

Saving Private Ryan

St Laurent Military Graveyard, Normandy France, 1998.

“Immaculately trimmed hedgegrows, high enough to block all else from view, edged the pathway. Up ahead, grandpa—in his plaid shirt and gray slacks and socks and sandals—was padding quickly down the tunnel of green, and little Jimmy—at seven the youngest—could hardly keep up.

Jimmy could hardly believe a geezer like grandpa could move so fast, hunched over, sunlight glinting off the tufts of his white hair. Mom and dad, and the rest of the family, were almost running, trying to catch up...as if the old man had escaped and they were hoping to recapture him.

Then Grandpa stopped.

Like he'd run into an invisible, brick wall, and Jimmy could hear his grandfather's breathing quickening, as if he were still running, ever faster, ever faster—only he wasn't. Grandpa was falling to his knees, and, as he did, he sucked in wind in an awful wheeze, which made Jimmy think Grandpa was collapsing or something.

‘Dad!’

Mom's voice, from behind Jimmy, carried concern, but Jimmy knew now that Grandpa hadn't fallen; it was more like he was...kneeling. Praying.

Pretty soon Jimmy knew why. When he came up beside his grandfather, whose eyes were riveted on the landscape that had finally revealed itself as the path sloped down, Jimmy saw an amazing abstract design, a collaboration by God and man. The grass on the gently rolling hill was God's work, while the sea of white crosses, interspersed with an occasional Star of David, was man's.

To Jimmy, who at seven had only been to a cemetery one other time...it was as if everybody on earth had died and been buried here; acres and acres of green with white filed his eyes. No sky above or even to the left or right, just green, white, green white, green, white, till the boy's eyes blurred....Grandpa's eyes didn't have any expression at all. His eyes were open wide, as if he were trying to fill them up with the green and white landscape....Those eyes must have seen a lot of things...Jimmy thought.

The boy wondered if Grandpa was thinking about people who were buried in this place, friends of his. Dad said Grandpa had fought in the war here, but Jimmy didn't understand, not really. He had heard of that war in Vietnam. But this was France.

Maybe a war was fought here once, too,¹

Thus begins the novelization of Steven Spielberg's epic masterpiece *Saving Private Ryan*. Jimmy's grandfather is, of course, Private Ryan. It is no secret to the viewer. He has been saved, and, at this profound moment of his life, as his family looks on with amazement, he kneels and weeps before the cross of the one who came to save him. He reflects on that man and on his act. His deep reflection throws light upon the life he has lived, and he cannot escape examining that life.

But more about that later. Scene fade. From all the blue and green and white of that calm, beautiful day the viewer is hurled into gray. Gunmetal gray. Gunmetal gray sea. Gunmetal gray sky. As the gunmetal gray landing craft move inexorably forward over icy waters to deliver men to the assault on Normandy the whitecaps snarl and threaten. The twenty-five minute battle scene that follows is, according to most critics and soldiers, one of the most authentic and powerful ever filmed. It is riveting yet devastating to

¹ Max Allan Collins, *Saving Private Ryan* (New York: Signet, 1998), 11-13.

watch; its realistic, chaotic, unrelenting sights and sounds transport the viewer into virtual battle. No Hollywood gloss here. War is hell. And at the end of this scene the beach is ravaged as if hell itself has been emptied. The beach is covered with dead fish and dead men. One of those men has a name on his back. The name is Ryan.

This Ryan is one of three Ryans who have been killed in battle. Three Ryans out of four sons—the sons of a woman in Iowa. Just one—Private James Ryan—remains alive, perhaps, somewhere in France. The Pentagon orders a group of soldiers to find Private Ryan and to bring him safely home. And, as we experience this search for the lost one, we also search our own deep thoughts about what it means to be saved, about the sacrifices it takes to save, and about how we live after the saving.

Based on what I heard the adults say being saved was what the Christianity of my childhood was all about. As a child I was asked if I was saved. I did not completely understand what I had to be saved from or for. But I did learn the vocabulary that went with it. I learned that it was very good if you were saved, and it was very bad if you were not. I learned that at the First Baptist Church in Paterson, New Jersey; that was the church with the white cross in the front that made me wide-eyed when it lit up at the end of the Sunday evening service, when the people who said yes to “are you saved” sang “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.” I learned those words there.

