

Hairs, Sparrows, Dads, and Death (21June2020)
Matthew 10:24-39; Jeremiah 20:7-13; Romans 6:1-11

Among characteristics in a bio I occasionally use, I refer to myself as a mediocre birder.

That shapes my pondering of what to do about a nesting sparrow at my house. On the one hand, bird eggs are always amazing to find and see, and there's a celebration of new life.



But then...they're house sparrows, really an invasive species, and they're aggressive. The photo on the bulletin cover shows some likely evidence of that. I'm wondering if this was actually a grosbeak nest and the sparrow drove out the bigger bird and maybe got rid of some of those bigger eggs and now has laid five of its own.

If I were more than a mediocre birder, I'd know, and I'd probably clear out those eggs and try to sustain native species. But I haven't convinced myself...yet.

This Bible reading worsens my internal debate. Jesus says not a sparrow will die without God

knowing about it. "His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he's watching me." It could sound like a threat, as if God is keeping track of sparrows (and their eggs), and knows who's been up on a ladder disturbing them.

It's my little moral dilemma, the better or worse of sparrow egg snatching (sparrow-cide?), complete with necessary theological turmoil.

But you probably don't care. I mean, you may now want to ask how I could be so cruel. Or you may want to press me to help other birds. But, I'm nearly certain, this wasn't your conundrum or cares coming into this.

You've got lots on your mind. But probably not sparrow ethics. Instead it may feel like the prophet Jeremiah, that "terror is all around" and you're crying "violence and destruction" all day long. You may be weary, with it not just on your mind, but burning inside your bones. It's thick these days, with stuff like coronavirus and all that goes with it. And stuff like racism and police reform and Juneteenth. And protests and rallies and politics. And the economy. And speaking out for the vulnerable. And the Supreme Court and DREAMers and LGBTQ folks. And your family's concerns. And how to navigate summer break and distancing. And various grievances and grieving. And some life or lives you want back. And the agenda for the rest of the day. And, and, and... It's lots, lots on your mind, lots to deal with, lots to cry out and stumble through.

Oh, and it's Fathers' Day.

It may be great. Or it may be a hard Fathers' Day without hugs, or with the general strain of relationships, and pressure to observe it rightly, to be as you should in families. To complexify what it is or isn't already, we happen to have a reading where Jesus talks about setting father against child and child against father. As you're trying to figure out how properly to be and act and what to do, you're confronted with the contradictory question of whether Jesus wants it all undone anyway.

If you're doing religion right, is the point to get in arguments and pick fights? Are you supposed to be scorned and miserable? Is Jesus' metaphorical

sword to hack away at your relationships, or to die impaled on it yourself at the end?

No. Again, you don't need to hear these as instructions from Jesus, but simply indicators of what may happen.

Even taking up a cross isn't sending you out as a martyr on a suicide mission. Crucifixion was a punishment that couldn't be given to citizens, reserved for the poor and outcast. Jesus may simply be talking about privilege and—as he humbly did—associating with those who *could* be crucified, identifying with the marginalized. You do know that view and seriously try to practice it.

That may be further commended since none of Jesus' followers got killed with him. Either that means they weren't listening and were doing it totally wrong, or that it wasn't actually only about getting yourself killed.

And it sometimes strikes me that getting killed is the easy way out. If you wanted to go clash with police as an act of solidarity, you could probably die before too long. If you wanted solidarity with those with coronavirus, you'd wind up needing to be taken care of. If you wanted to go on constantly about politics with others while disregarding their positions, that's a fairly self-righteous and minimally helpful way to get victimized like Jeremiah.

I know you take your responsibility seriously.

But to go back to fathers and children, what if it's not that Jesus is instructing you to blow up those relationships, but offering a word for when that does happen? For when you're feeling the burning in your guts. For when things aren't going well and you don't seem to make a lick of difference. For when you know people are hurting and you feel responsible to help. When the weight of the world is on your shoulders, or even just the weight of your family, which is still plenty. What if it's not that Jesus is recommending you start a fight, but acknowledging that even if there are fights you can't fix, still there's something more. If you can't overturn the oppressive powers and instead they scorn you or metaphorically crucify you, maybe it's okay.

And not okay because you can always try again. Not okay because you tried and gave it your all. Not to vindicate you for having been so right all along.

In the end, it's not bigger than whether or not I decide to smash those sparrow eggs, whether they die or live. Or, it is exactly bigger. Not one of those nasty sparrows would fall apart from God's notice or care.

There's nothing you do apart from God, nothing where you fail your responsibility, nothing that happens. Nothing will separate you from God's care. I know it's a big deal. I know you take it seriously, deadly seriously, because it's all a matter of life and death. The virus. Racism. Elections. How you use your voice. How to make it through each day. But if your family relationships are right: great. If they fall apart: still fine.

This is why it's so vital to have the unconditional proclamation: you are inextricably bound to Christ. You don't seek a cross and crucifixion; you've already been crucified with Christ. And since you've been buried with him, you certainly will walk in newness of life, raised with him. The death you died in him can't be lost, and much more surely neither can it be undone that you are raised to new life. Your shortcomings aren't excused; they're killed. But you live!

That assurance of love and life may free you to take some risks, to be more bold, to do what needs to be done, to take your responsibilities seriously.

Or maybe it just frees you to live, to be confident that it's okay, to hear those wildest words "do not be afraid," and to live in grace, that it's not finally up to you, because ultimately you are valued no matter what, and you will live.