



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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Third Sunday after Pentecost

June 25, 2017

“His Eye Is On The Sparrow”

(Mt. 10:28-31)

Rev. David K. Groth

“Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth far more than many sparrows” (Mt. 10:28-31).

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect: O God, because Your abiding presence always goes with us, keep us aware of Your daily mercies that we may live secure and content in Your eternal love; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

My wife, Gail, grew up in the Episcopal Church. When she was confirmed, the bishop slapped her on the cheek. Now it wasn't just Gail. Every one of the kids received the bishop's slap right there at the communion rail. It was a traditional part of the liturgy, not much used anymore. But the message was: be ready to suffer for the faith. Be ready for the unavoidable ridicule and the scorn and shaming you will face as a Christian.

Sometimes people believe that as Christians life should be easier, good health, better pay, and all that. But Jesus promises the opposite. Baptism into the Christian faith is not inoculation but initiation. So instead of hugging and kissing the newly baptized, perhaps we should warn them and say, "Now your troubles are just beginning." For Christians are not protected from the world, but rather are sent out as sheep into a warring world.

Perhaps we should have warning labels from a spiritual Surgeon General, advising would-be Christians that following Jesus could be dangerous to their health.

Our text this evening/morning is one such warning label. It's a continuation of the Gospel lesson from last weekend, where Jesus is sending his disciples out to teach and preach and heal; he's also preparing them for the opposition they will face. "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake. . . All men will hate you because of me. Some will say you are of the devil."

I'm reluctant to be so grim on such a bright, beautiful morning, but to do otherwise with this text would be unfaithful to it. Church picnic or no, we must go where the words of Jesus lead. And these words are relevant to us

today.

We don't face the persecution that our brothers and sisters around the world face, where churches are bombed, or forced to close by the government. We're not arrested and sent off to labor camps like others are for the crime of owning a Bible. We are not executed, like others are, for the crime of being Christian.

And yet, things are changing in this country, right. Many Christians are already feeling forced to violate their consciences. For example, it's not enough to legalize abortion. Now even an order of Catholic nuns, the Little Sisters of the Poor, under the Affordable Care Act, they are expected to provide money for abortions. It is not enough to legalize gay marriage. Now you must like it, approve of it, or be labeled a hateful bigot. And if you are a pastry chef, or a photographer, or a florist, you must practice your skills in support of it or close up shop. To be sure, any government that can compel an order of nuns to pay for abortions, will soon be telling pastors who they must marry . . . or else. Since the laws have already been changed in spectacular fashion, now they are targeting the conscience itself.

Already in his era, Luther wrote, "They do not persecute us for being adulterers, robbers, or thieves. In fact, they can tolerate the most desperate scoundrels and criminals in their midst. But they are raising such a hue and cry because we refuse to approve of their teaching and life" (What Luther Says, p. 1040).

No, we're not being arrested and hauled off because we are Christians, but we do find ourselves (rather suddenly) on the outside of our culture looking in. Many have already had their business targeted, their livelihoods attacked, their prayer groups disinvited, their speaking engagements canceled. One senses it's only going to get worse.

So what to do? Jesus expects from us today what he expected of his disciples thousand years ago. Remain faithful. "Do not be afraid of them" Jesus said to his disciples, "What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim it from the

housetops” (v. 26).

The first casualty of persecution is usually proclamation. But Jesus reminds us our duty is to carry on with the message of salvation in Christ, in spite of the persecution. Don’t compromise the faith. If our brothers and sisters in Christ are losing their heads for the faith, certainly we can put up with the pin pricks.

Of course all the other rules still apply. Don’t be caustic and belligerent or militant. Be respectful and gracious and winsome. Try hard to listen and understand before speaking. And when it is time to speak, trust the Lord will give you the wisdom and the words. He promises the same in this chapter. “Do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say” (Mt. 10:19-20).

Trust also your Lord cares for you and is watching over you. “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So do not be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.”

