

Proper 7, Year A

June 24, 2017

Matthew 10:16-31 *"See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes. "A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household! "So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. 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. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.*

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?

There's a relatively new curriculum published for the Episcopal Church titled, "Transforming Questions."¹ The premise of the curriculum is that *questions* are an important element of faith. The introduction to the curriculum states: "Almost every single person in scripture who encounters God does so with a lot of questions, and more than a little doubt. Abraham and Sarah, Moses, David, Mary, the disciples, and Paul all ask questions, and those questions are part of their faithful response to God. In fact, it is in the act of asking questions that we wrestle more deeply with our faith, allowing ourselves to be transformed by the One whom we encounter in the midst of our doubts and questions."

The poet Rilke wrote, "Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves... Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer."

And if you're still not convinced that questions are an integral part of faith, go through the Gospels and count how many times Jesus, rather than *answering* a question, poses a *different* question which gets more to the heart of the matter.

In fact, Pastor and author Frederick Buechner suggests that the Bible is perhaps best viewed not as an *answer* book, but as a book of important questions: “There is perhaps no stronger reason for reading the Bible,” Buechner writes, “than that somewhere among all those... pages there awaits each reader whoever he is the one question which, though for years he may have been pretending not to hear it, is the central question of his own life. Here are a few of them: What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world but loses his own soul? (Mat.16:26) Am I my brother’s keeper? (Gen. 4:9) If God is for us, who can be against us? (Romans 8:31) Who is my neighbor? (Luke 10:29)”²

Questions have a way of getting us involved. Answers can be held at arms’ length; but we have to take questions inside ourselves.

In our Gospel reading today we have another question – a question which is not explicitly stated, but is strongly implied. It is this: What are you afraid of?

What are you afraid of?

The question comes up because of the mission on which Jesus sent his disciples in the passage right before today’s Gospel, with the warning that they should expect rejection and hardship as they carry out that mission. “See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves,” Jesus tells them. “[T]hey will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me.”

In describing all these threats his disciples will face, Jesus is raising to their consciousness their own unnamed fears. Better to get it all out on the table now, name what it is that they are afraid of.

For like so many of *us*, the disciples have been evading the question. “What are you afraid of?” We would rather simply go on with our daily routine than struggle with our fears.

Jesus brings the question of his disciples’ fears out into the open, into the light of consciousness. “Brother will betray brother to death,” Jesus says, “and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name.”

But just as he brings the question of fear front and center into their consciousness, Jesus hits them with another question, as far afield from the first as East from West: “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?”

Excuse me?

Had the disciples not been so busy scratching their heads, wondering where in the world Jesus got *that* question, they would have answered, “Of course! A penny is exactly what two sparrows cost in those days. But what does that question have to do with *anything*?”

Jesus has set it up, exposing all that there is to be afraid of, and he is now ready for the punch line: “Not one sparrow falls to the ground apart from your [heavenly] Father. So DO NOT BE AFRAID! You are of more value than many sparrows.”

John Shea says that Jesus wants us to laugh at this – comparing the cost of half-penny sparrows with human lives! – and at the same time he wants us to be blown away by the overwhelming magnitude of God’s love for us. For as St. John writes, “Perfect love casts out fear.” After Jesus has spelled out the very real difficulties and hardships of following him, which inevitably lays bare the disciples’ fears, he tells them in the next breath that they need not be afraid, because of God’s unimaginable love for them.

“Do not be afraid,” God says to Abraham, “I am your shield.” (Gen. 15:1) “Do not be afraid,” the angel says to Joseph in a dream, “take Mary as your wife, for the child within her is of the Holy Spirit.” (Matt. 1:20) “Do not be afraid,” another angel tells Mary, “for if you put aside your fear, the Son of God will be born in you.” (Luke 1:31, 35) “Do not be afraid,” Jesus tells Peter after the miraculous catch of fish, “from now on you will be fishing for people.” (Luke 5:10) Over 100 times in the Bible, God or God’s messengers tell people, “Do not be afraid.” And after each of those times there follows a message of good news.

What are *you* afraid of? Failure? Running out of money? Loneliness? Loss of control? Your own compulsions or destructive tendencies? The wellbeing of your children or grandchildren? Declining health? Cancer? Being put in a nursing home? Death?

What are you afraid of? It is a question we should not avoid, but rather should live with; a question to which we should open ourselves and ask ourselves over and over again throughout our life, confronting the fears which keep us from living life fully. For the more we fear, the less we love. The more we fear, the less we trust God.

What are you afraid of?

Ask yourself that question; live with that question. But then ask yourself two more questions, and live with them, also:

“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?”

“And how much more does God love you?”

AMEN

¹ <http://www.forwardmovement.org/Products/2394/transforming-questions-brdownloadable-course.aspx>

² Frederick Buechner, *Listening to Your Life*, New York: Harper Collins, 1992, pp. 124-125; altered