

Pastor Kris Litman-Koon
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Lesson: Matthew 10:24-39

²⁴“A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; ²⁵it 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! ²⁶So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. ²⁷What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. ²⁸Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. ²⁹Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. ³⁰And even the hairs of your head are all counted. ³¹So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

³²“Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; ³³but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven. ³⁴Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; ³⁶and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household. ³⁷Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; ³⁸and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

“Look! A cardinal,” one of my daughters will say. “There’s a finch!” the other will say a moment later. You may have guessed that we have a bird feeder at our house. Stella and Virginia are really enjoying the show. Nowadays, our one copy of that ubiquitous green, pocket-sized book, *Birds of the Carolinas*, is often the source of our twins’ fighting. Our family tries to figure out the various birds that make appearances in our backyard and our neighborhood, and one phrase I’ve heard us say more than once is, “It’s just a sparrow.”

“It’s just a sparrow.” Sparrows enjoy living near human communities all over the world, and we often see them around our fringes, scavenging for our leftovers. If you ever notice little birds hanging around the outdoor seating of a restaurant, it’s probably a sparrow. The colors of sparrows are never colorful, just a drab brown and grey, like dust and dirt. Barbara Crooker wrote a poem called “Sparrows” that says in part: “We hear the flutter of their wings, look up, then yawn, ho hum, a sparrow. No rush for the binoculars. Like the poor, they are always with us. . . .”

It should be no surprise that in Jesus’ day, sparrows were extremely cheap. The poorest people in Israel would buy them as a source of food. These birds had essentially no value at all, except to hungry people, and apparently also to God. In Matthew 10:29, Jesus says: “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father’s will.” We can hear this statement in two ways. First as a sentimental acknowledgement that God cares, then leave it at that. Or we can hear this within its context of the overall speech that Jesus is giving his disciples.

Our gospel lesson is the third part of Jesus’ volunteer recruitment speech. He has gathered people and is now telling them what is in store as a disciple. The first part is about what they can expect to do as disciples: you’re going to heal people, cast out demons, cleanse lepers, even raise the dead. The second part of the recruitment speech is the packing list: don’t bring any money, don’t bring extra clothes. In Matthew’s version, he even says don’t bring sandals or even a staff that could be used for protection. The packing list is this: be utterly dependent on God to work through the generosity of the strangers you will encounter. Let that prospect sink in. The third part of Jesus’ volunteer recruitment speech is our gospel lesson today, and it consists of the horrors they will face as his disciples. The first thing we hear him say today is that whatever fate awaits teachers and masters will also await their disciples and slaves. If they call the teacher a devil, what will they call the disciple? Jesus knows that his ministry and proclamation will lead to powerful people reviling and hating him. The Roman officials and dignitaries would certainly stand opposed to his message of liberation. Likewise, his disciples should expect a similar response from the Romans. Yet, Jesus tells us, “Have no fear of them.” These warnings are so dire, that he has to tell them, “Do not fear,” three times.

What could ever be of such immense importance that people wouldn't run away from Jesus upon hearing these warnings in his recruitment speech? Let's be honest: why would anyone stick around and say, "Sign me up!" after being told these outcomes await? I'm convinced that the only reason these people continued with Jesus is that something had been kindled in their hearts. They experienced in Jesus the love of God and a kingdom whose values are radically different from Rome's values. He accepted people when no one else would, and he selected disciples who had been passed over by all other teachers. They witnessed Jesus making things right, bringing to oppressed people God's justice through his healings and through his outreach. They heard him speak about God whose rule wasn't based on might and dominance, but on valuing the poor and the ones living on the margins. They could see God's presence in their acts of mercy and compassion.

Jesus continues by saying, "Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known." His point here is this: sharing and living the truth of God's radical transformation will make us uncomfortable. Why? Because it values people that others don't find value in. "The first shall be last, and the last shall be first," is a value statement. However, that will not be easily accepted by the first who want to remain first.

Then Jesus moves on to say he came not to bring peace, but a sword. We shouldn't be surprised by that. We know that when opposing values butt heads, it can be difficult and painful. We see this in person and on social media when our friends, relatives, and neighbors disclose their values. "That is how they view things?" So "bringing a sword" is an acknowledgment that not everyone is going to be on board with the values that Jesus' ministry is advancing, and it will cause rifts.

I believe that all of us here desire to have our lives and our values shaped by God, even when knowing it will likely make us uncomfortable. So what does that look like today? An old spiritual hymn has this line: "his eye is on the sparrow and I know he watches me." The Rev. Dr. Mary Anderson says, "If God's eye is on the sparrow, then as those made in God's image, that's where our vision is best focused, too." Where then are the sparrows in our midst? The people who are the least of these. The ones who are the underserved, the oppressed, and victims of this world's injustices. Where are they? Like sparrows, these people are all around. God values them. In a

pandemic, where are the unseen workers who care for the vulnerable and for the sick? Where are the unseen workers who harvest our food and who get that food to our tables? God values them. Our world may not prioritize people based on their skin color, or based on their background, or based on their vocation. But God values them. The ministry of Jesus is good news for them, and therefore it is good news for us all.

Jesus finishes this volunteer recruitment speech by talking about his disciples taking up the cross. The Romans executed numerous people by crucifixion, but its use was limited to only certain people: slaves and subversives. These people were the ones who were the most downtrodden and marginalized in Roman society. They were the sparrows on the fringes. So when Jesus says “take up the cross,” it is a statement to side with the sparrows.

The disciples listen to Jesus, and follow him, because he reveals that even though the Romans may threaten death, their human power is a façade. The true power is with God, who is present with us and revealed in mercy and compassion. We may no longer fear the Romans, however illness, economic stability, justice in society, and maintaining relationships with friends and family are some of the common fears we are facing now. God is greater than those fears. God will see us through them. God is present -- still showing up when and where we least expect -- working in and through acts of mercy and compassion. So we side with the sparrows, we take up the cross, and Jesus’ ministry... the mission... continues on.

Thanks be to God. Amen.