

Genesis 21: 8-13
Psalm 86: 1-10
Romans 6: 1-11
Mathew 10: 24-29

SPARROWS

Sermon for June 21, 2020

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Summary: The rock of our salvation is the abiding presence of God.

The Gospel of Matthew is organized around five great discourses, five extended sections in which we only hear the voice of Jesus talking. The first of those discourses is the most famous and we commonly call it the Sermon on the Mount. It runs through chapters 5, 6, and 7 in the Gospel. The second discourse is sometimes referred to as the Missionary Discourse. It's called the Missionary Discourse because it basically consists of a lot of different instructions and warnings and predictions, and words of advice that Jesus gives to his disciples, apparently in anticipation of the day in which he would no longer be with him, and they would be tasked with spreading the Good News on their own.

The Missionary discourse occupies almost the entirety of chapter 10 of Matthew, and our reading selection for today is a sizable chunk from the second half of that discourse. Let's read it together:

Matthew 10: 24-39.

In all the discourses, what the author of Matthew has pretty clearly done is to pull together various things that Jesus said at various times and on various occasions that seem to relate in some way to the same topic. Since we generally don't know anything more about those particular occasions and what prompted the remarks, we are sometimes uncertain whether we really have fully understood the full intention and meaning of what Christ said.

And a related consideration to keep in mind when reading through any of these discourses is that, just because they are so-to-say, pulled out of their original contexts and cobbled together, the discourses seem to shift rather abruptly from one point to another in what can sometimes seem a rather jarring fashion.

Our passage for today provides a pretty good illustration of what I'm talking about. We find Jesus discussing the relative positions of teachers and students, the warning that they will be treated even worse than Jesus himself, that they should nonetheless be forthright in proclaiming the message of the Kingdom, that God loves them and watches over them, that they should nonetheless fear God, that those who stand strong will be more acknowledged in heaven than those who waver, that their families will be torn apart, and several other things as well.

A great deal of pulpit energy and ingenuity is spent in trying to show how these various strands can be woven into a smooth and coherent single message, and that often leads into real spiritual insight, and I applaud the effort.

My own preference, though, is to consider the various strands, and try to imagine what particular concern or confusion among the disciples might have occasioned it.

What stood out for me on reading the message this time were verses 29-31, perhaps because for our recent committal service for Glenn, Rodney asked that these particular verses be included in the message. And I don't believe in coincidences. So here they are again:

29 Are not two sparrows sold for a [c]copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will. 30 But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. 31 Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.

What was the original concern of the disciples when Jesus offered them this reassurance?

He surely was not telling them that God would spare them from the predictable consequences of pursuing their ministry. On the contrary, almost all of the other quotations Matthew has assembled here are quite blunt in telling them they are likely to suffer and be ostracized, possibly even killed.

I suppose one obvious suggestion would be that Jesus was giving them a promise of heavenly reward, although to my ear these would be strange images to use to speak of some promised reward: sparrows being watched over and hairs of the head being counted. Surely the gist of these images is that God is always with them, that God knows what's happening to them. And for what sort of concern on the part of the disciples would that sort of promise provide reassurance?

I have a Facebook friend who was a fellow I knew in high school and had not communicated with since that time until we hooked up via Facebook a few years ago. He had had an interesting life in the military, but at the time we friended on Facebook,

he had entered into a very difficult stage. Some form of terrible cancer had required a bone marrow transplant a couple of years earlier, and although the transplant had been successful, all the medications he was still required to take combined with various other debilities had resulted in a life that was basically one medical issue after another.

He did occasionally post something about a family trip or visits with his grand children and that sort of thing, typical feel-good Facebook things. But increasingly, and at this point almost exclusively, his posts simply describe his deteriorating condition and the various intensive medical treatments he's undergoing to deal with them.

When I read these very sad posts I'm led to wonder what would lead someone to describe in such detail the pains and trials he's undergoing. I'm sure the motivations have more than one layer, but I strongly suspect that at least one of them is a deep fear of suffering unnoticed.

