

“The Lottery”
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I’ve never attended an execution. I remember my old friend, Bob Tsu, a priest who I got to know first when I was a teenager and a member of the Diocesan youth group. He did. When I became the associate at a parish in the East Bay, Bob was the rector of a neighboring parish and we had occasion to become reacquainted. One Good Friday we did a joint service and Bob told about growing up in China as a young child being taken by his father to a public hanging. What struck me about his story was how it seemed that his father and he had walked for hours to get to the scaffold and how many hundreds of people had come from so far to be there. He said it had the feel of a picnic.

And while I’ve never been to a public hanging, I do remember the shock I felt at the black and white TV presentation of Shirley Jackson’s, The Lottery, that by then was already an American classic short story even though it was hardly more than ten years since its appearance in *The New Yorker* magazine. It’s publication on June 28, 1948 continues to hold the record for the most mail and the highest number of cancelled subscriptions. What I most remember about that television dramatization, what was most shocking was the blithe and congenial way in which the townspeople from the fictional New England village gathered on the village green as if for a carnival. The children first running and playing gather and hoard stones into piles at the corner of the green. Then the men talking about taxes and harvest gather next, followed by the women.

Throughout, the “Lottery” is mentioned as the event that brings them together on this same day each year. It is kind of their sacred tradition that we hear some distant villages are talking about abandoning and others already have. The oldest member of the village repeats the rationale for the annual rite: ‘lottery in June, corn crop will come soon.’ It’s not until the question of the rules comes up from the woman whose family has been chosen that we begin to become uncomfortable. Then when from among her family the slip of paper with the black spot falls to her, she exclaims in a muted, almost resigned fashion, “It’s not fair. It’s just not fair.”

Yet the eerily calm, picnic atmosphere is never broken. Only for the reader, or in my case the viewer, does the impact of the shock of what the woman has won by her lottery participation dawn on us. Shirley Jackson is quoted as saying in a rare interview some years later, “ You wouldn’t believe how many people expected her to win a Bendix washer.” Rather than a major appliance, her award now means she moves into the center of the circle of her neighbors while those other members of the town, including her own three year old child pick up stones and begin to throw them at her, stoning her until she is dead.

What is so horrifying about this short story, what so dreadfully galled its first readers in the *New Yorker* and what spooked me as an impressionable youth, is the matter-of-fact disconnect between what is really taking place and how calm is the manner in which the townspeople regard it. It is, in the phrase coined by the 20th century philosopher Hannah Arendt (1963) who made the Holocaust her prime example, the “banality of evil.” The juggernaut of the German bureaucratic social machine like that of the Roman Empire rolls over countless victims with little notice and less protest. You see it expressed in the very center of the gospel of John (in a kind of offstage aside that becomes the lynchpin of the entire narrative) when the Pharisees come to the Council, the Sanhedrin, to express their fear at the popularity of Jesus and his ministry that has just raised the dead man Lazarus. If we do nothing, they argue, it will draw the attention of Rome and they will come and destroy our temple. “But one of them, (the Gospel goes on) Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, ‘You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.’ . . . So from that day on they planned to put him to death.” (John 11:49-53)

It is as if, conveniently for the Pharisees and those who fear the intervention of Rome, the lot has fallen on Jesus. He will be the one “stoned” this year. What Shirley Jackson is telling us is that invisible to us there are continually being chosen—as in a lottery—insignificant, ordinary people to be the sacrificial scapegoat on our behalf. However we may justify their choice—’after all, if this terror suspect may have information that could spare one life, then no ends can be spared to get that life-saving intel,’ or ‘they didn’t read the fine print on the loan documents,’ or ‘didn’t they join-up themselves? how can they now claim the war is immoral and illegal?’ or, ‘it

may not be that murder they are guilty of, but you can bet it's some other equally heinous crime,' they no doubt deserve whatever they are getting and we will all be safer because they have been punished, because they're life has been spent.

Jackson's story functions like a parable. It ensnares us. Lulling us into a comfortably familiar sense of summer in the idyllic small town of our vaguely remembered childhood, it traps us into throwing the first stone. Before we know it "it is finished," and we are left exposed, angry, ashamed, holding in our hands the evidence of a lynching. It's only after the startling end of the story that we can awaken, that we can come to the event we have just witnessed—looking back at the clues along the way—to the event we as the readers have participated in. This rude awakening is what makes the story such a great work of art.

If functions like the narrative of the Passion that confronts us each year on Good Friday with our largely unconscious complicity with evil. As we read the passion in worship, picking up stones and casting them each time we cry out "crucify him," we inevitably cringe at our own capacity to become lost in a bloodthirsty crowd. Hopefully the repetitive reading of the passion helps us to avoid losing consciousness at such moments in our daily lives. It helps us to be able to resist the temptation to throw the "first stone." You remember that moment when Jesus was confronted by his enemies trying to trap him, who bring a woman to him who had been taken in the very act of adultery. They quote to him the law that Moses had given that they are to stone her to death.

It was then that Jesus went into what we know as a Godly Play mode. He says simply, "Let the one among you who is without sin cast the first stone." Then he squats down and draws in the dirt with a stick, avoiding eye contact, as if he were a Godly Play story-teller, and he waits, without any look that might provoke a reaction from one of those in the crowd surrounding him. Finally one by one, they go away, the eldest first, unwilling to be the one who strikes the first blow, until Jesus and the woman were left alone. Remarkably, he is not nearly so concerned with her guilt or innocence as he is with the reaction of the crowd. Could it be that when he teaches us to pray, "lead us not into temptation," the temptation he is referring to is our tendency to join in condemning another to take the pressure off ourselves?

The kind of traditional unity that the stoning brings to the village in Jackson's "The Lottery" is based on fear, intimidation and violence. It is precisely based on all joined against one in a half conscious condemnation that disappears just as soon as it is executed. You can see it represented on the front of our leaflet today. This enigmatic painting by the Russian Jew Marc Chagall was done in 1938 in the heart of a Europe that was undergoing the most cataclysmic wave of scapegoating violence in modern history. Chagall portrays the crucified one not as the victorious Christ ruling from the cross but as an ordinary Jewish victim, prayer shawl wrapped around his loins, whose suffering doesn't so much resolve the suffering of the world as it does mirror the world of anti-semitic violence swirling around him. But the very fact that we can see it revealed in these paradoxical terms of the crucified one means that the spell has been broken. The suffering Christ is not for Christians alone, not a triumphalistic racial identity power fetish. Christ and the crucifixion are here by Chagall redefined, re-appropriated, exposing the symbol's own misuse for the purpose of scapegoating violence.

As the symbol of a humble human being on the cross, his suffering somehow contains or concentrates the continued suffering of the entire world, not by providing an analgesic solution, a numbing answer in resurrection, but rather by posing a question. Must there be scapegoats? Can we gather in another way? without casting out, condemning, and scapegoating? Can we let go of life as we have come to grasp it so tightly that we lose conscious awareness of the true life that consists not in human reputation but in the recognition that comes from God alone? Can we face the fear of death and rejection that drives us to turn away when others are suffering, and can we instead look at death and shame and continue to love? Jesus shows us a way to drop our stones.

"Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life."