Those of you who have been around evangelical churches for a few years know the vocabulary. How many times have you heard the phrase? How many times have any of you read it on a bumper sticker or heard it from the lips of a televangelist? How many of you have heard it used like a password to a very elite club? And how many times have you seen someone

who has not grown up in that tradition totally baffled by that question? I am sure that many of you could explain to me with great intelligence and heart what it means to you, and yet I ask that you reflect upon it again today from a new perspective. From where I stand in my life today I honor what it meant to those good people in Paterson. But as I study and grow in my faith, it surely means more to me than can be expressed on a bumper sticker.

But often in Scripture, as in the film, being saved means many, many things. It can mean being healed, being cured, being rescued, being made whole. It can mean finding the sheep, the coin, the boy. It can mean finding one's self. Given the depth and breadth of the meaning we can agree. It is a universal experience. The Gospel accounts emphasize the universal nature of being saved. "For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10) can certainly be read in many ways, for there are so many ways to be lost. If you think of the Gospel stories each one with whom Jesus has an encounter has something unique from which she or he needs to be saved in order to be whole. Each of them, like each of us, needs to find and to be found.

Each story is different because to be saved differs from person to person, from parable to parable. If we really listened to each other we would probably discover that each of us has been saved and is being saved uniquely, that each of us has been found and is still being discovered, that each of us has found and needs to find. Each of us at some moment in our lives is that sheep scooped up and draped over the shoulders of the Good Shepherd. When that happens we are saved. Saved from contemporary gods and ancient devils. Saved from all that stands between each of us and our God. Saved. Rescued. Found.

The unique ways in which each of us need to be saved range from the obvious to the not so obvious at all. One of us has to be saved daily from the agony of addiction. One from an intense anxiety about not making the grade. One from the tyranny of not being smart enough. One from an unrelenting need for approval. One from a vitriolic negativity which shuts down a room. One from a prejudice that blinds and debilitates. One from a loneliness that no one can penetrate. One whose need to be righteous blocks any creative thought. One from an inability to walk away once and from all from an abusive relationship. One who feels he is not worthy, that in now way could he ever fully accept the love of Almighty God. One who cannot let go of a grief which has permeated her every thought and paralyzed her every action. One whose need to be sick is greater than her need to be well. One whose drive to perfection is speeding out of control. One whose insecurities about money cause him to never really relax. One whose childhood memories haunt each day and terrorize each night. One who never stops trying to earn the love of a loveless father. From person to person, from pew to pew, each of us has something unique, something from which we need to be saved today and every day so that we can live as God so passionately desires. And so God sometimes searches for us and sometimes waits for us to search for ourselves.

But why Peter out for his water walk or why the leper or why that woman facing fierce, stone throwing men or why you or why me or why Private Ryan? Why? Saving, it seems, is never without the unanswerable questions, is never without someone paying a price, is never without energy going out of one place to another, is never without sacrifice. Is he worth it? Are you worth it? Am I worth it? And this is the theme *Saving Private Ryan* explores so eloquently.

A conversation between the very human hero, Captain Miller—portrayed to perfection by Tom Hanks—and the quintessential “Sarge”, seeks to answer the unanswerable. Why is any life given up for another? Why is one sacrificed to save another? I will delete the many expletives as I recount this dialogue for you, and I will remind you that this scene is set as the two men rest in a beautiful church surrounded by war. Using humor to cover his agony, Captain Miller reflects on those lost under his command as he searches for Ryan. One is named Vecchio. One Caparzo.

“Yeah, yeah—Vecchio.” Miller shook his head. Goofy...kid... Vecchio, Caparzo. Jesus...”

“Jesus?” Sarge gave him the needle. “You mean you got him killed, too? I had no idea. You’re at the right place to make amends.”

Miller smiled at that, shaking his head; he was working to keep the tears inside.... “Every time you get one of your boys killed,” Miller said softly, almost prayerfully, “You tell yourself you just saved the lives of two, three, ten, maybe a hundred other men and boys.”

“Not a bad way to look at it.”

“You know how many men I’ve lost under my command?”

“Not offhand.”

“Caparzo made ninety-four. So, hell, that means I probably saved the lives of ten times that many, maybe twenty times. See it’s simple. Just do the math. It let’s you choose the mission over the men, every time.”

“Except this time the mission is a man.”

Captain Miler then asks that impossible. Is Caparzo, who has just been killed on a mission to save Ryan, worth Ryan?

Sarge Responds: “Maybe to his mother.”