As we've drawn attention to many times from this pulpit, one of the principal themes in all the teachings of Jesus is the crucial importance of doing your good works in secret. Over and over again he warns us against publicizing our own virtue. When you fast, don't let the world know; take the least conspicuous seat in the synagogue or the banquet hall; in acts of charity, don't even let your right hand know what your left hand is doing.

Why does Jesus keep coming back again and again to this instruction? Clearly because he recognizes the deep-seated, almost irresistible desire in human nature to have others acknowledge our own virtue, and he considers it of first importance for our own eternal well-being to resist this human temptation.

But how to resist? Well, notice how whenever Jesus is offering this instruction, he almost always accompanies it with an assurance. Let me read one of the full passages:

3 But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you [a]openly. (Matthew 6: 3-4)

Or again:

17 But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 18 so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you [a]openly. (6: 17-18)

You Father, who sees in secret... And when Jesus offers this assurance, he is surely not simply saying that God sees the things you do in private, although that is obviously true. What Jesus is saying is that there is a special quality about things done in private that attracts God's particular attention, something that God is deeply concerned with cultivating for our own good. The 'reward' Jesus mentions is clearly not some material benefit; it refers to the improvement of our own quality of being, as God reckons quality.

Without belaboring that any further, because we have covered that ground many times before, I want to suggest that something like that is also behind the assurance Jesus offers his followers in the verses under consideration for today;

29 Are not two sparrows sold for a [c]copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will. 30 But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. 31 Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.

In the context of preparing the disciples for the difficulties that will lie ahead of them, Jesus promises then that God is watching them, always watching them. I think this is an assurance that speaks to a fear much deeper than simply the physical fear of suffering. It speaks to the fear of suffering alone, which is a fear of the spirit rather than just the body or the emotions.

It's a historical reality that, except for Saint Peter, who died a martyr's death, we know literally nothing about the fate of any of the other disciples. It's a good bet that most or all of them suffered a fate similar to Peter's, a difference being that they suffered theirs in anonymity. And the context of Christ's warnings suggests that he was speaking not only of their deaths, but of their lives as well. Not only would they not be applauded, commended, appreciated, admired for their efforts; they would on the contrary be despised, marginalized, oppressed, abandoned by those they held dear. And worst of all, all this would happen with historical silence, with no record of it, nothing to compensate. They would be alone. Except for God.

That very fear of being alone and abandoned in their struggles and trials is I think the fear Jesus was addressing in these verses. But he wasn't just saying that God was watching, even though no one else was. He's saying something like this: As the world's attention decreases, God's attention increases. Or rather, as the world's attention decreases, we become more and more aware of the intensity of God's attention. And so in that strange way, the anonymity of suffering can be a blessing.

What is the application of this to us? I think there are two applications.

The first is being brought home to us pretty poignantly by current events, where those we love and cherish are isolated and alone in their final trial. Christ's message here is this: as the possibility of human recourse for extending love diminishes, the magnitude of God's own concern and attentive love becomes apparent.

As the noise of the world decreases, the still small voice of God, which has always been there, finally becomes the only voice you can hear

That's the application for us, as we watch those we love suffer in their aloneness.

But there is another application for us personally, as there was for the disciples. Every one of us will enter into that last final journey. Some will have the support of family and friends, and others will not. But all of us will eventually feel the comfort of earthly bonds slipping away. And at that point, we have the comfort of Christ's own assurance that, as the comfort and security of those earthly bonds slip away, the magnitude and intensity of God's loving concern will become apparent, to each and every one of us.

Do not fear, therefore. You are of more value than many sparrows.

And so our prayer for this morning, Father, is to experience with ever greater responsiveness the intensity of your love. Keep us innocent of pride, that we may be more sensitive to Your abiding presence; and help us extend that sensitivity to those last extremities of our lives, when all other resource and solace have been removed, as they were on the Cross from your son, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.