

SPARROWS STILL DIE

Matthew 10:5a, 21-33

Third Sunday after Pentecost (Series A)

June 21, 2020

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Third Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 10. We'll read the first part of verse 5 as an introduction. You'll see that Jesus is giving instructions to the twelve apostles when he chose them as apostles. Then we'll skip down and read verses 21 through 33. Jesus warns them what their lives will be like because of their devotion to him. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 10, beginning at verse 5, we read in Jesus' name.

⁵ These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them ...

²¹ "Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, ²² and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. ²³ When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

²⁴ "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. ²⁵ It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household.

²⁶ "So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. ²⁷ What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops. ²⁸ And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. ²⁹ Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. ³⁰ But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. ³¹ Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. ³² So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, ³³ but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Think of the birds. They're so happy and free. They don't have to work. They just fly, play, sing, and eat all day. Earlier in *The Gospel of Matthew* Jesus says, "**They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them**" (6:26). They don't have to work, and they fly south for the winter. The birds are born into retirement. Must be nice.

Birds have it so nice because our heavenly Father feeds them. Notice: it's not the birds' father who feeds them, but *our* Father. Believers in Jesus are the children. Birds are mere pets. And yet, God our Father cares for them. He feeds them. He gives them a great life. They eat, play, sing, and fly all day. And if a cat gets too close, they just fly up in a tree. Then the cat chases them up the tree, the bird flies to another tree, and the cat is stuck in the tree. This must be very satisfying for the bird.

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For such a cheap creature, birds sure have it nice. In Jesus' day you could apparently buy two sparrows for a penny. Granted, a penny today isn't worth what it used to be. Back then it was worth 1/16 of a day's wages, which is a lot more than today, but still not very much. That means you could buy thirty-two sparrows for one day's wages. That's a lot of birds. Birds are cheap. And yet, God our Father cares for them. He feeds and protects them. This is nice. It's a picture for us of how God our Father takes care of us. Here's the point: if God cares for the birds, *how much more* does he care for us? **"You are of more value than many sparrows"** (10:31).

But sparrows still die. Every once in a while you step out your front door and there's a dead bird lying right in the middle of the sidewalk. Then you have to get a plastic bag, turn it inside out, stick your hand in, and pick up the dead bird without touching it. Gross! God cares for the sparrows, but sparrows still die. Jesus doesn't say they don't die. Rather, he says, **"Not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father"** (10:29). That bird fell dead on the sidewalk because God let it fall to the ground.

So when Jesus comforts us by telling us that we are worth more than many sparrows, he's not saying we won't die. He's also not saying we won't have trouble. Rather, he is saying that God our Father will love us through our troubles. Furthermore, he will raise us from the dead on the Last Day when Jesus returns. Until then, we should expect troubles.

So whenever you hear birds singing, think to yourself, *They sing because my heavenly Father cares for them, and he cares for me even more.* And the next time you have to pick up a dead bird with an inside-out grocery bag, think to yourself, *But they still die, and so will I, but my God will raise me from the dead, because I am worth more than many sparrows.*

This is a rather sobering passage. The first thing we heard is how brother will betray brother, father will betray child, and children will betray parents. And this isn't the normal kind of family spat. Jesus is talking about family members delivering one another over to death. Can you imagine such a thing? What would have to happen for you to take your brother, child, or father, hand him over to someone, and say, "Here. Kill him"? It's unimaginable. But this is what Jesus said would happen, and it has happened.

At different times and in different places in the world, family members have turned over family members to be killed simply because they converted to Christianity. There are many places in the world—more now than ever—where Christianity is illegal. In some of these places, conversion is a capital offense. And every once in a while we hear stories of family members turning other family members into the authorities. Occasionally they even do the killing themselves.

What would cause a person to be so hostile to Christianity?

Consider the Apostles' Creed as a simple summary of the Christian faith. What in there is so offensive? We believe that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We believe the Father created all things. We believe the Son of God became man. His name is Jesus. We believe he was crucified and that he rose again. We believe this results in "the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." What is so offensive about that that it would cause someone to kill family members over it?

There are a few answers to that question.

