

Proper 7 A 2020

Jeremiah 20:7-13

Psalms 69:8-11, 18-20

Romans 6:1b-11

Matthew 10:24-39

Two sparrows,  
Sold for a penny.  
That's what it cost to redeem the life of Jesus.  
The precious life of the one  
Whose worth is beyond measure.  
Jesus, who promised us  
That we are worth more than many sparrows,  
And showed us it is true  
When he offered his priceless life for ours.

The infant life of Jesus was redeemed  
For only two sparrows,  
Because his family was poor.  
His parents brought him to the temple  
And, as some translations say,  
Did sacrifice for him according to the law.  
There was compassion in that law,  
But that's a story for another day.  
What matters now is this:  
Jesus was born into a world  
Where some lives mattered more than others,  
Were, quite literally, valued more highly.  
His value was low,  
And yet his life was priceless,  
And his gift was to promise all of us  
That we are, each of us,  
Infinitely precious.  
He lived into the truth of that promise  
By giving up his life to make it real.

Many of us, I suspect,  
Have never doubted this promise of Jesus:  
You are of more value than many sparrows.  
Until now, at least.

We have trusted that the God whose eye is on the sparrow  
Watches over each of us, certainly,  
And, we have assured ourselves,  
God watches over every living thing.

Maybe for some of us  
That blessed assurance is unshaken,  
And Jesus' words, do not be afraid,  
Are all we need to hear.

Maybe our own experience bears this out.  
For most of us,  
Our value has never been questioned,  
In any ultimate way.  
Even when we face hardship,  
Or terrible loss,  
or self-doubt,  
the conviction that God sees us,  
values us,  
will vindicate us,  
grounds our lives.  
If moments come when we doubt this truth,  
Others will insist on it for us.  
You are of value.  
God sees you.  
You matter.  
The promise never fails.

But is the promise true for everyone?  
In this moment we are face to face with a great reckoning,  
Confronted all over again  
by the great sin of racism,  
implicated in the truth that that oppression, violence,  
and injustice  
is woven into the fabric of our nation.  
So this is a moment for us to wonder,  
Is the promise true for everyone?  
Does God see the fall of every sparrow?  
Count the hairs on every head?  
Do black lives matter?  
Does God mark every second, minute after minute,  
As a man lies dying with a knee on his neck?

I believe God sees the fall of every sparrow.  
God's promise is for everyone.  
But I know, too,  
That the words to convey that truth,  
The stories that give shape and meaning to that truth,  
Have to be real.  
The stories have to be grounded in the experience

Of people whose lives have been accounted  
Of little worth.  
This is no time for us to offer empty phrases,  
Or fond hopes,  
Or sweetness and light.

This is no time for the words we find comfortable,  
No time for saying things like,  
You just have to trust,  
God never gives you more than you can handle,  
It's always darkest just before the dawn.  
These words can be false,  
And when we offer them,  
We make ourselves and our religion  
Look empty, irrelevant,  
And even harmful.

They make us look as though we have nothing to offer.

As a great preacher in another dark time,  
In the hardest days of a terrible war,  
Said from a venerable pulpit,  
This is no time for dry as dust religion. \*

Or as another great theologian said  
In those same dark days,  
What does the religion of Jesus have to say  
To those whose backs are against the wall? \*\*

We need, in these times,  
To face the hard fact  
That our comfortable words,  
Coming from our comfortable lives,  
Offer very little to those whose backs are against the wall.

Whatever work we have done before,  
However many times we have woken up to the truth,  
This is another moment for us to listen.  
To hear the hard stories,  
And refrain from rushing to the assurance we feel,  
And others cannot imagine.  
This is a moment to ask painful questions,  
That may, right now,  
Have no answers –  
Or at least no answers we can offer.

