The Soul We Cannot Ignore
Kol Nidre Sermon • September 2018
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Over the summer, Laurie and I saw the most remarkable movie. It was called “Welcome to My Neighborhood.” It was a documentary on the life of Fred Rogers, lovingly known by millions as Mr. Rogers. I have to say, we cried throughout the movie. I kept looking over at Laurie throughout the film, and she was constantly dabbing her eyes. When the final credits rolled, I felt a lump in my throat, and was transfixed to watching the names scroll by. And I never do that.

Mr. Rogers taught so many lessons. He gently taught us, with his kindness and personal warmth, about the worth of every person. He said once, “If you could only sense how important you are to the lives of those you meet... There is something of yourself that you leave at every meeting with another person.” From now on, I will ask myself, when I am getting-together with anyone, what am I leaving with this person?

Mr. Rogers was not only kind, he was brave. During times of segregation, he invited Officer Clemmons, a black policeman character on his show to put his feet in the kiddy pool, alongside his. By doing something so simple, he normalized integration to a new generation that would hopefully see it as ordinary; blacks and whites swimming together. While many were protesting for integration on the streets of America, he was changing the world and opening up opportunities for others in very subtle but significant ways.

He celebrated all people and lifted up those with handicaps. Most of us saw, the touching scene where he invited a wheelchair bound child to speak openly about his handicap. The young child spoke of his spinal paralysis and honestly shared his disability, and then Mr. Rogers asked him to sing a song with him. The
words went like this. “It’s you I like. It’s not the things you wear. It’s not the way you do your hair. But it’s you I like, the way you are right now, the way down deep inside you. Not the things that hide you. It’s you I like.” The boy knew this song and sang it with Mr. Rogers. I don’t remember seeing him do this when I was a child, but I will always remember seeing it as an adult. He helped that young boy accept himself and modeled unconditional love and acceptance to countless other children who might encounter others struggling with difficulties.

Mr. Rogers saw in each child a soul. He saw the good in others, when others too easily gravitated to the darkness. He recounted in the movie a lesson his mother taught him. “When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, “Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.”

So why was I crying in the movie? I think it’s because today, we have a problem with the soul, which Mr. Rogers lifted up. We ignore it. We tell young people to discount it. Even our own religious community, the Reform Movement tells us that Judaism is predicated on rationality and biblical criticism. There is little room for the soul, when we are told to think through our problems. And so I cried, because we have lost so much. The problem today is that there is a conspiracy against the soul. We tell young people to forget about it. Focus on your SAT scores. Your computerized test numbers. These are what matter. While these are of course, important, they are not what will serve us our whole life. But as Mr. Rogers taught us, we are not a number, a statistic. We have a soul.

There is a story of a man who bought a home with a bamboo plant on his property and he hated bamboo. So the first thing he did when he bought his home was to chop the bamboo tree down. He dug out its roots, poured plant poison down the hole, filled it up with gravel, and then topped it off with poured cement. He thought he was done with the intrusive plant. Then two years later, guess what happened? A tiny sprout of bamboo came popping up through the concrete. We can try to kill the soul. We can try to ignore the soul, but then we are reminded as
with the sprout of bamboo peeking up, that we are more than brains on a stick.
We have a soul.

This summer, I learned about the sale of some of Albert Einstein’s letters. Einstein, you may remember, wrote many letters. In fact one of his correspondences written on board a ship of German exiles, dated March of 1933, sold for $30,250 at an auction House in LA. The 1933 letter, written with his wife, Elsa, describes the dire situation in Germany, just minutes before they docked in Antwerp, where Einstein renounced his German citizenship. Later that day, Einstein, knowing that the Nazis were hunting him down, handed in his passport at the German consulate in Antwerp. A second letter from Einstein written in 1938 in which he discusses helping Jewish refugees escape Nazi Germany sold for $31,250. It turns out that he also wrote a letter to a Dr. Marcus in which he expressed his religious beliefs. It is this letter that I’d like to discuss with you tonight. Einstein wrote in a few short lines, his understanding of religions purpose. He wrote, “A human being is part of the whole, called by us “universe,” a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separate from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. The striving to free oneself from this delusion is the one issue of true religion. Not to nourish the delusion but to try to overcome it is the way to reach the attainable measure of peace of mind.”

