

What is Worth Fearing?
Matthew 10:24-33
The Source, June 25, 2014

This scripture passage is from last Sunday's lectionary. If we weren't doing a series on Revelation, Larry would have picked this passage to preach on. You may have noticed that the choir sang a song based on this scripture passage: "His eye is on the sparrow and I know He watches me."

I decided to speak on this passage today because of the word fear. It is mentioned 4 times. Three times it tells us what not to fear and one time what to fear. I noticed the word fear because I have been fearful lately – which is normally not me. I'm not sure why I've been fearful, or at least worried about things. Here are some of the things I've been fearful about:

- Not enough money to retire
- Dementia (I need to know God in order to live)
- Dying so old that nobody comes to my memorial (I want my memorial to glorify God and have people know that I served God wholeheartedly. Who is going to know all this?)
- Dying alone (I never married – no family)

I am sure the reason I've been thinking about these things is because I see these situations all the time working in a retirement community. And several friends have died recently. And I just can't seem to hang onto money.

So, those are my fears. What are your fears?

By the way, comedian Jerry Seinfeld noted this: "According to most studies, people's number one fear is public speaking. Number two is death...This means to the average person, if you go to a funeral, you're better off in the casket than doing the eulogy."

(If time and people into it: The things we fear have a way of changing over time. Back in 1985, *Psychology Today* magazine surveyed 1,000 people about what they feared. The top three places were:

- death of a loved one
- serious illness
- financial worries/nuclear war (tied for third)

A survey on fear in 2008 by *Online Think Tank* came up with:

- Iraq War
- dwindling middle class
- global warming

Interesting how fears change over the years. I don't have a current list...of course, the War in Iraq would be removed. No matter what, there are plenty of candidates for the most-feared list.)

So when I saw this scripture passage on fear, I thought if I preached on it, it might help me. I wanted to focus on just certain parts of it: the part that says God knows when sparrows fall to the ground, therefore, God watches us because we are worth more than sparrows. And I wanted to focus on the part that says if God knows the numbers of hairs on our head, then certainly God knows everything about us. (By the way, did you know that black-haired women have 110,000 hairs and blonds have 140,000?)

The sparrow and the hairs on our head are wonderful thoughts, but the passage in context is not just about this. The context is this: Jesus is sending out his disciples to do ministry without him. He is giving them the "authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness" (Matthew 10:1). Our passage is within the instructions Jesus gives his disciples. And he does not say easy things to them:

- Don't take money and do not pack a bag.
- Some people won't listen to you.
- Some people will persecute you (Jesus may be referring to the time after Pentecost). That what Jesus means when he says in verse 25 "If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more than the members of his household." If Jesus, head of the house, is called the Devil, then you will be, too. If Jesus the master is persecuted – you can expect it to.

And of course, the disciples are frightened and therefore Jesus says do not be afraid. Basically, Jesus is saying that following him is not for the faint of heart. But do not fear. Face your fear and keep going. Keep serving. Jesus promises to be with them and will be aware of everything that happens to them just like the sparrows and the hairs on your head.

I really didn't want to hear all that! Because it says my fears may happen, but I am not to fear them. Which is easier said than done. Remember FDR who said, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself"? Well, Jesus doesn't agree with him!

Jesus tells the disciples what they should fear. Verse 28, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell."

What does that mean? At first glance, it sounds like Jesus is saying fear Satan because he talks about hell.

Jesus is saying "fear that which is truly deadly," but it is not Satan. Jesus is saying, "The worst that other people or troublesome circumstances can do to us is still not as bad as suffering spiritual death. God, and not anyone or anything else, holds our ultimate destiny in his hands. In the final analysis, only two events can befall his followers -- life and death -- and both are in the hands of God."

God is the one we should fear. Rather than fearing the limited powers of evil people, we would do better to fear the One who possesses all power over life and death. So, in other words, keep your fears in perspective.

That is helpful, but do Jesus' words have anything to say to some of the fears I listed at the beginning of this message? Or, to any of your fears? We don't face persecution for our faith in this country, or hardship in ministry. Although if you do, Jesus promises it will be righted – everything will be uncovered and revealed in the end (verse 26). Not now, but someday.

So, Jesus is saying, do not fear because everything is in God's hands. Do not fear because God has control of the future. Do not fear because God has control of the present. Now this I can hang onto for today.

God cares for the totality of our lives, from big things to small things. God knows the fate of a sparrow and even the number of hairs on our head, so he is totally aware of all our circumstances. This passage is sometimes used to teach that God provides for our practical welfare, but the passage doesn't say that God will provide for the sparrow, rather God is aware when it falls.

Therefore, God is totally aware of our circumstances, that we are not alone when bad things happen, thus, we should not be afraid. Nothing will happen to you "without your Father knowing" (Jerusalem Bible).

We have a choice in how we react to fear.

Preacher John Killinger tells of a man who was a gunner in the nose bubble of a B-17 airplane during World War II. The man was in that part of the plane as the pilot was landing on a narrow strip of jungle. Suddenly, the gunner saw that there was a ditch across the runway. "I knew it was curtains," he said. "I tried to warn the pilot, but I couldn't speak fast enough.

When I finally switched on the intercom, I knew the pilot had seen it. He was praying 'God, don't let me panic, don't let me panic.'" Somehow, the pilot managed to bounce the plane on the ground and into the air again, leaping the ditch. The gunner says that he has often thought of that prayer and prayed it himself in the years since. He prayed not for anything tangible, but just not to panic.

This is one way to handle fear! Because....

The things we fear are never the final word on our lives. That's what Jesus was telling the disciples as he sent them out into dangerous situations. We can imagine several of them praying a similar prayer: "God, don't let me panic," and it must have been answered, because they all went forward.

Jesus assured them that God, whose eye was on even the sparrow, who knew even the number of hairs on their heads, would not desert them.

The same is true for all of us who walk with Jesus. My fears may come true. I may not have enough money to retire. I may get dementia. I may die alone. Nevertheless, nothing can separate us from the love of God, not even fear itself, and not even the frightening things that actually happen to us.

May we rely on Jesus' words this day.