First: the devil. Whenever we see such horrible things, we should recognize that the devil is behind it somehow. The devil is really behind every evil in the world. He introduced evil into the world by deceiving Adam and Eve. He is the source of all evil. And even though we may not be able to see it, there are particular evils where he is actively working behind the scenes. He is the

sworn enemy of God, and, therefore, the enemy of everything God has created. And he is especially the enemy of the Church. Whenever we see persecution of Christians, we should recognize that the devil is behind it.

Another thing that would cause a person to be hostile to Christianity is the sinful nature, also known as the “sinful flesh,” or the “old Adam.” The sinful nature hates Christianity, and especially the gospel, because it means the death of the sinful nature. One way to define repentance is: *the death of the sinful nature and the birth of the new nature*. But it’s not a one-and-done death. It’s an ongoing death where the Christian is daily putting the sinful nature to death through repentance. Repentance is ongoing torture for the sinful nature. And we are, according to our sinful natures, rebellious and hostile to God.

There are two basic messages God speaks to us: Law and Gospel. These are the two basic doctrines of the Bible. I’ll define them briefly: “The Law is the divine Word which tells us what we must do” (*Explanation of Luther’s Small Catechism*, 33). And, “The Gospel is the good news of the grace of God in Jesus Christ our Savior” (*ibid*, 34). In other words, the Law gives us instructions, and the Gospel gives us forgiveness.

The sinful nature hates God’s Law. The sinful nature does not want to be told what to do. It is rebellious. The sinful nature hates God’s Law. But the sinful nature *really* hates the Gospel. The sinful nature hates the Gospel even more than it hates the Law, because the sinful nature can use the Law to puff itself up. We use the Law to justify ourselves. This, by the way, is not an honest use of the Law. You have to ignore large parts of the Law to do this. But the sinful nature does it. So even though the sinful nature hates God’s Law, the Law can appeal to a person’s pride, and the sinful nature likes that. But the Gospel comes along promising forgiveness, and this assaults our pride. The Law also assaults our pride, but with the Gospel, it’s unavoidable. Someone says, “Jesus died to forgive your sins,” and the sinful nature responds, “How dare you? I don’t need any forgiveness! I can deal with my sins on my own just fine!” So the phrase, “the forgiveness of sins,” is the most offensive part of the Apostles’ Creed. Do you see what I mean?

Forgiveness can actually be quite offensive. Suppose some random stranger walks up to you and says, “I forgive you.” What do you say to that? “Forgive me for what? What did I do?” And then they go into this big long list going back your entire life. They mention a bunch of things you don’t even remember doing, as well as some things you don’t think were really that bad, and even some things you thought were actually pretty good. Suddenly the statement, “I forgive you,” becomes rather offensive, especially when you think your sins are none of this person’s business. Their statement, “I forgive you,” implies that you’re a pretty bad person, and they are in a position either to save you or condemn you.

This is how it is when the Holy Spirit comes along preaching forgiveness. And the assault on our pride is really driven home by the point that this forgiveness is necessary. Without forgiveness we will be condemned to hell for all eternity. Our sin was so grievous that the Son of God had to take on our human flesh in order to die a brutal and humiliating death on a Roman cross. This was necessary because of our sin ... because of your sin. There is no making up for it. There is no atoning for our own sins. The only possible solution was the death of God’s Son. That’s how bad our sins are. Do you see how that might be offensive? So the good news—the *greatest* news of forgiveness through Jesus’ atoning death—is also the most offensive part of Christian doctrine.

This is why the world often responds so harshly, even violently, to the Church. The world is simply the collective sum of everyone’s sinful nature, and the sinful nature hates this message of forgiveness. Then you stick the devil behind it all, and we have a deadly combination.

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The world hated Jesus, and Jesus warns us to not be surprised if we get the same treatment. **“If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul”—**which is another name for the devil—**“how much more will they malign those of his household”** (10:25). Jesus came preaching forgiveness, healing the sick, driving out demons, and raising the dead. They called him the devil, and they killed him for it. This is how the world responds to the Light. We should not only be ready for the same treatment. We should expect it.