The novel *The Sparrow*,\*\*\*  
An extended, dystopian theological reflection,  
Asks us to wonder about this promise:  
Not a sparrow falls to the ground  
Apart from your Father.  
So do not be afraid,  
You are of more value than many sparrows.  
At the terrible climax of the novel,  
A Jesuit missionary to outer space,  
Stranded on a remote planet,  
Naked and maimed,  
Trembles at the center of a mocking crowd  
As the decadent, casually cruel prince of an alien species  
Approaches him with a leer.  
After he is assaulted in public,  
The Jesuit is thrown in prison,  
And finally, months later,  
Sent hurtling through space to face the censure of his superiors.

The author never makes overt reference  
To the promise of Jesus,  
But the question,  
Does God see the fall of this sparrow,  
broods over every dreadful scene.  
The heart's desire of this man  
was to bring to good news of Jesus  
to an alien world,  
but he was broken, used, and thrown away.  
Could you say to him,  
Do not be afraid,  
You are of more value than many sparrows?

In our own world,  
Our own time,  
A black man cries out for breath,  
And dies with a police officer's knee on his neck.  
A young black woman is shot to death in her bed.  
A young black man is shot while out for a run.  
I could continue,  
But you know these stories,  
You know these names:  
George. Breonna, Ahmaud.  
And others, in their thousands.

Thousands are broken,  
Used,

Thrown away, killed.  
Can we say to them,  
Do not be afraid,  
You are of more value than many sparrows?

We try to believe this is a moment  
When hope is possible.  
We can say there is a show of solidarity,  
That a multitude of voices are crying out  
That these lives do matter,  
That they are of more value than many sparrows.

But even as the streets are filled with witnesses  
To the truth that these lives matter,  
It happens again.  
And again.

What does the religion of Jesus  
Have to offer to those whose backs are against the wall?  
How do we show that our religion  
Is water in the desert,  
Rather than dry as dust?

The story of George Floyd is a challenge.  
The truth proclaimed by Jesus  
Is that he is of infinite worth.  
The events of his life  
And the way he died  
Must make us question that,  
Must make us repent,  
And lament,  
And then turn again.

George Floyd is our sparrow.  
Yes, he is an individual child of God,  
Particular and precious and irreplaceable.  
And he has become, in death,  
Our sparrow.  
He was killed as if his life had no value,  
Like thousands upon thousands before him.  
But this time,  
The world did see  
When he fell to the ground.

Around the world,  
In this moment of seeing,

Valuing, remaining present,  
The streets themselves have become signs,  
Bearing witness to the truth.

In Denver,  
The huge sign painted on Broadway  
Proclaimed not only the truth  
That black lives matter,  
But added this prophetic word:  
Remember this time.\*\*\*\*

Remember this time.

But will we remember?  
Will the world remember?  
And will the church,  
The gathered people of God  
Who call upon the name of Jesus,  
Can we show and share that the words of Jesus are true?

Can we do as God does?  
God is always seeing.  
Valuing.  
Remaining present.  
Remembering.

Can we remain present in this moment  
And into the unknown future,  
Not to fix,  
Or even to console,  
But to affirm the preciousness  
Of each and every sparrow?

Can we show that the people of Jesus  
Care and know about the fall of the sparrow?  
That we are engaged in the work of lament,  
Of repentance,  
Of truth-telling –  
The work that comes first  
Before we can get to the blessing of healing and reconciliation?  
Can we proclaim the coming kingdom  
That is already and not yet here  
As a place where black lives matter,  
Where every sparrow is priceless?

Remember this time.

In the kingdom,  
No sparrow will fall  
without notice.  
Every living thing will be valued and affirmed,  
Celebrated and honored – and remembered.

Remember this time.

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\*Henry Emerson Fosdick, quoted by Bishop Michael Curry

\*\*Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*

\*\*\* Mary Doria Russell, *The Sparrow*

\*\*\*\* Artist Adri Norris: <https://afrotriangledesigns.com/>

<https://www.denverpost.com/2020/06/12/denver-black-lives-matter-street-mural/>

