

The 3rd Sunday after Pentecost: Holy Trinity Church: June 25, 2017

Proper 7: Matthew 10: 24-39: *Innocent Sparrows Do Fall From The Sky*

Preached

By

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A large train pulled by two engines was making its way across America. While crossing the Western mountains, one of the engines broke down. “No problem, we can make it to Denver and get a replacement engine there,” the engineer thought, and carried on at half power. Farther on down the line, the other engine broke down, and the train came to a standstill in the middle of nowhere. The engineer needed to inform the passengers about why the train had stopped. He didn’t want the passengers to get too upset and so he tried to look on the bright side of things. He made the following announcement:

“Ladies and Gentlemen, I have some good news and some bad news. The bad news is that both engines have failed, and we will be stuck here for some time until the additional engines arrive. The good news is that you didn’t make this trip in an airplane!”

My sisters and brothers, If you're going to lose both your engines, better to do it on a train and not a plane. But I have some even better news for you today.

God's love for you and me is intimate and it is unimaginable.

In our reading from Matthew's Gospel, we have one of the most important Scriptural reminders of the love of God's children. It tells us how far reaching God's love is: *"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?" asked Jesus. "Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows."* What a moving testimony to the very intimate love that God has for each of us.

It might very well seem that people don't really matter very much in the grand scheme of things. After all, we are but microscopic inhabitants of a somewhat miniscule planet orbiting a relatively obscure star in a small galaxy among the billions and billions of stars and galaxies that make up the universe. Yet the God of creation has counted the very hairs of our heads.

What a magnificent picture of the love our Heavenly Father has for us.

But wait just a moment here. There is a troubling side to Jesus' teaching about the sparrows, and it has to do with those two engines that failed on that train: *"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?" asked Jesus. "Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care."*

This Gospel reading acknowledges that sparrows do fall from the sky. It happens all the time. Jet engines suck them up in their engines. Predators prey upon their young. Sudden storms or droughts can deprive them of their food. I am going to say something you may find quite harsh.

My brothers and sisters, God's love does not protect those tiny sparrows from life's tragedies. Neither does God's love for us protect us from life's tragedies. Engines have been known to fail on trains as well as airplanes, and it makes no difference in the world how many Christians are on those trains, planes or automobiles.

We are mature Christians. We understand and we have realized this truth in our own lives, but there are so many priests and ministers who speak of Christianity as the path to ease and prosperity in our society that the point needs to be made. It is a troubling truth but it is the truth. Sparrows, innocent sparrows, do fall out of the sky. Innocent people die on our roads everyday in car accidents. God's love does not protect us from life's problems and tragedies. It is the most difficult dilemma that Christians face.

So, why do the righteous suffer? There is a common phrase: only the good die young. Scoundrels live forever. That's not always true, of course, but that is sometimes how it seems. Why in Heaven's name, should that be so?

One answer may come from ordinary family life. Those of us, who are parents, and grandparents, let me ask you a question. If you could, would you protect your children and grandchildren from all of life's problems? Without thinking many of us might answer yes. I would resoundingly say, "YES!" It would be mighty tempting. Deep in our hearts we would like to build a protective bubble around our children. After a fractured skull and a broken arm before the age of 3, I would very much like to put my grandson Mitchell in a bubble suit. After all, when they hurt, we hurt. When someone abuses them, we are angry. When they are confronting a crisis, it is we who toss and turn in our beds with sleeplessness. We would like to protect our young from any and every hurt. But what would happen if we did? They would never grow into strong, responsible, competent and mature adults. Overcoming obstacles produces character and competence and strength.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, I am a big believer in *vigor in arduis*, strength in adversity. God has placed us in a world that is designed to bring out the best within us if we deal with life in an attitude of faith and love. That does not mean that God has forsaken us or forgotten us. Sparrows do fall from the sky.

There is a second truth related to this one. God's love does not protect us from life's problems, but neither is life's problems God's punishment for our sins.