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I think the American Church has become numb to this warning. We have enjoyed protections of religious freedom that the world has rarely, if ever, seen before. So we've become numb to Jesus' warning, and we've taken our freedom for granted. But it's not going to last. It really can't last. I don't know how long it will take. I kind of think it will occur within my lifetime, but I'm really bad at predicting things. I do feel confident enough to say this: unless Jesus returns first, religious freedom is going to collapse at some point. The devil, the world, and the sinful nature are just stronger than the manmade protections we have in place. It's as simple as that. Sooner or later, religious freedom will collapse, and we need to be ready to live in a society without it.

Now, you might say, “God can protect us. He is stronger than the devil, the world, and the sinful nature. He can do anything.” Yes, he can do anything. And he does promise to protect his Church. But he does not promise to shield us from persecution. Instead, Jesus warns us that it will come. He teaches us to expect it.

For us it's a matter of knowing what Jesus' promises are, expecting him to keep those promises, and not expecting him to do things he has not promised. There are many things we might like God to do, and we might even be able to rationalize that those things are good, and, therefore, we expect God to do them for us. But in the end, those things are merely our wishes. The only things we can really be confident in are the things God has promised.

Jesus has not promised to shield us from persecution. He has not promised that we won't be thrown in prison. He has not promised that we won't die for our faith. Sparrows still die, and so do Christians. Sometimes Christians die for the simple fact that they are Christians.

So Jesus tells us who we should really fear: **“Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”** (10:28). If someone throws you in prison for your confession of Jesus, remember that God's Word is not bound. If they kill you for your faith, remember that they cannot destroy your soul, and God will also raise your body on the Last Day. **“Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”**

And that's not the devil. The devil is not the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell. He is not the ruler there. When the devil is cast into the lake of fire, it will not be to reign in hell; it will be to suffer in hell. The one who can destroy both soul and body in hell is God. So fear God.

It's hard for us to think of fear as a positive thing. But there is both a negative kind of fear and a positive kind. We usually think of the negative kind. We fear things that are dangerous and evil. But we also fear good things. Fear simply means to acknowledge the power of something. If we see a tornado a hundred feet away, we fear in a negative way, because we acknowledge the power of the tornado. We know it could destroy us, and we know it doesn't need a reason. Or if an armed intruder comes into your house, you might fear in a negative way, because you already know the person has evil intentions. These are negative forms of fear.

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But there is also a positive kind of fear. When a toddler sees a parent do something really powerful, like pick up a gallon of milk, they fear in a positive way. They acknowledge the power of mom and dad. And maybe, if they really think about it, they might realize that mom and dad could use their power to hurt them. For some children, I suppose this is the tragic reality of their lives. But with good parents the child knows that mom and dad use their power for good things, like pouring them a glass of milk. Children should have a positive fear of their parents, teachers, and other superiors. In a similar way, all of us should also have a positive fear of government, because God has instituted it for our good.

This is the positive kind of fear that we also have for God. The fear that children have for their parents and that citizens have for their governing authorities is a shadow of the kind of fear we should have for God. We acknowledge that he has the power and authority to discipline us, just like parents discipline their children and governments punish criminals. But we also know that God ultimately uses his power for our good. He uses it to save us.

This positive kind of fear comes when we acknowledge God's unlimited power on the one hand, while we also see his unconditional love on the other. If it's just sheer power, and we didn't know whether or not he loves us, it might be the negative kind of fear. But when we consider that the omnipotent God of the universe also loves us, then it's the positive kind of fear.

This power and love were on fullest display at the cross, where Jesus endured the worst suffering ever in order to destroy the power of sin and death. The cross looks weak. It's the death of a condemned criminal. But this is the epitome of God's power, because the cross is where Jesus defeated enemies we can't even see. And this is the victory that secures eternal life for us.

So someone may destroy our bodies ... temporarily. But no one has the power to destroy the soul that God has redeemed through the blood of Jesus. And, for that matter, no one has the power to permanently destroy your body. No earthly power can take anything from you that God will not give back in the resurrection of the dead. On that day, Christ's Church will be vindicated. All will see that the Jesus we trust in is the One True God. Evil will be revealed for what it is, and our faith will be vindicated. Our bodies will be raised. Body and soul will be reunited. And we will see that every bit of suffering we endure was worth it. And not only will we see that it was worth it, but we will see that it was nothing compared to the glory to be revealed in Jesus Christ. So do not fear men. Fear God. For he is all-powerful, and he loves you. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.