In biblical times sparrows did then what they do today. They ate grain and insects and gathered into noisy flocks. They would often build their untidy nests in the eaves of houses. Psalm 84 says they even built their nests in the Temple but were not driven away (v. 3). The sparrows were known to be such social creatures that in Psalm 102, a single sparrow on the housetop becomes a symbol of deep loneliness (v. 7).

In the days of Jesus, sparrows were cheap, and were sold as food for the poor and pets for the rich. Today, cats and birds of prey like to hunt and eat them. Little boys have been known to torment them. Many adults consider them pests. They are the epitome of small and insignificant. If a couple sparrows go missing from your neighborhood, no one will notice. Only the Father. “Not one will fall to the ground apart from your Father” (v. 29).

Jesus uses the common and the small to teach a profound truth: in God’s eyes, no one is insignificant.

Nothing happens to the children of a loving Father which falls outside his providential care. It neither takes him by surprise nor frustrates his purposes.

There's no promise of immunity here. Sparrows will fall, but it won't happen apart from the Father's notice nor be outside his will. And if he has his eyes on the sparrow, you know he's watching over you. Moreover, any God who cares enough to number the very hairs on your head cares also about your sorrows and your suffering, your plans and prospects, your fears and your future.

Think of those early Christians. I'm sure they loved this text. The Roman Empire thought of them as enemies of the state. Therefore Christians were systematically hunted, arrested, hauled off to jail, or to the coliseums, or summarily executed in their homes. Most of them were poor. Few had any social capital to speak of. In the face of Roman might, those early Christians must have felt so small, so weak and vulnerable, so inconsequential and insignificant . . . like sparrows. Yet if God cares for the sparrow, how much more so does he care for his people!

We may not esteem the common sparrow, but God does, and assures us "you are of more value than many sparrows." So Paul wrote, "Have no anxiety about anything" (Phil. 4:6). He wrote that, by the way, from a Roman prison, knowing his end was near. Nevertheless, Paul urges, "Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God." Peter, also crucified by the Romans, wrote, "Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you" (1 Pet. 5:7). Luther, who also faced fierce opposition, wrote, "Cast your worries upon God's back, for God has a strong neck and strong shoulders. He can easily carry the load." (SL 12, 693 f).

See the common thread? From our Old Testament lesson, do not be afraid, because the Lord is with you like a mighty warrior (Jer. 7:11). From the psalm, do not be afraid, because God is your refuge and fortress (Ps. 91:2). He has covered you with his feathers and will command his angels

concerning you to guard you in all your ways (v. 11). And from the Gospel not be afraid, because not even a sparrow will fall outside of God's good will. And from Easter, do not be afraid, because death itself is really dead. "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:55f)! When you already own the last minute, you don't need to be afraid of the next days, months and years.

Finally, be open to persecution; it's not the worst thing for God's church. Luther taught we should never fear persecution, "but prosperity and good days we should fear. These may harm us more than persecution . . . For when the Gospel is not attacked, it rusts and has no opportunity to reveal its power" (What Luther Says, p. 1039). Similarly, he also wrote, "When tyrants rage against the Gospel, they do no more than blow into the ashes. Then the fire becomes greater . . . Through persecution, Christendom grows; conversely, Christians become lazy and lax when conditions are peaceful and quiet" (Ibid, p, 1040).

He also writes, "Although all the devils, the world, our neighbors, and our own people . . . revile and slander us, pound and plague us, we should consider this nothing but a shovelful of manure dumped around the vine to fertilize it well." (Ibid, p.1038).

Just one more: Luther reminds us also of the classic image of the church being like a tiny boat in the middle of a great big storm. He writes, "Christ is in the boat; therefore the sea and the wind rage, and the waves assail us and want to send us to the bottom. But let them rage; it is an established fact that wind and sea are obedient to Him. This persecution will go no farther and last no longer than He desires. And although they pounce upon us, they will nonetheless have to be subject to Him. He is Lord over all; therefore this persecution will not harm us. May He only help us not to tremble with unbelief."

So, good friends, be faithful. Have no fear. His eye is

on the sparrow, so you know He's watching over you. Amen.