This truth is made obvious in the book of Job. Job was a wealthy man living in a land called Uz with his large family and extensive flocks. In God’s sight, Job is “blameless” and “upright.” Yet God allowed Satan to torment Job to test his faith. You know how the story goes. Job’s livestock, servants, and ten children all die due either to marauding invaders or natural catastrophes. When all this happens to Job he tears his clothes and shaves his head in mourning, but he still blesses God in his prayers. Then, on top of all this, he is afflicted with horrible skin sores. His wife encourages him to curse God and to give up and die. Job refuses. Job curses the day he was born, but he refuses to curse God. Three of Job’s friends come to visit him. They are another big help. They accuse him of deserving his wretched condition. But Job knows he has been a righteous man and he believes that his redeemer God lives. He refuses to give up, and the result is that Job’s faith is finally vindicated and God blesses him more than before. My dear brothers and sisters, the book of Job still leaves many questions unanswered, but it is a mighty affirmation that adversity does not come as a punishment from God for our sins. Jesus’ disciples were undoubtedly familiar with the book of Job, yet when they saw a blind man begging on the street, they asked Jesus, “Who sinned that he should be in this condition?”

How often people blame themselves, and ultimately blame God, when life deals them a difficult blow. “Is God using my child’s sickness to punish me for some sin I have committed,” they ask themselves. What a petty God they must have to injure a helpless child in order to punish that child’s parent. I say, “No, a thousand times no!” Grief is tragic enough without adding to it the crushing burden of guilt.

Here is where our theology of the cross of Jesus Christ becomes so critical. My sisters and brothers, you and I live under the rule of God’s Grace. That is, we believe that something happened on the cross of Calvary that has forever changed the relationship between God and humanity. Because of what happened there, the believer in Christ has all their sins forgiven.

Now, to be sure, as free moral people living in a lawful world we have to live with the consequences of our misdoings. If I abuse my body, sooner or later it will catch up with me. If I cheat on my income taxes, Uncle Sam may punish me financially. In terms of my relationship with God, however, those sins are buried at the bottom of the deepest sea never to surface again. They are gone forever. If you believe that Jesus Christ has atoned for your sins, you cannot believe that God is using some adverse circumstance to punish you. The two are mutually exclusive.

You and I are not perfect, but that is the way God sees us. That is what it means to live under God's grace. God's love does not protect us from problems; neither are our problems God's punishment for our sins. As the Gospel of Matthew puts it, "*He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.*" Sparrows do fall from the sky. That is not because they have been good sparrows or bad, if sparrows can be good or bad. They fall because they are part of a lawful universe in which unfortunate tragedies do occur. But listen, here is the good news and the challenge.

The little sparrow never falls beyond God's watchful eyes. As children of God we know that we are under the watchful eye of God's grace. So, we can bear any burden. We can triumph over any tragedy. We can snatch victory from defeat. We can grow strong in adversity. We can get on top of any circumstance that this life throws at us because we know that we are never alone. Our challenge this week is two-fold my sisters and brothers: Embrace God's grace knowing that God's grace is sufficient for us to live our lives on this earth and second, know that you are never alone.

Do you remember St. Paul's litany of his misfortunes? "Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night

and a day on the open sea. I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.” (II Corinthians 11: 24-27) Yet, in all that, St. Paul heard the Lord’s voice saying, “My grace is sufficient for you” (12:9)

My sisters and brothers, for me and for many of us the injustice of this world, combined with the love of God, is the best assurance we have of a world beyond this one. Someday, somehow, somewhere, we will find our way back to our beginning in the presence of the creator God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

I will end this sermon with a short story. In Marjorie Rawling’s beautiful novel, *The Yearling*, set in rural Florida, there is a scene in which friends and family gather around the grave of a little disabled boy named Fodderwing.

Fodderwing could not do the things other boys could do, but he had a wonderful way with animals. There was no priest or minister present at Fodderwing’s burial, so one of the men of the community offered up this simple but moving prayer:

“Almighty God, it ain’t right for us to say what is right. But if we had been making this boy, we would never have made him with his back bent and his legs crooked. We would have made him straight and tall like his brothers. But somehow you made it up to him. You gave him a way with critters. It comforts us to know that he is in a place where his being bent doesn’t matter no more. We would like to think that you have taken that bent back and those crooked legs and straightened them. And Almighty God, if it ain’t asking too much, we pray that you will give him some critters to play with--maybe a few redbirds and a squirrel or two. Thy will be done. Amen.”