

**Consider the Birds: the Sparrow**

Matthew 10:16-31

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Well if you have wondered why, exactly, we are focusing on birds for the next few weeks, you aren't alone. A Jewish rabbi once said of scripture, "Turn it and turn it, for everything is in it. Look deeply into it, and grow old with it, and spend time over it, and do not stir from it, because there is no greater portion." There is always more life to see, more truth to learn, more intrigue to explore.

In addition to this online service, we have been worshipping outdoors for four months now. I have been struck by how loud those services are. Oh, sometimes it's a car engine or a police siren. But far more often, it's a mighty gust of wind or a songbird that simply will not stop. It's a funny thing, really, to find yourself in a shouting match with a bird, which is, of course, the wrong way to think about it. Sometime I have wondered when the sparrows and wrens and robins really get going if maybe I should just be quiet so we could listen to what they have to say, so we could hear whatever it is they have to teach us. Because they do have something to teach us, even in scripture itself.

Birds are everywhere in the Bible, from start to finish. God hovers over the face of the waters in Genesis, much like, the ancient rabbis suggest, a bird. And birds eat away at the defeated "beast" in Revelation. In between, they are the currency of mercy — birds are the most common sacrifice. Birds bring bread to the prophets. They are food for those who are wandering. The psalmist tells us God is a bird who carries God's children on her wings — God is a bird under whose feathers we find refuge. Jesus compares himself to a mother hen, and he is the one who instructs us to "consider the birds." Once you start looking for birds — in

the bible or in life — you find them everywhere.

When I shared this sermon series information with our music staff, I did so with a bit of fear and trembling. "Birds," they said, with a bit of uncertainty. But then I received an email from Dr. Alicia Walker, which read, "It turns out I know a lot of music with bird references. There's more music about birds that you might think!"

I think the same is true about the grace of God. If you stop to pay attention, you'll discover there's far more of it than you ever imagined possible, in places you'd never noticed before. So let us consider the birds together.

This week, let us consider the sparrow. In just three short verses in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells us that sparrows are both nearly worthless to humans, and that not one of them is ever forgotten by God. "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?" he says. "And yet not one of them will fall to the ground unaccompanied by your Father. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows."

For a time, sparrows were the cheapest of sacrifices — a sacrifice even the poorest of the poor could afford. After all, they were sold two for a penny. So often we debate the worth of something or someone, but here the gospel is clear. You could obtain not one, but two sparrows, for the closest thing next to nothing. The house sparrow was — and is — just about everywhere. It is one of the most common animals in the world, and that tends not to be a declaration offered with much fanfare. Field guides describe them as bland, dingy, and dull, with songs that are monotonous and grating.

The Egyptian hieroglyph based on the sparrow had no phonetic value. It was used in words to represent “small, narrow, or bad.” In ancient Sumerian cuneiform writing, the sparrow was the symbol for “enemy.” Saint Dominic once called a sparrow that interrupted his lecture the devil incarnate, and then he plucked its feathers off in front of all his traumatized students.<sup>1</sup>

Honestly, “worthless” isn’t the half of it; sparrows often inspired rage. In the 16th century, a Lutheran pastor lobbied his local government to exterminate the bird, claiming its ongoing song distracted his congregation from his sermons. (Apparently, reducing the quantity of the birds seemed more realistic than increasing the quality of his preaching.)

But the house sparrow is called a house sparrow for a reason — it arose, evolved, and multiplied wherever humans arose, evolved, and multiplied. Their story is thoroughly intertwined with ours. It’s often said that the house sparrow is native to Europe, but it would be more accurate to say it is native to human habitat. Skeletons found in an ancient cave in Israel suggest that the sparrow cohabitated with — or at least near — humans as long as 100,000 years ago. It goes where we go. Where we build, it builds.

For this, though, house sparrows are considered an annoyance at best and an enemy at worst. Because in addition to everything else, sparrows are fairly aggressive. They compete with rarer, more beautiful birds for places to nest, and they usually win. When the Eastern bluebird began to disappear, sparrows were blamed. To encourage bluebirds, birders and famers and environmental advocates all began installing bluebird houses. This did little to help the species, however, because as soon as a new birdhouse was put up, sparrows moved in. And so wherever sparrows have gone, people have sought to chase it away, make its environment unpalatable, or taken

even more drastic measures. After all, are not two sparrows sold for one penny?

