife and young children were present.

I could list any number of other shootings that happened this past year. Sadly, these killings were done by young men between twenty and thirty years old. Why are these young men so angry, alienated, full of rage, that they feel they must kill? That's a puzzle to me and to those who study our culture.

Roman Catholic priest and columnist Raymond de Souza refers to the killings as "an icon of evil." An icon, in this instance, is an image making present the reality of evil. There is no question that there is real evil in the world, and we would be foolish to dismiss it.

However, evil does not have the last word in our Christian faith. The cross on which Jesus was crucified was an icon of sin, cruelty, and death. But by

the power of God the cross of Christ converts the cursed icon into a blessed one. It becomes the image that makes present the mystery of salvation. It declares that God's goodness is greater than our sin. Even when we are lost, we are never ultimately lost because God's grace is greater than our guilt. God can change hearts, change minds, transform lives, and pull us from the depths of hell into the heights of his presence.

St. Paul knew what it was like to be lost and found. He described himself as "the worst of sinners." He wasn't bluffing. He had reached that point in life when he could recognize all the potential for evil that he possessed. Yet sinner that he was, Paul knew himself to be a forgiven sinner – and that made all the difference. He thus was able to confront the depths of his misery because he felt the heights of God's mercy. Because he came to trust in Christ more than in himself, Paul discovered that God's love was greater than his sin. He was lost and found.

Lost and found is the experience of being a Christian. When we lose our way in life, when our perspective is dimmed and our conscience becomes callous, when the divine light within us flickers, God is still searching for us, finding us, embracing us, and leading us home. Even when we get so hopelessly lost that we lose our bearings and do wicked things – God never gives up on us. There is no limit to God's love, and therefore to our forgiveness.

We can't forgive those who hurt others, because only the offended person can forgive the offender. However, we can forgive those who hurt us. That is the beginning of reconciliation in our lives and in our world. It is not easy, I admit, but it is the basis of the Christian life.

Thornton Wilder describes a lost person in his play, *The Skin of our Teeth*. In the play, a World War II soldier, George returns home to his wife Maggie. He's been away for years, and the experience has profoundly changed him. George announces to Maggie that he's decided to leave her for another woman.

Faced with her husband's moral weakness, Maggie mouths a spirited defense: "I married you," she says, "because you gave me a promise... that promise made up for your faults. And the promise I gave you made up for mine. Two imperfect people got married, and it was the promise that made our marriage."

To this, George objects that the war has changed him, but Maggie refuses to let it go. “Oh, George,” she continues, “you must get it back again. Think! What else kept us alive all those years? Even now, it’s not comfortable we want. We can suffer what’s necessary; only give us back the promise.”

Maggie won’t give on George, even when George gives up on himself. She literally pulls him up from the depths, and in the end they reconcile. It’s a difficult road, a painful road, but they find a way to get the promise back in their marriage.

Keep that in mind the next time you lose your way in life. There’s the promise; there’s always the promise – the promise of God never to stop loving us even when we can’t love ourselves – the promise that God never gives up on us no matter how far gone we may be. None of us are ever out of the reach of God’s love. God can find us, and finding us embrace us, and embracing us lead us home. We hold fast to the promise of God’s forgiveness. We rely on the promise of God’s mercy. We trust in the promise of God’s grace.

So, have hope. No matter how lost you are in life, God can find you. No matter how unlovable you think you are, God still loves you. Try as you may to give up on God, God will never give up on you. Jesus says that God is like the shepherd pursuing the one lost sheep. God is like the woman searching for the one lost coin.

If you want a clear picture of what God is like for a Christian, here it is: we have a God who aggressively goes after, searches out, and rescues us from being lost. That is why we should never give up on ourselves, on our country or other people.

There have been many films in recent years about family members or loved ones not giving up on each other, rescuing loved ones from gangs, sex traffickers, kidnappers, or getting lost in the wilderness, helping family members overcome drug and alcohol addiction, parents standing up for their children when they are bullied. It is amazing how far love will go to rescue the ones we love.

Oddly enough, the greatest example of this love is in the animated film *Finding Nemo*. It was an amazingly successful film, but why? Why did children love it so much? Why were adults brought close to tears watching

it? I suspect that behind the technical and artistic features of the film is a great theme – of a bit too careless child being found by a parent who never gives up on him, even when the situation seems hopeless. Through almost every obstacle imaginable, in the most difficult circumstances, the father keeps caring, keeps searching, keeps persevering, keeps sacrificing himself for the sake of the child he loves.

It's a parable about God's love for us – a love that never gives up, never let's go, and never quits or turns back. As I say: to be loved, to be really loved like this is the experience of being a Christian. It is to know that however much you may feel lost in life, God is with you – always with you – and therefore you are never really lost at all.

But there is one last thing to say. St. Paul says, "This is a true saying, to be completely accepted and believed: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." This is good news for you and me. The Gospel is all about grace, amazing grace. God says to us: "Before you asked for forgiveness, I forgave you. Before you sought acceptance, I accepted you. Before you could earn my love, I loved you. I have loved you and accepted you and forgiven you from the beginning of creation and forever. Just let yourself be loved, accepted, and forgiven – totally, unconditionally, and always." That's why we never give up on human beings, no matter how much we dislike them or disagree with them, because God does not give up on us.

In a Kentucky city in the 1950s, one of the most influential and notorious men in the state died after reigning for decades over an area widely known for its corruption and violence. The rich and powerful gangster claimed to have a conversion experience shortly before his death, and at his funeral gave his own eulogy through a tape recording which brought many of the mourners to tears.

In the Sunday sermon a few days later, the minister who presided at the funeral spoke to the congregation about the gangster's dying remarks. "Many of you will wonder how such a man could find salvation," said the minister, "but the answer is simple: amazing grace, amazing grace."

"Amazing grace! How sweet the sound / that saved a wretch like me. / I once was lost but now am found, / was blind but now I see."

Let me conclude by mentioning again the killings that happened in our country. I believe that by the grace of God the violence and vitriol afflicting our nation can stop. That Americans can be civil and respectful toward one another, that we can work toward reconciling our differences, that people who are mentally unstable will get the treatment they require, and that harmony, justice, and peace will prevail among people of good will. Just as I don't believe any human being is inevitably lost, so I don't believe our country is inevitably lost. By the grace of God, we can find our way once again. We must work at it, pray for it, and listen attentively to differing voices in search of common ground.

Above all, we must never lose heart. We must never despair or become cynical or bitter. We must keep our hope alive because God's grace is always greater than our sin.

The Rev. Dr. Gary Nicolosi  
September 14, 2025  
Text – Luke 15:1-10; 1 Tim. 1:12-17  
Proper 19, C  
Advent Episcopal Church, Sun City West, AZ