

12th Sunday, Ordinary Time, A

²⁶ “Therefore do not be afraid of them. Nothing is concealed that will not be revealed, nor secret that will not be known. ²⁷ What I say to you in the darkness, speak in the light; what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops. ²⁸ And do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna. ²⁹ Are not two sparrows sold for a small coin? Yet not one of them falls to the ground without your Father’s knowledge. ³⁰ Even all the hairs of your head are counted. ³¹ So do not be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows. ³² Everyone who acknowledges me before others I will acknowledge before my heavenly Father. ³³ But whoever denies me before others, I will deny before my heavenly Father.” (Mt 10:26-33)

Context. Depending on when Easter is celebrated in any a given year, certain readings from Matthew’s gospel may or may not be proclaimed. In 2017, the 8th Sunday of Ordinary Time was celebrated on February 26th. The following Wednesday was Ash Wednesday and our Sunday readings were then taken from the Lenten Season. Lent gave way to the Easter Season and its assigned readings. After the Easter Season, we would begin the Ordinary Time readings again with the 9th Sunday...except there are three solemnities: Pentecost, Holy Trinity, and Corpus Christi. Consequently, Ordinary Time readings begin anew with the 12th Sunday. Here is a quick overview and context.

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| 9 th Sunday | Matthew 7:21-27 | The end of the Sermon on the Mount and its discourse on the deeper, fuller meaning of the Law and righteousness, Jesus says to the disciples: “Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and buffeted the house. But it did not collapse; it had been set solidly on rock” (Mt 7:24-25) |
| 10 th Sunday | Matthew 9:9-13 | Mt 8:1 to 9:38 is Matthew’s description of the powerful deeds of Jesus, nine in all, interspersed between is the theme of discipleship. Mt 9:9-13 is the call of Matthew, the tax collector, to be follow Jesus as a disciple. Jesus also describes the intrinsic nature of his mission: “Go and learn the meaning of the words, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ I did not come to call the righteous but sinners.” (Mt 9:13) |
| 11 th Sunday | Matthew 9:36 – 10:8 | This reading is the story of sending out the disciples: “At the sight of the crowds, his heart was moved with pity for them because they were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd.” (Mt 9:36) |

The first verses of Matthew 10 describe Jesus’ sending the disciples on mission: the names of the Twelve, their commissioning (vv. 5:15), and a warning of the persecutions they will face (vv.16-25). It is after this warning that the opening verse of our reading has its meaning: “Therefore do not be afraid of them.”

The idea that discipleship involves mission sets the stage for the second major discourse by Jesus — the missionary discourse in Matthew 10. The basic theme is stated in 10:24–25: “No disciple is above his teacher, no slave above his master. It is enough for the disciple that he become like his teacher, for the slave that he become like his master.” Just as the disciples share in Jesus’ power, so they must share his life, mission, and his sufferings. As Matthew describes in v.19, the disciples will be “handed over” (*paradidomi*), the same word Jesus uses in the description of his own passion (17:22; 20:18–19; 26:2). Like Jesus, they will suffer for the sake of the divine mission in the world.

²⁶ “Therefore do not be afraid of them. Nothing is concealed that will not be revealed, nor secret that will not be known. ²⁷ What I say to you in the darkness, speak in the light; what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops

These verses have their parallel in Luke 12:2 and, some would say, in Mark 4:22. I would disagree with the Markan parallel. While the words are similar, the topic in Mark is not missionary endeavors, but rather why Jesus teaches in parable and leave some listeners “in the dark,” so to speak. Perhaps one might offer that the Markan context is that what must remain secret for a time will ultimately be revealed. But in Matthew’s use (and Luke’s) there is no nuance. The disciples are to proclaim the good news so that all can hear. In the setting of a Palestinian village, the housetop (rooftop) is a very visible platform from which to proclaim the Good News to the people in the streets nearby.

The disciples have the duty to proclaim the message opening and not to let that public proclamation be the first casualty of fear. “Good news is not meant to be kept under wraps, however little some people may wish to hear it. Even though for the time being Jesus’ teaching to his disciples has to be “in darkness”...in the coming time of witness before governors and kings (vv. 17–18) and of world-wide proclamation of the *euangelion* (24:14) it must no longer be hidden.” (France, 402)

²⁸ *And do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna.*²⁹

The possibility of martyrdom in the cause of Jesus, already raised in v. 21, is now addressed head-on. The body/soul contrast, when used in relation to execution, presupposes that there is a true life which goes beyond mere physical existence, so that the real “self” is untouched by the death of the body alone. And that is all that human opponents can touch. But both body and “soul” are subject to God’s power, and therefore also to his judgment. Under that judgment, it is not only the body but the true life of the person which is liable to destruction in hell.

