

I. Intro: If you want to start an argument among bird-lovers, just have a conversation about house sparrows!

A. That's what Pastor Debbie Blue discovered, as she describes in her book Consider the Birds. This is a book we are using as a loose guide for this worship series on birds of the Bible

1. Living on a farm in Minnesota, Debbie once got into a disagreement with Linda, who was from one of the other families who share that farm with Debbie and her husband.
 - a) Linda & her husband despise house sparrows because they're hyper aggressive and keep away other more-valued birds from nesting sites ... birds like the Eastern Bluebird, or the Purple Martin
 - b) Linda & her husband did not feel badly about trapping & killing these nuisance birds, in order to promote the threatened bluebird population
2. Debbie Blue tried exploring a more nuanced, compassionate approach to handling the swarms of sparrows that take over feeders & birdhouses all across the country.
3. Her friend & neighbor was having none of it. (Debbie Blue, Consider the Birds: A Provocative Guide to Birds of the Bible, ©2013 Abingdon Press, p. 132-3)

B. Some of you here today don't care one little feather about birds ... but some of you know exactly what I'm talking about.

1. Many of you faithfully put out bird feeders and lots of seed in your back yards.
2. Among this group, some of you don't really care which birds show up, since you believe they're all God's creatures anyway.
3. But others of you are very careful about targeting certain native songbirds you want to attract. You work hard to keep away what you would call "junk birds" ... like house sparrows & starlings

C. I'm not aiming to start arguments here at church, but I want to show how controversial a simple small brown bird can be

II. The controversy around sparrows is not at all new

A. Even in Bible times, sparrows were considered of very low value, basically "junk birds"

1. In ancient Middle Eastern marketplaces, you would find plucked, dead sparrows jammed onto wooden skewers and laid out on trays to be sold as cheap food for the public. (Blue, p 129)

2. In Matthew 10:29 Jesus asks his disciples the question, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?" Jesus presumes the answer = yes

3. Then in our passage today, the very same teaching of Jesus is told, but the writer Luke remembers it slightly differently.

- a) He quotes Jesus as saying 5 sparrows are sold for 2 pennies
- b) Maybe when Luke was writing down this story of Jesus, he still had fresh in his ears the voices of the food vendors in the Jerusalem market ...
- c) You know, the ones hawking their cheap snacks to the passersby: (*loud voice*) "Roasted sparrows! Get your roasted sparrows! Buy four, get one free! Take 'em home to your family. No cheaper protein than that!"

4. These birds were so cheap that near the Jerusalem temple in Jesus' day, sparrows were a popular substitute for more expensive doves, for poor people who couldn't afford the regular Jewish bird sacrifices. (Sally Roth, [An Eye on the Sparrow: The Bird Lover's Bible](#), ©2013 Sally Roth, Happy Crab Publishing, p 242)

B. Does it feel to you like a huge distance in time & space from Jerusalem 2K years ago to your own backyard today?

1. Although we have many different native sparrows today, most of them are not related to biblical sparrows

2. But the house sparrow or English sparrow is a non-native species, nearly identical to the ancient Middle Eastern sparrow

- a) The house sparrow arrived in North America in 1851, when 100 pairs from Europe were released in New York City

(1) This was the height of 19th century industrialism & city folks missed seeing birds where they lived.

(2) These invasive birds were also later introduced in San Francisco and Salt Lake City (Roth, p246)

- b) By the 1880's they had spread all over the continent, and many US states were trying to eradicate the house sparrow

3. For example,

- a) Officials in neighboring Michigan were paying a penny/ dead bird
- b) Over the last 2 centuries, from England to Russia to Mao Ze Dong's China, farmers & governments have launched massive campaigns to exterminate what they saw as pests. (Blue, p 131, 136)

III. Whether you think they're cute or ugly, the house sparrow likes to be around people

A. You don't have to travel to remote mountains or special habitats to find them.

1. They often build their nests in birdhouses intended for more valued birds. But they also live where we live: in crevices of our own houses and barns, with nests tucked into our dryer vents.
2. Sparrows thrive where humans thrive. Their story and our story intertwine. (Blue, p130)

B. So with some of those historical realities in mind, listen again to how sparrows feature in one of Jesus' teachings to his disciples: (read Lk. 12:6-7)

1. Why do sparrows appear in this Jesus story in the Bible?
2. What does this story with sparrows in it tell us about God, or about ourselves?

