

Sermon: Third Sunday after Pentecost (a) 6/21/26

Peace, Danville Pr. Lucy Kolin, preacher

Text: Matthew 10:24-39

It's difficult to locate the center of today's gospel text, to figure out what's at the heart of this collection of Jesus' teachings, instructions, and guidelines for disciples and missionaries. There's **no** evidence that Jesus delivered this list all at once; probably not. But Matthew the gospel writer was a collector and an organizer. So he chose to collect and organize **these** sayings of Jesus, to put in one place the things Jesus says are **always** to characterize and shape the witness of disciples sent into the world, as missionaries near or far. You and I are both missionaries and disciples, because it's not **distance** that makes us missionaries; it's our movement toward others...whether right next door or halfway across the world. In collecting these sayings, Matthew has created as it were a hermeneutical string of pearls to be carried and worn daily by disciples of every times – us, too -- as a reminder of our mission.

These sayings are critically important in the face of the mission **all** disciples undertake and **also** in the face of the **resistance** that mission may provoke. Discipleship, you know, is serious work. But there's something striking about this list: right in the middle of all Jesus' instructions and admonitions comes a word about... **sparrows**. Does this mean discipleship is for the birds? Definitely not! But there is **something** about sparrows that is key to the message disciples **bring** and the message disciples **are**. In these sparrow sayings, Jesus is saying – with Matthew's help – that understanding how much God values us and cares for us will be key to enduring the discipleship life **and** to making clear the message of divine love that's meant for **everyone...** without distinction.

There are **lots** of different sparrows in the world, fifteen species in the United States **alone**. But like the sparrows Jesus knew in his **own** geography, they are small, not brightly colored, and so common they're often hardly noticed. In **Jesus'** day, they seemed **most** valuable to young children who hunted and caught them, tied them in bundles of two to five, and sold them for less than a quarter.

In different times and cultures certain birds become important symbols, birds like eagles and doves...but never sparrows. Think of the **eagle**, our **own** country's national bird -- they suggest majesty and power. In Jesus' time the symbol of the **Roman** eagle inspired awe but also fear. It reminded conquered peoples who was in charge and who was always watching for signs of disobedience or resistance and, when it found them, who was ready to swoop in and take swift and deadly action.

Some of Jesus' disciples and many **other** folks were looking for a Messiah who would take on the Roman eagle and all it stood for. They wanted **Jesus** to be like an eagle, swooping down on the Romans, destroying the predator and rescuing those who'd become their prey. But remember how often those **same** folks were disappointed to find Jesus refusing to be their eagle, committed instead to being their **sparrow**: someone described by his neighbors as nondescript, as just a carpenter's kid, someone willing to remain with and identify with the conquered, someone who certainly spoke up against cruelty and injustice but whose resistance took the form of companionship, compassion, and mercy, embracing the poor and being a willing ally of the powerless and the despised.

So, in the midst of teachings about the life and mission of those who would follow Jesus in proclaiming God's reign of love, in the midst of words that make all too clear there will be difficulties ahead, we find an unexpected word about...**sparrows**, indeed a call to **be** sparrows, to be **content** to be God's sparrows who, though devalued by others find

their value and security in God. Jesus uses the most common of birds to teach a profound and welcome truth: that, in **God's** eyes, no one is insignificant or forgotten. And sparrows are just the sort of creatures to deliver that message.

As Jesus' disciples considered the difficulty of their mission -- the ways others would not simply **resist** what they came to say and to do, but perhaps **also** inflict cruelty and rejection, they were often overcome by fear. But this wasn't true just for Jesus' **first** disciples; it's true for disciples of **every** age. Matthew was speaking to disciples who were being sent out as missionaries from **their** home church. But we recognize this also in our **own** fear and hesitation to speak about Jesus or our faith closer to home, whether among family members, colleagues, neighbors, or institutions that see us as nothing but sparrows, small and insignificant or just plain troublesome and a nuisance when we show up in numbers.

That is why, in the midst of talking about the discipleship life and the missionary journey, Matthew inserts Jesus' blessed reminder of what is at the heart of it all, of **who** is at the heart of it all, and how that empowers and encourages us to go on, to keep on. God knows we need to hear that because, as Jesus' brothers and sisters, we are sparrows all. And because God treasures and remembers Jesus, **God's Sparrow**, remembers how God's Sparrow was rejected, suffered, and even died for love of all the world, we can trust that God **also** knows and remembers how much **we**, the sparrows of today, need hope and help to continue the mission **we** have inherited, to gather **other** sparrows home to God's nest of love.

So hear what Jesus is saying today loud and clear: God loves and knows each and every one of you. God knows your fears and your challenges, your sufferings and your hesitations. But they are not cause for rejection or shame; rather they are all the more reason to believe that each of us is known and remembered, watched over and loved, the

object of God's daily and everlasting care, people redeemed and called to spread the Sparrow Gospel wherever we go, to whomever we meet, people who know how to speak "Sparrow" to the sparrows **we** encounter and approach.

In our neighborhoods, our cities, our country, and our world, there are so many sparrows who are suffering, who are feeling at the mercy of those with power, power to forget them as well as power to hurt them and destroy their future. The ministries of this congregation are testimony that **you already know that** and that you are willing to bring a message, a witness, and a presence that declares, "You are valued. You matter. You are precious. You are loved...by us and by God." The psalmist sang, "Even the sparrow finds a home at God's altars." I see that in the way many of you take time to talk with visitors, to make them feel welcome, to help them feel that we're happy they've come and hope they'll come back. I see that in those who volunteer monthly with the Open Heart Food Pantry, sorting, cutting open huge bags of fruits and vegetables to repackaging their contents in smaller mesh bags, and doing other simple but important tasks that prepare food for distribution to households in need of good food.

I see that in the way you welcome the musicians, not just the audience members to Jazz Church West performances. I see that in the way you greet people who drop by our DIY picnics or come to explore the Peace garden. I see it in the way we embrace and support our Afghan friends. I won't list **all** the ways, because as one of my seminary professors once said: sermons need not be endless to be eternal. **But** I hope you get the message that you **already** are carrying out a "sparrow ministry" perhaps without really knowing it. And, as we continue during this transition to explore and prioritize what we want to be about in the future so we can recognize what we will look for in our next settled pastor, our already in process sparrow ministry – which

makes us friends and allies of many different people – will **help** our discernment.

In any congregation members come and go and pastors come and go, but the ministry continues and develops by the grace of God and the help of the Holy Spirit. So in this transition time, let us remember that each of us here and each person we encounter here or beyond the congregation are sparrows all, God's **beloved** sparrows, none of whom will be forgotten by God our Abba and Imma. And, as we prepare to receive Holy Communion, let us remember that no sparrow goes alone, that in nature sparrows always live in a clan, move in clusters, eat together -- the key to their survival and protection. So every time we eat and drink the Sparrow Feast, in which by the grace of God, a little wine and a little bread become for us the Body and Blood of Jesus and the food that fits us for lives of love, unity, and service, let us close our eyes and picture a world of sparrows gathered by God **in love, by love, and for love**...and know that we will **never** be separated from the love of God by **anything**, not even by death itself.

And now, dear Sparrows, let us prepare to feast together on the goodness of God and go out to bear witness to the love God has for the whole world. God's loving eye is **indeed** on the sparrow...even you... today, tomorrow, and always, here and there and everywhere. This is good news indeed! Amen.