“Hell” (Gehenna) will be referred to in 5:29–30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33 is the place of final destruction of the wicked; its use in this sense is well-attested in Jewish apocalyptic literature. It is not the same as Hades, the place of the dead, which is not usually understood as a place of punishment or destruction but rather of shadowy existence. The name Gehenna derives from the Valley of Hinnom (Hebrew *gê hinnōm*) outside Jerusalem which had once been the site of human sacrifice by fire to Molech (2 Kgs 23:10; Jer 7:31). There is a later tradition that the city’s rubbish was dumped and burned in this valley, which if true would provide a vivid image of “the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”

²⁹ *Are not two sparrows sold for a small coin? Yet not one of them falls to the ground without your Father’s knowledge.*

This section does not try to sketch a misleading picture of a God. Sparrows fall to earth and disciples of Jesus are slain, and Jesus never says that it hardly matters. “What these sayings assert is that God is indeed God, that he is above success and failure, help and isolation, weal and woe, holding them in hands that Jesus says are the hands of the Father.” (Schweizter, as found in France, 404)

Where these verses begin with the repeated message not to fear, this verse reminds the reader that fear in general and fear of God (v.28) is balanced by trust in God as one’s heavenly Father. The God who can destroy in Gehenna is also the One who cares for the smallest of creatures. The sparrow, which can be purchased for a pittance, are cared for by God (v.31) while alive, but even their death is within the Creator’s care. It all happens with “*your Father’s knowledge.*”

The Greek text literally translates as “without your Father.” Most translations include “knowledge,” “consent,” “will,” or “care” as the English seems to demand a clarification from the expression which is generally taken, of itself, as whether the Father is present. But depending on the view of the reader it simply offers up more questions of divine sovereignty and providence: “does God simply know about the death of the birds (and therefore also of his people), or does he allow it, or does it happen because he has decided on it, or is the point that even in their death they are not outside his loving concern?” (France, 404).

The clearest understanding is that nothing happens to the children of a loving Father which falls outside his providential care; it neither takes him by surprise nor frustrates his purpose. This saying does not, of course, promise immunity from death or suffering for God's people, only the knowledge that it does not happen "without your Father."

³⁰ *Even all the hairs of your head are counted.³¹ So do not be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.*

Some things are impossible to count: the stars in the heavens, the grains of sand on the shore, and the hairs on your head (baldness aside!) The impossibility of counting the hairs of the head is proverbial (Ps 40:12; 69:4), but even the impossible is not impossible to God who made them. The Creator's intimate knowledge of those he has made is expressed movingly in other imagery in Ps 139:1–18. Equally proverbial is the saying "not a hair of his head will fall to the ground" to express a person's total security (1 Sam 14:45; 2 Sam 14:11; 1 Kgs 1:52; cf Dan 3:27, Luke 21:18; Acts 27:34.22) The Father who knows the number of each disciple's hairs will make sure none of them are lost.

As we learned in v.29, the small sparrow matters to the Creator, and so (for the third time) the disciples are told not to be afraid. All of God's creatures are important to Him, none more so than humanity.

³² *Everyone who acknowledges me before others I will acknowledge before my heavenly Father.³³ But whoever denies me before others, I will deny before my heavenly Father.*"

There is the old expression, "fish or cut bait." One has to choose to move forward and take action (fish) or simply be back on shore "cutting bait." So too, the question of priorities – who to fear – is asking a radical loyalty and fidelity to Jesus.

The previous mention of judgment before God gives added urgency to the choice: short-term advantage of preserving human approval and the humanly risky but ultimately sound course of maintaining a prior loyalty to Jesus in the face of human opposition. The issue is not merely obedience to Jesus' teaching, but the explicit "acknowledgement" of him as Lord before a hostile world. The demand is for faithful witness to Jesus even when it means suffering in Jesus' name.

It is not without basis that one suggest that Jesus' verdict will be on a reciprocal basis: acknowledgement or denial depending on whether they have acknowledged or denied him. The later experience of Peter (26:69–75) is an object-lesson in denying Jesus under the pressure of public opinion, but Peter's subsequent rehabilitation adds a reassuring suggestion that the stark verdict of this saying may be understood to refer to a settled course of acknowledgment or denial rather than to every temporary lapse under pressure. (France, 406)

Sources

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