

The Third Sunday after Pentecost, 25 June 2017

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Matthew 10:24-39 - Fearing the Wrong Thing

The passage this morning follows directly after last Sunday's gospel. Jesus has summoned the twelve disciples, and is sending them out to proclaim the good news and to heal. This mission is to the Jews only, at this point, and the disciples are to go forth carrying nothing for their survival, and they are to depend on the hospitality of those they encounter. And, oh yes, they are to expect persecution. Jesus uses the image of sheep in the midst of wolves. The warning about persecution continues in the passage this morning, and this seems to be addressed not only to the twelve at that time, but to all of those who would follow Jesus in the years to come. What they would be proclaiming, this "good news," would cause a reaction in the world around them. Jesus wants them to be prepared for the result of following him.

What caught my eye in the passage this morning was the three times Jesus tells them not to be afraid, or not to have fear. Jesus is not sparing them the details of what might happen. But they are not to fear. Or, maybe I should say, **they are not to fear the wrong thing**. This is a different way of saying, "you will be just fine." "Fine" may include persecution and loss of life. It may include being rejected by family. But they will have the one thing that really matters. They will find their lives in God. They will have the one relationship that keeps their soul safe. Their value will come from God's love for them, not the reaction and valuation of the world. This is the good news – that we are loved by God, and we are called to follow Jesus ever further in that love. But it might not look like what you expect. There will be no protective bubble. There will be the presence of God in any sort of circumstances. And their choice to put their relationship with Jesus before anything or anyone else will cause them to stand out in this world. Stand out in the way Jesus did when he carried the cross to his place of execution.

For me, this is the paradox of Mary's Magnificat. God has done a great thing. God has overturned the system of this world that kept the rich and powerful on the top and the others trodden in the dirt. This good news started with an unexpected pregnancy and continued on to a death on a Roman cross. But death did not end the story, because Jesus was raised from the dead. This is clearly good news. But for whom **is** this good news? It is good news for those that Jesus went out of his way to acknowledge. It is good news for the sick, the poor, those shoved off to the side, those who know they will never amount to much in the present system. It will bring things to the light that have been intentionally hidden. It will free those who have been bound. **For God is aware of the sparrows.**

Some of you may know that I am a birder. And I confess, I am a bird snob. It's not just that I have favorites, the bluebird probably at the top of the list. But I am not fond of what are called **invasive species**. Because they are introduced, their population has no checks and balances. They have few natural predators to keep their population in bounds. They outcompete other species. And the species I am most aware of is the House Sparrow.

This is no regular sparrow. It was introduced to this continent, and it is actually a European Weaver Finch. It has no song, only a “cheep, cheep.” They come and go as part of a nervous flock. They gobble seeds with their finch bills and they take over housing meant for bluebirds. There you see my prejudice. But when I was in Chicago I experienced them in a new way. There weren’t many types of birds in Hyde Park. There were pigeons, sea gulls, the Hyde Park parakeet, and house sparrows. “Cheep, cheep.” The street department is very evident in that part of Chicago. They ban parking regularly to sweep the streets, and the fines for not paying attention are steep. One fall they attempted to replant grass under the street trees. They scattered the grass seed on the bare dirt, and did not add straw. They probably hoped for rain, but it didn’t happen. The House Sparrows noticed. And they had a feast. A feast of pure grace – all of the grass seed they could eat. And suddenly I saw these despised sparrows as street urchins. Fighting for survival in tough circumstances. And experiencing grace, just like us. And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from God. Even **those** sparrows. Hmm... Maybe that is how the good news of reversal works.

So Jesus is sending out the twelve, and sending out all of us, to proclaim this good news. And he is **not** telling them or us that all will be serene and we will be joyfully received. And three times he says not to fear. We are not to fear those who will reject and persecute us. We are not to fear bodily harm. And we do not need to fear a lack of value for we are valuable in God’s eyes, and it is that relationship that matters. **Fear.** There is a lot of it around today. Jesus was talking about circumstances that they could see or would soon be able to see around them. And he did not want fear to hold them back from what they were sent out to do. There is much fear today. Some of it may be about things we see or could reasonably expect. It may be about our health, or job security or the well-being of our children. But plenty is about what might possibly happen at some unknown time in the future. What is it about fear? Fear activates the primitive part of our brain that sees two choices: fight or flight. It can save our lives in the short run. It can totally paralyze us in the long run. We get stuck between only two choices, or we become frozen, unable to act at all. There is a fascinating brain reason for this. If we are in our primitive brain, we cannot access the part of our brain that does higher functioning. We try to decide: A or B. Because of course those are the only choices, right? But when we can use all of our brain, we can see possibilities that extend far beyond those two options. And instead of just reacting, we choose what is deepest in us, what is most important, what is most true. We need to be calm to do this. The more anxious we are, the less we can use our imagination, or come up with options. Jesus is giving us a choice. We can give in to the fear, and react rather than thoughtfully respond. Or we can remember whose we are, and that our very hairs are counted, and allow God to work within us. We may not live in the circumstances of those disciples. But we live in a time of great uncertainty and great reactivity. The world tells us to value only ourselves, keep ourselves safe, and go for the profit. And we are manipulated by fear of this or that. Jesus calls us to follow, and lose that self-interest as we fall more deeply into his love. Jesus tells us that God is greater than what we fear. The God who made the sparrows has not lost sight of us. God has not lost sight of those who are considered last because they are

not rich or powerful. God has not lost sight of the sick and those no longer able to work. We do not have to accept the valuation of the world around us. We are valuable because we belong to God. So are others. Jesus calls us to follow and do what he did: reach out to those who are rejected and despised. Feed the hungry. Care for the poor. And spread the word of the one without a home who was in police custody and was tortured and put to death on a public street. The one who loved us enough to let go of his life, and who was given resurrected life to share with us all.

Jesus is not calling us to the easy path. He is not calling us to greater and greater self-protection and the rejection of anyone who is different. He is calling us to the path of compassionate and giving love. He is calling us to a connected life – connected deeply to God at our deepest center, and connected to each other, especially to those who suffer. Remember the sparrows, even those that go “Cheep.” AMEN