

June 25, Ordinary 12A (Matthew 10:24-39)

## **We have value because we are creatures, like sparrows.**

by [Liddy Barlow](#) in the [June 7, 2017](#) issue

Lawyer Kenneth Feinberg chaired the September 11 Victim Compensation Fund, which gave money to the family of each person who died in the 2001 terror attacks. Starting with a formula and then using his discretion, Feinberg considered the victims' age, their dependents, whether they had life insurance—and their income and earning potential. The value assigned to these lost lives varied dramatically: as little as \$250,000 for blue-collar workers, as much as \$7.1 million for executives.

Feinberg later reflected on his experience. “As I met with the 9/11 families and wrestled with issues surrounding the valuation of lives lost, I began to question this basic premise of our legal system,” he told NPR. “Trained in the law, I had always accepted that no two lives were worth the same in financial terms. But now I found the law in conflict with my growing belief in the equality of all life.”

Jesus sends his disciples out into a perilous world. There will be divisions in their families. There will be “those who kill the body.” The disciples must be prepared to take up the cross.

And yet, in the middle of this recitation of conflict and danger, Jesus suddenly speaks of the smallest, most insignificant creatures. “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.” In the marketplace, sparrows were the meat of the poor, the ground chuck of the first century. Yet their lives—their deaths—are not beneath God's attention and care.

“Do not be afraid,” Jesus says, “you are of more value than many sparrows.” In 1905, these lines inspired Canadian schoolteacher Civilla Martin to write the words to “His Eye Is on the Sparrow,” a gospel hymn that declares with assurance, “I know he watches me.” It's not hard to understand the hymn's later popularity in the African-American church. In a world that insists that black lives do not matter, Jesus

declares that overlooked, exploited, brutalized lives are, in fact, of the greatest importance to God. In a world that says the life of a rich person is worth 28 times as much as the life of a working person, Jesus says that God pays special attention to those who are poor, struggling, and suffering. God cares. We are not alone.

Jesus' calculus for the value of a life has little to do with a person's income or earning potential. To Jesus, our lives have innate value, in and of themselves. We have value because we are creatures, like sparrows. And we humans have value because we are made in God's image. As Julian of Norwich wrote in her vision of the hazelnut, "I marveled how it might last, for it seemed it might suddenly have sunk into nothing because of its littleness. And I was answered in my understanding: 'It lasts and ever shall, because God loves it.'"

To Jesus, our value does not lead to compensation or a guarantee of safety. It means that we receive attention. The God who cares for the welfare of sparrows also keeps track of every aspect of human lives, even tallying up the hairs of our heads. When Paul's description of divine love comes to a crescendo, he promises that one day we will know fully, even as we have been fully known (1 Cor. 13:12). We are already fully known, known more deeply than we even know ourselves.

Occasionally, well-meaning Christians declare that "God doesn't care if you get a tattoo" or "God doesn't care if you have a glass of wine." While it's true that neither choice is, for most of us, a matter of eternal consequence, the idea that God doesn't care is entirely untrue. There is nothing, not even the smallest thing, that is outside the circle of God's care. And if God cares about these little details, the sparrows of our lives, then how much more God cares about the greater shape of each life, and of all our lives in community.

Community, after all, is essential to our value. Jesus speaks to the disciples as a group, using the plural forms of "you." We cannot understand our own value without recognizing that the person next door and the person across the world have the same value. God's care is not for me alone, nor only for people like me, but for all of us.

When we feel secure in God's deep attention, knowledge, and care for us—in other words, when we know that God loves us—then we are able to go forth without fear into a dangerous world. Then we can declare out loud the lessons we've heard whispered in darkened rooms. Then we can stop being afraid of those who wish us

harm. When we are assured that our Creator loves us, we can remain steadfast even when our human families turn against us. We can be faithful even when our very lives are at risk. We can pick up our crosses, no matter the cost.

After the September 11 Victim Compensation Fund completed its work, Kenneth Feinberg received a call from the president of Virginia Tech, asking him to manage the fund that would distribute compensation to the families of the students and faculty killed in the 2007 mass shooting. “I realized that Feinberg the citizen should trump Feinberg the lawyer,” he said. “My legal training would no longer stand in the way. This time all victims—students and faculty alike—would receive the same compensation.”

Sparrows and disciples alike: we know he watches us. To God, we matter. In God’s sight, there are no unimportant lives.