

“HIS EYE ON THE SPARROW”

Romans 14:7-9; Luke 12:6-7, 22-31

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Birders often refer to them as little brown birds. They generally occupy the largest segment of most field guides, about 20 species in the Eastern US guide, but hundreds of species around the world. Remembering the various field marks that help distinguish one species from another can be challenging. Two sparrows have this very attractive white and gray stripe cap, but I can never remember which has the yellow lores, so I always go by the white throat to distinguish the white-throated from the white-crowned sparrow. But sometimes the white throat is more gray, and I have to thumb through the book only to discover that I'm looking at a sub-species and not a different bird I haven't seen before.

Chipping sparrows are easy with the rufous cap and black eye-line, but you have to remember to check for the unstreaked breast to make sure you're not looking at the rufous capped sparrow, a bird I've never seen. Of course you also have to remember that young chipping sparrows do have a streaked breast.

It's so easy to get lost in all the questions. Is the breast streaked or not? Is there a black dot in the middle of the chest? Is there an eye-line and does it extend to both sides of the eye or just one? You don't have to look at too many sparrows before you start settling for the little brown bird designation.

I'm frankly baffled as to what God sees in the sparrow, especially the most common of sparrows known as the house or English sparrow. Thanks to the British colonial efforts, this bird exists all over the world. I remember my disappointment to wake up to the chattering of this bird when we visited Cuba. Though not native to Israel, it's also the most common sparrow there.

It carries all of the negative connotations of the invasive species designation. It is a bully often taking over the nests of bluebirds and destroying their eggs. You'll find articles about how to keep house sparrows away from your feeders. They don't sound pretty. They don't look pretty. And they present problems for other birds.

So how they can be model citizens of the kingdom of God as Brueggemann suggests that scripture claims, seems odd to me. Brueggemann says that they “find ample food without any effort on their part to be predatory or acquisitive.” They are “examples of God's creatures who rely on the faithful sustenance of the creator. They embody a model of trust that Jesus commends to his disciples, who are to be neither predatory nor acquisitive.” He goes on to say that “the raven, sparrow and swallow have figured out... that you cannot serve God and pursue commodities (food!) via predation and acquisitiveness” (p.147). To put it more simply, they don't hunt for or store up their food.

Of course, neither the hymn nor the scripture is really about sparrows. They're about us. As with most metaphors, we're only concerned about certain aspects of the comparison.

Just as sparrows don't worry about where their next meal is coming from, so we too should trust God to provide for our needs.

"His Eye is on the Sparrow" was first written as a poem by Civilla Durfee Martin from Elmira, New York "to comfort a friend with chronic illness." We hear the emotions that sometimes arise from an illness in the questions of verse one: discouragement, a sense of being in the dark and alone. We hear it in the doubts and fears that sometimes accompany illness in verse two. We hear it in the temptation for songs to become sighing and hope giving way to death of verse three. And we know a host of other troubles we may encounter in life that call out these feelings.

This hymn moves us because we have known experiences like that of Civilla Martin's friend. Whereas by faith we affirm that God is always good, there are times when life doesn't seem so. Illness, injury, grief, disappointment... these things can lead us to question our value. The bully strikes not just at the body, but at a person's sense of self-worth. Injustice not only deprives an individual of rights, but dehumanizes its victims. Chronic illness doesn't just weaken the body, it attacks the human spirit.

To all this and more, the scripture affirms that you are worth more than many sparrows and the hymn reminds us that as with the sparrow, God's eye watches over you as well.

As I think about Brueggemann's claim that the birds serve as a model for faithful living alongside what I know about the destructive habits of the house sparrow, I have to say that God's care extends even to the dull, chattering, destructive sparrow. Brueggemann says as much when he goes on to write: "Everything depends on the eye of God, the remarkable capacity of God the creator to pay attention."

He's not wrong when he observes about this scripture that we are being called to give up worrying about our welfare, to give up that driving desire to acquire many things. But I think if we push the sparrow imagery to its limit, we see that even when we are not faithful, God remains faithful still. Even when the harmony of nature is disrupted and when we undermine the health of the human community, God still cares, still watches, still provides.

That's encouraging, but there's something in this hymn even more exciting. Not only is God attentive to the birds and to us, but God intends freedom and joy for us. As I mentioned before, the house sparrow, to my ears, just makes an unpleasant noise. But there are other sparrows whose songs are a delight. There's the melodic song of the white-crowned, the increasing rhythm of the field, and the staccato jazz of the song sparrow. These sounds say, "I'm happy... I'm free." This is precisely where the path of discipleship leads. Thanks be to God, whose eye rests upon us. Amen.

Resource:

Brueggemann, Walter. *A Glad Obedience: Why and What We Sing*. Westminster_John Knox Press: Louisville KY 2019.