

His Eye Is On the Sparrow

Luke 12: 1-7

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First Federated Church

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(SERMON NOTES)

In days before Holiday Inns and Comfort Inns and the like, it was common for people with large houses to take in houseguests in order to supplement their income. Such was the case with Mr. and Mrs. Doolittle. They lived in Elmira, New York. In the spring of 1905 one of the families that lodged with the Doolittles was the well known gospel song writers Civilla Durfee Martin and her husband Walter.

During the course of their stay that Martins developed quite a fondness for the Doolittles. In one of her letters Civilla Martin referred to them as “true saints of God.”

“Mrs. Doolittle” she wrote, “has been bedridden for nigh twenty years. Her husband was an incurable cripple who had to propel himself to and from his business in a wheel chair. Despite their afflictions, they lived happy Christian lives brining inspiration and comfort to all who knew them.”

One evening Walter Martin asked the Doolittles about their cheerful hopefulness. What was the secret of it? The two looked at each other before Mrs. Doolittle responded. The source of their cheerful hopefulness was really quite simple. “His eye is on the sparrow,” she said as she looked over at her husband, “and I know He watches me.”

Later that night the Martins thought about what Mrs. Doolittle had said. Eventually they were moved to put their thoughts on paper and a poem, entitled “His Eye Is On the Sparrow” was born.

The next morning they sent the poem to a composer named Charles Gabriel. The rest, as they say, is history.

“His Eye Is On the Sparrow” found its way into the hearts of millions of Americans. It was the title of the signature song of the great gospel singer Ethel Waters as well as the title of her autobiography.

After a number of years it began to slip from the pages of hymnals but then in 1993 it saw a revival when Grammy-award winning singer and rapper Lauren Hill sang it in “Sister Act 2—Back in the Habit.”

In the movie Whoopi Goldberg plays the lead role, a Las Vegas lounge singer who is enticed to become the music teacher at a tough inner city parochial school. Her students are undisciplined, tough reflecting the apathy that is so prevalent in impoverished, hope starved communities. By accident Goldberg discovered that the school had a rich but now forgotten musical tradition. At one time it had been the home of one of the state’s premier music programs.

Goldberg used this forgotten heritage as the catalyst to bring about a revival in the school. She set a goal before her students, to once again qualify for the state’s music competition. “His Eye Is On the Sparrow” became the vehicle that would take them there, and Lauren Hill’s angelic voice the engine that propelled the choir.

By the end of the movie the students made a life-transforming discovery. They are not losers limited by their circumstances. They are champions. They are children of God.

The biblical text that gave the Doolittle's strength, inspired the Martins to set that buoyant strength to paper and has encouraged millions over the generations is our Scripture lesson for today.

By way of context, tension between Jesus and the Pharisees mounted. Jesus popularity was on the rise. The Pharisees, hoping to discredit him, began to press him in hoping to make him stumble.

Our lesson opened with Jesus warning his disciples to beware of the Pharisees leaven because it is hypocrisy. He told his disciples that there are no real secrets in life. Whatever is said behind closed doors will eventually be made public. He told them not to be afraid of those who can kill the body, for what more can they do to you? Instead be afraid, be very afraid of those who can kill your soul—that which makes you *you*.

Then, as a way of encouragement he reminded them of something that they have seen everyday in the marketplace.

“Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies?”

There is something curious in Luke's gospel at this point. The story also appears in Matthew's gospel but it is slightly different. Matthew asked, in a similar context, are not *two* sparrows sold for a penny?

It would make sense then that Luke would say aren't *four* sparrows sold for two pennies but that is not what he said. Instead he noted that *five* sparrows are sold for two pennies.

Sparrows were “poor man's meat.” It was evidently a common practice to sell two sparrows for a penny but if you splurged and bought four, the dealer would through in the fifth one free—kind of like our “bakers' dozen”, you buy a dozen donuts and they'd throw in a thirteenth for free.

In other words, economically speaking, the fifth sparrow was worthless.

But Jesus said, “au contraire”! You may think that the fifth sparrow is of no value but it is of eternal value to God.

Jesus does not say that the sparrow is protected from harm. The truth of the matter is that there will come a day when the fifth sparrow will fall to the ground like the four before it. But that does not mean that it is worthless. It is simply the way of this broken world.

He turns to his disciples and essentially asked, “Don't you realize that you are of infinitely greater value than a handful of sparrows in the marketplace?”

In John's gospel Jesus reminds his disciples, “In this world you will have trouble, but be not afraid for I have overcome the world.”

Being a disciple does not make us immune from hardship or disappointment. Bad things happen to us as they happen to everyone else. The rain, Jesus once said, falls upon the just and the unjust. And when the Tower of Silom killing sixteen people Jesus asked his listeners if they thought that those who died were any worse than anyone else. The obvious answer is “No.” We can be at the wrong place at the wrong time. Things can happen that we have no control over. But remember this. God is with us in the good times and the bad times—especially the bad times.

My grandson is currently afraid of thunder storms. When a thunderstorm breaks the stillness of night he calls out to his dad. His dad lays down with him, like I laid down with my daughters. It's not that we can prevent the storm but our presence makes a difference. God's presence in the midst of the storm makes a difference.

In our text the voice of God spoke to the bedridden Mrs. Doolittle and the severely crippled Mr. Doolittle. “Everyone else may see someone to be pitied, someone who is broken, someone who may not be of value as the world judges value. But theirs is not the opinion that counts, that matter. There is Someone who sees you as you *really* are. That Someone is the One who has an eye upon the sparrow.”

*Why should I feel discouraged,
Why should the shadows come,
Why should my heart be lonely
And long for Heav'n and home,
When Jesus is my portion?
My constant friend is He:
His eye is on the sparrow,
And I know He watches me;
His eye is on the sparrow,
And I know he watches me.*