We may think we are separate and distinct from others. But this, according to Einstein, is a delusion. We are all part of the universe; we are connected to each other, and to all of existence. Religion’s purpose is to teach of this unity and our connection to one another and to free us from the delusion that we are separate. Einstein taught that when we feel alone, we are wrong. We are all a part of a greater whole. Loneliness, confusion and pain result from our delusion that we are alone. Our souls are linked to each other and to the cosmos. Everything is intertwined.

Einstein, it turns out, wrote these spiritual words to a man who had lost a young child. The grieving father was Dr. Robert S. Marcus. Dr. Marcus’ name on
the letter did not bring any monetary value to Einstein’s letter. But he was, nevertheless, a fascinating man, whom I’d like to teach about tonight.

It turns out, that Dr. Marcus was ... a rabbi. People turn to their clergy when they are in pain, they come to us when they are hurting; but who do we clergy turn to in our moments of crisis? You see, Rabbi Marcus had just lost his son, and so he turned to of all places, Albert Einstein.

Dr. Marcus was ordained as an Orthodox rabbi in 1931. He earned a law degree from NYU in 1935. He began his career in the pulpit but left it when the United States entered the war. He enlisted to become a Jewish chaplain in General Patton’s army. The decision was not an easy one, for he had a wife and two small sons back home, but he felt the need to encourage and comfort men in battle. He shipped off in the spring of 1944 just in time for D-Day. He wrote home to his wife, Faye almost daily during his deployment. On D-Day he wrote to his son Jay, “Today our armies invaded France to attack the Nazis,” he wrote, ...”They have already killed 4 million of our Jewish men, women and children...I am sorry I cannot be home to celebrate your 6th birthday as I must stay with my very brave men who are fighting for all the children in the world. I must try to encourage them so that they should not be afraid. Even though I shall not be with you, I will be thinking of you and Stephi and Mommy.”

Rabbi Marcus in April 1945 was one of the first chaplains to enter Buchenwald concentration camp. As he walked through the camp he saw indescribable inhumanity. Amongst the dead and the living dead, he discovered 904 Jewish boys who had been hidden and saved by the camp inmates. These youngsters became the rabbi’s personal mission. Among them was a sixteen-year-old boy named Eliezer who looked more dead than alive. The world did not know this young boy as Eliezer, but rather Eli Wiesel. He discovered a little boy named Lulek hiding in fear amongst a pile of corpses. Lulek grew up to be Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau, the chief Ashkenazi Rabbi of Israel. These children had no parents, no home, no family, so Rabbi Marcus became their home, their father, their mother, their rabbi, their teacher, with arms wide enough and a heart big enough to embrace
them all. Though he missed his children terribly, he stayed on after the war, committed to restore these boys to health and to finding them a new life. He led services, counseled them and of course, spoke to them in Yiddish about trust, hope and faith. He built a farm on German soil to teach the children about agriculture which they would need when he hoped they would settle in Palestine. He called the farm, of all things, Kibbutz Buchenwald. After several weeks, he succeeded in bringing 80 children to Palestine on board the S.S. Mata-roa. One of the teenage passengers on the ship was a seventeen-year-old girl who would grow up to become Dr. Ruth Westheimer, the renowned sex therapist. Seventy-three years ago, to the day, Rabbi Marcus and his charges arrived in Israel where he led High Holiday Services on the ship as it sat in Haifa’s port. He later wrote, “The New year was ushered in with an inspiring service under the clear Mediterranean skies...Never before in my life did it feel so good to be a Jew...the long and torturous voyage from bondage to freedom is over. They are home at last.”

Rabbi Marcus came home after the war, but could not go back to the pulpit. He had seen too much. So he became a representative for the World Jewish Congress, where he fought tirelessly to help survivors remake their lives. Once while oversees, helping the children of Europe, his beloved eleven year old son, his firstborn, with whom his soul was intertwined, died of polio. The grief and guilt were overwhelming. In agony, he reached out to Einstein for help. And so Albert Einstein taught the Rabbi about the soul and our connection to one another.