But, then again, not one of them will fall to the ground unnoticed and unaccompanied by God. Because — this is not a new message, by the way — God cares for what the world considers insignificant or unpalatable. God goes out on a limb for the weak and the poor, the widows and the broken; Jesus makes a feast for the common people, but also shares a table with the sinners and the troublemakers. God’s eye is on the sparrow, even when, or maybe especially when, our eyes seek out something with a little more prestige, a little better behavior, a little less trouble.

That is why, I think, scripture keeps pressing the point — that God loves the commonplace and everyday; that Christ came to save the world, the whole world; that the Spirit redeems what is overlooked, but also that which is downright unpleasant. God simply refuses to reserve God’s love for that which the world finds beautiful or important; God insists on loving everything and everyone the world finds downright unloveable. As one theologian puts it: “Perhaps it is not our love of the sacred that will help save the world as much as it is our willingness to embrace the profane.”

The truth is, it’s pretty easy to hate things. It’s terrifyingly simple to list out the unlikeable qualities of other residents on our planet: our next-door neighbors, our spouses, our colleagues, the Republicans, the Democrats, the independents, the black lives matter advocates, the all lives matter responders. those who are pro-mask, those who are anti-mask, anyone who is not like us or aligned with us. The list goes on and on.

But I’m not sure that generating more reason to hate, or more reason to ridicule, or more reason to belittle, ever results in more love. Jesus seems quite clear on this point. Whoever is most unloveable in your life, he

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<sup>1</sup> Most of the facts about sparrows presented in this sermon come from Debbie Blue’s book, *Consider the Birds*.

says, love them. Whoever seems worth the least, he says, value them more than the others. Pay attention. See what and who is longing to be seen. Consider the birds. Not one sparrow falls to the ground unnoticed, unaccompanied, by God.

Just yesterday, we celebrated the life of Scott Barnes, who was perhaps more than any other individual in history of this church, the very embodiment of welcome, hospitality, and grace. There was room for everyone, he believed, and he lived it out quite literally. It didn't matter if the service was already underway — if he noticed someone new coming in the door, he was going to go welcome them, liturgy, sermon, or singing notwithstanding. In recognition of his remarkable spirit, Session named him Ambassador Emeritus when he moved into assisted living and was not able to attend in person each week. And here's the thing: ambassador emeritus was not something that previously existed. Scott's capacity for welcome and inclusion, Scott's desire to extend God's love, was so deep and wide, we had to create something new in order to honor it properly.

We celebrated Scott's life yesterday, and just a few days ago, we celebrated the ordination and installation of our newest church officers. That will be included later in this service, because we recorded it in order to share it with you. But these newest elders and deacons, they answered many questions in the affirmative about their willingness to serve God and love their neighbor and bear witness to the good news of the Gospel. They answered many questions, but I am wondering now if perhaps there should have been one more: will you consider the birds?

That is the question for all of us, really. When push comes to shove. It is the task Scott pursued with the fullness of his life. It is the task our new officers will pursue in their new roles. But in the broadest, truest sense, it is the task for us all. Will we notice the sparrow? Will we

respond to contempt with compassion? Will we lift up what the world casts aside? Will we choose love even in response to the strongest hate?

If we do, it is not just the sparrow that will benefit. That is the way the world works; that is how creation was designed; our lives are inextricably intertwined. Because the sparrow may be common and basic. It may be dull and uninteresting, and at times aggressive and unpleasant. But in Australia, there is video proof that they have learned to open automatic doors — not for themselves, but for one another, especially when the weather is threatening. One hovers in front of the electric sensor until the door opens and the others can enter safely and ride out the storm.

And even though the sparrow is in no way a water bird, it can swim when it needs to, to escape a predator or a trap. They will adapt more than previously thought possible in order to survive.

And while our hearts beat 70 times a minute, a sparrow's heart beats 800 times. At rest, we breathe about 18 times a minute; a sparrow breathes 90 times. I know it isn't scientifically the case, but I like to think this means when we are afraid and our hearts skip a beat, or when we are anxious and we cannot catch our breath, the sparrows are there, keeping the world breathing and beating for us, in order that we all not just survive, but ultimately thrive.

Consider the birds. Notice the sparrow. Not one is ever forgotten by God.