

So a polar bear walks into a bar and says to the bartender, "I'll have a gin....." He paused for a long time, thinking, and then finished with, ".....and tonic."

"Why the big pause?" asked the bartender.

"I dunno," the bear said, "My dad had 'em too."

How much are you like your father? Do you have big paws too? (CELEBRATION, May 2003, p. 2224)

Six-year-old Ben and his dad were spending the afternoon at the zoo. They came to the tiger's cage. Dad was explaining how ferocious and strong tigers are, and Ben was taking it all in with a very serious expression.

"Dad," Ben said finally, "if the tiger got out of his cage and ate you up...."

"Yes, son," the father said, expectantly.

"What bus should I take home?"

HAPPY FATHER'S DAY TO ALL OF YOU WHO KNOW THAT privilege! We'll have a special blessing for you at the end of the mass.

Now for the 3 points!

First, our fears. Jesus tells us not to fear, but the reality is that many of us are plagued by all kinds of fears. Officially, about 8% of all adults suffer from some kind of phobia. The actual number of phobia sufferers, though is probably higher than that. But even at 8%, that means over 26 million people suffer from irrational fears relating to particular situations, objects or experiences. These are the names of just some of the fears that people deal with: rhytiphobia (fear of getting wrinkles – guess those folks are the ones getting all the BOTOX!); homilophobia (fear of sermons – I guess those folks don't come to church – I'm sure no one at St. Andrew's suffers from that – but you may have heard of it happening at OTHER parishes!); and ephebiphobia (fear of teenagers) – which practically every adult suffers from! ("Conquering our Phobias: The Biological Underpinnings of Paralyzing Fears," US NEWS AND WORLD REPORT, 12/6/04)

There IS a lot to fear in this life. Right now Covid-19 is uppermost on most of our minds. But if we asked everyone here at Mass this weekend what they were afraid of – we would be here all day! Fear is a sub-current that runs through our lives; fear of economic insecurity, fear of what's happening in our relationships, fear of illness, even fear that our fears will be exposed! But there is also so much more in life to cherish, and there is so much more in life to do, that we will never get done if we are consumed by fear. Jesus knows this about us, and He knows well our situation, so He counsels His followers to name our fears, face them squarely, take appropriate caution when necessary, but live confidently anyway, knowing that our ultimate security is in God, not in our alarm systems, door locks, or weapons. Jesus' line "fear no one," can hit us right between the eyes. How can we follow such radical advice? Life without fear – that would be Good News indeed!

Second, WHY should we NOT be afraid? Because we are loved! By God! We are held forever in His hands – we are precious in His sight. And God is paying attention to us – because He even pays attention to the sparrows. There is a good bit of interesting background to this. 2 sparrows in Jesus' day sold for 'a small

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coin' the text says. Now the denarius was what a poor person would make as a daily wage – barely enough to feed him, let alone his family. The coin referred to in this gospel text was the *assarion*, which was about 1/16 of a denarius or one quarter of a penny. But if buyers were prepared to spend 2 pennies, they would receive not 4 sparrows, but 5! The extra bird was thrown into the bargain as having no value at all. But God cares even for the sparrow that human beings account as nothing. How much more does God value and love us!

But there is more. In v. 29, the Matthean Jesus declares that not one sparrow *falls* to the ground without God's consent. Most of us would think of this as a reference to the sparrow's death, but the Greek text of the Gospel actually says, "no sparrow *lights* upon the ground..." Therefore, it is not when the sparrow dies that God takes notice but *each time* it lights and hops on the ground. Because this would occur innumerable times in the life of a sparrow, it follows then that God's attentive care is continuous not only for sparrows but even more so for those whom God values more than an entire flock of sparrows – us!

This love of God, along with the assurance that God keeps a hair-count on all human beings helps us to understand Jesus' counsel not to live in fear. By the time these words were committed to writing for the Matthean community in the 80s, there had been many instances of intimidation leveled against believers, as well as outright persecution. Nevertheless, those early Christians kept the faith despite their fears of 'those who could deprive the body of life.' Clinging to Jesus' promise of salvation, they struggled and survived. Through their struggles, as well as those of Christians through the centuries, the church continues. Jesus promises that a caring God will always be with us.

Third and finally, a story of someone who took these words to heart. Sister Dorothy Stang was a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur who was murdered by a pair of gunmen as she walked along a rural road in Brazil's Amazon region in 2004. Stang had been receiving death threats for years because of her work on land reform, peasants' rights, and environmental issues and had asked the government on a number of occasions for better protection for the people in this isolated area, whom loggers and large landowners wanted moved elsewhere.

A witness to the shooting said that when her assailants approached, Sister Dorothy said, "you men are armed. I am not. The only defense I carry is the Word of God." She pulled out a Bible and began to read to them. Her killers listened for a moment, took a few steps back, and fired.

There is no doubt that Sister Dorothy followed Jesus' command to fear no one. She is now surely with the Lord she so faithfully served. But what I find almost unbelievable is that the gunmen actually paused to listen to her read from the Bible. What could possibly have been going through their minds as she read?

Perhaps Sister Dorothy's steadfast witness even unto death had an impact on their hearts, and they may someday find the courage to seek forgiveness. In the meantime, I pray that we all might find the courage to love so fearlessly. (Adapted from Patrice J. Touhy, in PREPARE THE WORD, 19 June 2005)