IV. I see 2 major learnings for us from God's love of the sparrow:

A. The 1st is obvious, but still quite startling: God cares about the most common and ordinary things

1. That is not at all like us and our tendencies ... think with me for a bit ... imagine you're ... :
 - a) Walking through a big parking lot, maybe at O'Hare airport. There are hundreds of cars all around you. Are you more likely to notice ...
 - (1) The dozens and dozens of nondescript silver, or white SUVs? Or the bright yellow sleek-looking sports car?
 - (2) Will you remember all the ho-hum Toyota Camry's you passed by the handful? Or that one exotic Tesla Roadster that's screaming at you, even when it's sitting still?
 - b) In my backyard we have multiple bird feeders, and even as I'm encouraging us today to value even the common creatures, as God values them, I can't deny that my pulse quickens for a Baltimore oriole or rose-breasted grosbeak much more than it ever does for a starling!
 - c) But as Debbie Blue puts it,

We don't like what is common – we are so much more attracted to what is shiny and rare. We are hardly able to convince ourselves that God is unlike us in this. (Blue, p142)

2. The Scripture today tells us that God cares for the common, ordinary stuff of life ...
 - a) God loves every part of the created world ...

(1) God cares for the things we take for granted and overlook ... for what the world considers insignificant, bland, boring or just plain annoying

(2) I bet you can hardly bring yourself to honestly declare, “God loves cockroaches!” (*Go ahead. Try saying that aloud!*)

b) Can you imagine a God who cares so much ... for all parts of the creation, and for all people, even our enemies?

c) Can you imagine holding that much caring for the good, the bad and the in between? We can't ... our hearts & brains would explode! It's unfathomable!

B. The 2nd learning from this text about God and the sparrow: It shows us how easy it is to hate

1. We can all think of a bird, a bug, or a reptile ... that we hate.

a) Unfortunately, we can also hate or be suspicious of certain people or even particular kinds of people

b) And more than just hating them because of how they personally hurt us, we can learn to hate them simply for what we've been told over the years, explicitly and implicitly, about what they might do to us

c) In fact words like “us” and “them” are exactly the language we often unconsciously use, which builds up barriers and keeps hate going

2. The progression in our minds that moves us toward hatred is so easy, it's basically effortless. It goes like this, as we learned last fall in our worship series on conflict and reconciliation:

a) In order to move toward hating someone, 1st just pay attention to the difference between you & someone else. Fixate on what's different about that person, and separate yourself from them. Author John Paul Lederach described this process as “How to create an enemy” (John Paul Lederach, *Reconcile: Conflict Transformation for Ordinary Christians*, ©2014 Herald Press, p79)

b) After separating yourself from that other person, then begin to judge them as inferior to yourself ... make sure you and they know that you see yourself as superior to them

c) 3rd, depersonalize the other as fundamentally “different” from you ... start using labels for a whole class of people ... & create generalizations that dehumanize the other

3. One thing I appreciated from Debbie Blue's material on the sparrow is not just how easy it is for us to hate, but asking why it's so easy to hate? (Blue, p145-6)

a) Could it be easy to consider sparrows and certain people worthless, because we ourselves secretly feel worthless?

Texts: Ps. 84:1-4; Lk 12:6-7

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- b) Maybe we hate others because we fear that they see us as worthless, common, mundane and forgettable ...
- c) Could it be that hate & scapegoating are a common response to our own sense of worthlessness? ... to our own fears of being unlovable?

4. I'll leave those "pondering questions" with you, but before I finish I want to move from lessons learned to the "So what?" question

V. Jesus tells us that God values even worthless sparrows, so what actions might this text call from us? (Let me offer 2)

A. **1st thing we can do is to start to literally have "an eye on the sparrow" as God does**, ie begin to take notice & value what is unnoticed & undervalued in this world

1. This practice may be nature-oriented, all too often taken for granted in our hectic-paced lives

- a) Stop & actually notice the house sparrow as something other than a noisy annoying ugly drab invader
- b) Or you can examine closely the blades of grass that do more than just provide a playing surface for your soccer game, or attractive greenspace where you live or work
- c) This is, literally or metaphorically, "stopping to smell the roses"

2. Having an eye on the sparrow can also be about the people we see around us and the ones we often fail to see.

- a) When you first encounter someone who's visibly "different" from you, right when you first meet them and you're mentally sizing them up, push yourself to silently ask the question, "How can I see Jesus in this person?"
- b) When you're enjoying food or accommodations, be curious about the overlooked and ignored people behind the scenes:
 - (1) Who's washing your dishes or busing your table?
 - (2) Who's cleaning your hotel room?
 - (3) Who's picking the grapes or cucumbers you just ate?
- c) Even more significant is to notice if their skin color is different from yours ... to find out if they make a living wage at this job

3. God sees all the "sparrows" of this world and cares for them. The question becomes, "Do WE see them? Do WE care in any way?"