“I got a mother, you got a mother, Caparzo had a mother....” and he was staring at the stained-glass window as if daring God to do something about his blasphemy. “This Private James Francis Ryan better be pretty...special. He better get home and cure cancer or invent a light bulb that never...burns out, or a car that runs on water. Because the truth is I wouldn’t trade ten Ryans for one Vecchio or one Caparzo.”²

Kind of makes you think of “Which 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?” doesn’t it? The issue is one of worth. The captain does not yet know Ryan, but he knows the men he has lost. Is anyone worth the sacrifice? Why would anyone in her right mind risk 99 sheep for one? Why?

So here is this in-your-face metaphor: that God will seek to save us—even if we are wandering around like some sorry sheep. The movie plays it this way. When Ryan is found he refuses to go. His reasons are sound and play interestingly into the plot and character development, but yet another stay-up-all-night-and-talk-about-it idea is introduced. To accept the saving is a choice. A choice.

Did you hear what I just said? If you really hear it you must be spinning just a little. You must be shaking your head and trying to understand a God who both creates the universe and goes after one lost sheep. This is the way Grandpa Ryan feels as the movie ends. “Then Ryan looked at the cross as if it were a person and said. ‘I’ve tried. Tried to live my life the best I cold. I hope that’s enough. I didn’t cure any diseases. I

² *Saving Private Ryan*, 181-182.

worked a farm. I raised a family. I loved a life. I only hope, in your eyes at least, I earned what you did for me.'

'Jim...' Now it was not his grandson's voice, but his wife's. His son, his son's wife, the four grandkids, were keeping a respectful distance. Just over the rise. Their expressions were touched with confusion, because what this meant was beyond them. So far beyond them...but not beyond the woman he had lived with, this woman standing beside him now and always. He'd never really told her anything about this place. No war stories, except a few funny ones. Still, this was the woman who had held him, rocked him, comforted him, on those nights, those once frequent, now occasional nights, when he would wake screaming, or weeping, or both...

'Are you alright, Jim?'

He looked at her, and the tears in his eyes made tears form in hers.

'Alice...Have I lived a good life? Am I a good man?'

'Jim...what...'

'Just tell me...Tell me if you think I've earned it.'"

As we watch this scene at the end of the film each of us stands alone in that field of crossed and stars. Each of us must stand alone and contemplate the enormity of the sacrifice. Each of us is Private Ryan. As we stand before the cross, like Ryan, we are judged by the cross not because of God. We are judged as we stand before the cross because it causes us to judge ourselves.

Our Epiphany there is our life in its light. It is impossible to hide from or to ignore the sacrifice, the life that has been given for the saving. And the only thing we have to give back at that moment, besides our tears and gratitude, is how we have lived, how we are living. It is our moment. The issue of our worthiness is not God's. The issue of our worthiness is our

issue. “Just tell me...tell me if you think I’ve earned it.” Ryan’s wife, of course, says yes, as any good wife would.

But I think if I asked and answered that question myself I would have to say no. NO. There is no way I could earn it. No way. I will have a grateful heart. I will honor your memory by living with integrity. But I cannot repay Captain Miller. I cannot repay the sacrifices that have been made for me. I cannot fully understand, even with my college degree and well stocked bookcases the phrases “and his father went out to meet him: and “Jesus died to save you”

But I can continue to work out, in fear and trembling, being saved. It is not just that I have been saved by the most awesome sacrifice in history, not just that I have been saved from something, but that I have been saved for something and to something. We have heard it expressed a thousand ways: from blindness to sight, from conflict to peace, from insecurity to confidence, from criticism to creativity, from fear to blessed assurance, from retribution to forgiveness, from grief to rejoicing, from disease to health, from stinginess to generosity, from addiction to choice, from self-centeredness to God centeredness from lost to found, from death to life,. I am saved—we are saved—in every way we need to be saved. We are saved to grow gardens, offer an encouraging word, make music, rock babies, build bridges, to teach children, to feed the hungry, to bring good news to the poor, to heal when we can, to hold hands with the dying, to end wars, to pray without ceasing. The Gospel tells us so clearly how to live once we are found. So I can, like the elderly Private Ryan at the end of the film, fall on my knees in front of the cross and weep in profound gratitude. Then I can get up off my knees and try to live my life like someone worth dying for.

Amen. Reverend Sharon Smith. Roland Park Presbyterian Church. May 25th, 2008

