

Head's up! The joke's in the middle – so you have to stay awake to catch it!

The famous scripture scholar William Barclay did some wonderful scholarship on this notion of the sparrows. In Jesus' day, 2 sparrows sold for 'next to nothing' (v. 29), or more correctly, 'a small coin.' The coin 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, as one would expect, 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 count as nothing. HOW MUCH MORE does God value the disciple called into service by Jesus.

Barclay's research continues and makes the point regarding God's care even more poignantly. In verse 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 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 us -- whom God values more than an entire flock of sparrows.

Then we are assured that God keeps a hair-count on all human beings! Which backs up Jesus' counsel not to live in fear. Now by the time these words were committed to writing for the Matthean community of the 80s, there had been many instances of intimidation leveled against believers, as well as outright persecution. And of course, Jesus Himself had already been harassed and intimidated by the religious leaders, so He knew about what He spoke. (adapted from CELEBRATION: PREACHING RESOURCES, 12th Sunday, A, 2005)

Second, the issue of fear. An ironworker on a skyscraper calmly walked a narrow beam 15 floors above the city street. Even with heavy winds blowing, and a driving rain falling, he showed no fear and never hesitated.

When he came down to the ground level a man who had been watching asked, "How did you ever get a job like that?" "Well," replied the ironworker, "I used to drive a school bus – but my nerves gave out." I guess we all have our breaking point!

Stephen King – the writer of scary stories, was asked about his daily writing routine. He said that he only writes in the morning. The interviewer asked him whether he ever wrote anything at night, to which Stephen King replied, "Are you kidding? Not with the stuff I write!" He was kidding, of course, but there is something about the night that gives us all the heebie-jeebies. It reminds me of a young woman who was waiting for a bus in a bad area of town one evening when a young rookie police officer approached her. "Want me to wait with you?" he asked. She replied confidently, "Thank you, but that's not necessary. I'm not afraid." "Well, then," he said, grinning nervously, "Would you mind waiting with me?" (DYNAMIC PREACHING, July-Sept 2014, p. 13)

The issue of fear has deep consequences in the spiritual life. Underneath the religious or belief systems we hold, there are often 3 possible worldviews, that show us how we deal with our fears: The universe is against us, the universe is for us, or the universe is neutral.

The neutral universe says that reality is indifferent. There is no God against us – or for us; we're basically on our own. Many good and even religious people subscribe to this worldview. Life has sadly

convinced them that there probably is a God, and God might even be just and good, but this God is not actively involved in our daily lives or history. We can be baptized and confirmed, come to Mass every Sunday and follow all the rules, but if the grace of God hasn't deeply touched us – which is the full meaning of conversion – we will have no meaningful awareness of the divine.

Which is the malaise of much of Western Christianity today. Many people keep up the external observance of reliance upon God, but underneath depend only on themselves. “Nothing’s going to happen unless I make it happen,” such people say to themselves. Think about the way we contribute our money to the church. If we trust that God, the universe, is on our side, we can rather easily give 10%, trusting that our loving God will take care of us – even in our old age. Grubbing on to every penny we can and stuffing it into our IRA says we don’t trust God, we don’t think that God makes any real difference. This is a form of secularism – and it is insidious because we seem to miss it. All the right words and ideas are there – I give, but just \$5 or \$10 a week – but I’m operating out of a foundational sense of an indifferent universe and an indifferent, distant God. That’s not a loving relationship, it’s a dues payment.

If we stay in an indifferent universe for long, we usually move to the second worldview where reality is perceived as hostile, destructive, or judgmental. Not only is God not involved but God has to be appeased. For such people God is somehow actively AGAINST humanity; watching us, judging us, critiquing us, and certainly not on our side. Many Christians claim they don’t believe that, but it’s clear that they do from the fearful way they live. People still come to me and confess that they missed Sunday Mass – WHEN THEY WERE SICK! Does God have to be appeased by our coming to Sunday Mass – even when we should NOT? Or do they want a medal for coming to Mass when they are sick and infecting everyone else?! That’s just plain fear – and a warped concept of God.

The third worldview can only be given by grace, though it has a great head start with a loving and merciful family system. In this group the universe is not against us, nor is it sitting out there indifferent. Somehow, it’s on our side! Reality can be trusted. We don’t need to pull the right strings or push all the right buttons. Grace is everywhere. It’s good to be here. Life is often difficult, but it is still good and trustworthy at the core. That’s the message of the sparrows and being worth more than a flock of them. And it is the meaning of the hairs on our head being numbered. God is in charge, and God is lovingly in charge. And God has created a loving and good universe.

And until we meet this benevolent God in a benevolent universe, until we realize that the foundation of all is love, we will not be at home in this world. That meeting of God, that understanding experience, cannot be communicated by words. It is a gift given through encounter with the Holy Spirit. Its inherent character is best described by 3 overlapping characteristics: faith, hope, and love. When we experience those virtues, allow them to transform us, and are able to pass them on, we are participating in the very life of God.

A story of someone living this understanding of God loving us through it all. It was just a few weeks after her surgery; the chemotherapy treatments had begun. Every morning, she would comb her hair – and every morning she would pull out another clump of her beautiful hair from the brush. This side effect was hitting her harder and harder.

One morning, she felt the top of her head and, for the first time, she could count the strands. But she felt strangely at peace. She held each strand – just as God, in His providence, could count them from the moment God breathed His life into her. She became aware of God present in the love of her family and friends who were supporting and suffering with her. She remembers: “I felt comfort knowing that God knew how many strands were in my brush, on my pillow, in my hat, and in my hand. God had counted them all.

With or without my hair, God knew me and what my future held. I was still afraid – of the cancer, of the chemo, the upcoming brain scan, and its results – but I knew that God would be with me through it all.” (adapted from “I lost my hair but not my faith” by Kathryn Lay, CATHOLIC DIGEST, May 2008)

You are worth more than a flock of sparrows! And God has counted every single hair on your head! God is with us through it all. Amen.

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