B. **2nd action continues on from seeing the "sparrows" as God sees them ... because we're also called to treat them as God would –**

1. So find ways yourself to extend this crazy, countercultural love of God to those who are considered dull, dispensable, annoying, resented, even hated

2. Volunteering with some of the many fine local service agencies and ministries in our community can be one way to do this. Who are the "sparrows" in our midst and where might you share God's love with them as a volunteer?

- a) The homeless in Goshen receive care from God when you sign up to help at our church's week with Interfaith Hospitality Network
- b) When you become a part of the Safety Networks locally, you're extending God's care to vulnerable immigrants
- c) Helping with the Boys and Girls Club, or the E3 Program at Goshen Middle School assists at-risk elementary and pre-teen students locally
- d) At RETA (Reason Enough To Act) in Elkhart, your assistance makes women struggling with an unwanted pregnancy or struggling after an abortion feel less like worthless "sparrows"
- e) Every day at The Window downtown, free nourishment is given to flocks of people the world considers "sparrows" – low-income persons who are food insecure

3. Even if you can't volunteer with an agency, sometimes those Jesus referred to in Matthew 25 as "the least of these", they will find you, providing you the opportunity for a random act of kindness on the street, at the grocery store or on the sidewalk

There's a man who has come numerous times to the church asking for financial help over the past 3 years. I'll call him "Michael" (not his real name).

He's often seeking gas money to get to a new job, or to get to Riley Hospital to visit his seriously ill daughter. With me, Michael has always been friendly and gentle, but not always completely honest with me or Janet about his situation. Beyond our regular Kroger gift card policy, we sometimes unknowingly helped him too often, or we chipped in from our own pockets, when the church had no money to give.

Always grateful for the church's assistance, Michael would promise me he'd come to worship some time, or to pay me back the money I gave him for gas. He never did do those things.

The children he fathered early on with multiple women ... the drug-associated people he has in his life ... the shameless way he kept returning to ask for help ... and talking to me as if we were best buds – all of these marked him in my mind as "different" from me.

About 2 weeks ago he pounded on the church door after hours, until Janet let him in so he could talk with me, as he requested. He showed up unannounced, coming to say goodbye because he was moving to Tennessee to be reunited with his children and estranged wife. Because his

Texts: Ps. 84:1-4; Lk 12:6-7

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driver's license was taken away, he would be traveling all the way there on backroads, driving the 49cc scooter he bought with his first disabilities check. Though he needed a little more gas money, he proudly showed me his black helmet with the flip-down sun visor.

I only had ten bucks on me for gas, but, adding that to what he had, we figured he might make it there to Shelbyville, Tennessee. He gave me a hug more than once out of his gratitude for how we had listened to his story and helped him and his kids out. He asked to go back inside the church to give Janet a hug. I diplomatically suggested a handshake would be enough with her!

Did Janet and I sometimes groan inside or roll our eyes when we saw Michael reappear? The honest answer is Yes. Did I sometimes lose patience with his chattiness, as if I had nothing better to do than hear his repeated hard-luck stories? Oh, yes! Did we sometimes get taken, by Michael? Undoubtedly.

But despite all that, there was a part of me that strangely kind of liked him. If nothing else, he was a tangible and unavoidable reminder in my face that God loves the "Michaels" of this world just as much as God loves me ... despite how I continually labor on in my discipleship with delusions to the contrary!

VI. Conclusion

A. As a perfectionistic person, all my life I have striven for high achievement.

1. Sometimes I've publicly succeeded, & sometimes I've screwed up, hurting the people around me,
2. More often I've inwardly thanked God for the amazing love that forgives my shameful hidden thoughts & deeds.
3. That's why it's all the more important for me to frequently remind myself of this truth that Jesus is teaching me: God bless the "Michaels" of this world ... because God cares for the sparrows!

B. I can find no more eloquent summary this morning than these simple lines from Pastor Debbie Blue about the sparrow-loving God of Psalm 84 and Luke 12. She writes:

We need the kind of God who shelters the sparrow. What other kind of God could find a place for us?

(Blue, p146)