Rabbi Marcus was not just a footnote in history. He was a giant among rabbis. Were it not for Einstein’s letter, he would have been unknown, but his story is remarkable, not only for his courage, but for the pathos of it all. While trying to save other children, he lost one of his own and was too far away even to mourn together with his family. Eleven short months after receiving his response from Einstein about the unity of all things, on January 18, 1951, Rabbi Robert S. Marcus died of a heart attack. He was forty-one years old.

And so, I stand here, speaking about two religious men who I can’t seem to get out of my mind. One was a Presbyterian Minister, Mr. Rogers and one an Orthodox
Rabbi. Neither Einstein nor Mr. Rogers, or Rabbi Marcus for that matter ever used the word soul, but Einstein in four short sentences and these courageous men through their character and lives, painted a picture of a holy life that exists in the here and now, and infinite life that we are blind to. We matter. We have a soul.

David Brooks the NY Times commentator taught me this summer, at Chautauqua that we have two mountains in our lives. We spend most of our life focusing on the first mountain. This is our career, our professional life. We spend years and years going to school, working on our occupation to get the heights of our earning potential. But once we have made it to the top of our mountain, we often look around and ask, “now what?” Many of us realize that the purpose of life is not fame, fortune or influence. There has to be something more. That’s where our second mountain enters the scene. This is when we realize that we want to get involved, we want to volunteer, we want to give back. And over and over gain we discover that moral joy comes not from climbing the first mountain, but rather the second. The first sustains our body, the second nourishes our soul.

My friends, we are more than intellect. We are more than our thoughts. We are more than ideas in our consciousness. We are more than our actions and our assets. We are feeling, loving, yearning, dreaming, and giving human beings. And we need to nourish that side of our lives. Maybe that’s why I cried at the Mr. Roger’s movie. Maybe that’s why we come here. We need to be reminded of this simple truth. We are spirit as well as flesh.

Do you know where the phrase “spitten image” comes from? We say that so n’ so is the “spitten image” of so n’ so. Well like Goodbye is a contraction of God be with ye, so spitten image is a contraction of spirit and image. And just as we removed God from our salutations, and turned it into Goodbye, we have removed the reference to the spirit from our descriptions of our doppelganger. But we are not just the image of our ancestors, we have their spirit as well. I have my father’s and mother’s spirit and image, just as my children have Laurie and mine. We are spirit and image of our ancestors, not a “spitten image.”
The comedian, Gary Shandling once joked, “People say that I have an intimacy problem...but they really don't know me very well.” Well, we have a spiritual problem. We are too busy acquiring, controlling, understanding to appreciate that life is lived in the human heart.

Tonight on this most sacred night, let us remember Mr. Rogers, Albert Einstein and Rabbi Robert Marcus, all very spiritual men. They were doers, to be sure, but more important, they were believers. And I ask you to join them.

We have a soul. And so do the people we encounter every day. And let us treat each other accordingly. We need to show each other the respect, the love and the sanctity of life. For we must overcome the delusion of separateness as the only way to reach what Einstein taught as an “attainable measure of peace of mind.”

Most of my sermons end with a task to accomplish. I offer some helpful tools to bring about change. So, I could talk about prayer, goodness, awareness, community, compassion, but I will not.

The most important thing I have to say tonight....is that our value has nothing to do with what we do. It is only based on what we are. I conclude with a story.

When God was creating the world God shared a secret with the angels, that human beings will be created in God’s own image. The angels were jealous and outraged. Why should humans be entrusted with such a precious gift when they are flawed mortals? Surely if humans find out their true power they will abuse it. If humans discover they are created in God’s image, they will learn to surpass us!

So the angels decided to steal God’s image and planned on hiding it so that we would never find it. They held a meeting and brainstormed. They angel, Gabriel suggested hiding it at the top of the highest mountain. The other angels, objected, “one day humans will learn to climb and they will find it there.”

The angel, Michael said, let’s hide it at the bottom of the sea.” “No,” the other angels chimed in ‘humans will find a way to dive to the bottom of the sea and they’ll find it there.”

One by one the angels suggested hiding places, but they were all rejected.
And then Uriel, the wisest angel of all, stepped forward and said. “I know a place where man will never look for it.”

So the angels hid the precious holy image of God deep within the human soul. And to this day, God’s image lies hidden in the very place we are least likely to search for it. Lying there, it is farthest away from you than you ever imagine. Lying there, it is closer to you than you will ever know.”