**Proper 7, Year A**

June 22, 2014

Matthew 10:[16-23] 24-33 *"See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes. "A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household! "So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. 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. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. "Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven. "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*

Years ago, when I was able to stay awake past 9:00 at night, I would at times watch Ted Koppel’s *Nightline* before I went to bed. Koppel was a sharp and seasoned reporter. And so it always amazed me, when Koppel would interview a political candidate, how little information even he could extract from the politician. I came to realize that when political candidates agree to be interviewed, it is not because they are willing to answer the questions of the interviewer; it is because by appearing on the radio or television program they can sell their own viewpoints to a national television audience at no cost. The reporter will ask a question, the candidate will ignore the question asked, and will address his or her own agenda. (I’ve known some politicians, and they tell me this is how it works.)

I wonder if you and I are all that different. Like our politicians, when we are involved in a conversation or a meeting, are we not often most intent on putting forth our own point of view, rather than truly listening to others and engaging the questions at hand? Observe yourself, the next time you are in a conversation or a meeting. If we were honest with ourselves, how much time do we spend really listening and being open to what the other person is saying, willing to having our minds changed, and how much time do we just lie in wait for the next opportunity to interject our own opinion? And yet the key to abundant Life, many spiritual teachers attest, lies not so much in having our own opinion prevail (which is hardly *ever* the path toward spiritual growth), or even in having all the right answers (which is virtually impossible); but rather in living with the right questions. Struggling with the right questions. The poet Rilke wrote, “Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves… Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”

How many times in the Gospel does Jesus, rather than *answering* a question, pose a *different* question which gets more to the heart of the matter?

In fact, Pastor and author Frederick Buechner suggests that the Bible is perhaps best viewed not as an answer book, but as a book of important questions: “There is perhaps no stronger reason for reading the Bible,” Buechner writes, “than that somewhere among all those... pages there awaits each reader whoever he is the one question which, though for years he may have been pretending not to hear it, is the central question of his own life. Here are a few of them: What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world but loses his own soul? (Mat.16:26) Am I my brother’s keeper? (Gen. 4:9) If God is for us, who can be against us? (Romans 8:31) Who is my neighbor? (Luke 10:29)” (*Listening to Your Life*, pp. 124-125; altered)

In our Gospel reading today we have another question – a question which is not explicitly stated, but is strongly implied. It is this: What are you afraid of?

What are you afraid of?

The question comes up because of the mission on which Jesus sent his disciples in the passage right before today’s Gospel, with the warning that they should expect rejection and hardship as they carry out that mission. “See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves,” Jesus tells them. “[T]hey will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me.”

In describing all the threats his disciples will face, Jesus is raising to their consciousness their own unnamed fears. “I know what you will be up against,” Jesus tells them, “because I’ve been through it myself, and a disciple is not above the teacher.” Better to get it all out on the table, name what it is that they are afraid of.

For like so many of *us*, the disciples have been evading the question. “What are you afraid of?” We would rather simply go on with our daily routine than struggle with that question. For if we were to truly ask the question of ourselves, we would have to *face* our fears, which we would rather avoid at all costs.

Jesus brings his disciples’ fears out into the open, into the light of consciousness. “Brother will betray brother to death,” Jesus says, “and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name.”

At this point, the disciples can no longer avoid the question, “What are you afraid of?”, for Jesus has brought it all out from their interior shadows into the light of day.

But just as he brings the question of fear into their consciousness, Jesus hits them with another question, as far afield from the first as East from West: “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?”

Excuse me?

Had the disciples not been so busy scratching their heads, wondering where in the world Jesus got *that* question, they would have answered, “Of course! A penny is exactly what two sparrows cost. But what does that question have to do with anything?”

He has set it up, exposing all that there is to be afraid of, and is now ready for the punch line: “Not one sparrow falls to the ground apart from your [heavenly] Father. So DO NOT BE AFRAID! You are of more value than many sparrows.”

John Shea says that Jesus wants us to laugh at this – comparing the cost of half-penny sparrows with humans! – and at the same time he wants us to be blown away by the overwhelming magnitude of God’s love for us. For as St. John writes, “Perfect love casts out fear.” After Jesus has spelled out the very real difficulties and hardships of following him, which inevitably lays bare the disciples’ fears, he tells them in powerful images that they need not be afraid, because of God’s unimaginable love for them.

“Do not be afraid,” God says to Abraham, “I am your shield.” (Gen. 15:1) “Do not be afraid,” the angel says to Joseph in a dream, “take Mary as your wife, for the child within her is of the Holy Spirit.” “Do not be afraid,” another angel tells Mary, “for if you put aside your fear, the Son of God will be born in you.” “Do not be afraid,” Jesus tells Peter after the miraculous catch of fish, “from now on you will be fishing for people.” Over 100 times in the Bible, God or God’s messengers tell people, “Do not be afraid.” And after each of those times there follows a message of good news.

What are *you* afraid of? Failure? Running out of money? Loneliness? Loss of control? Your own compulsions or destructive tendencies? The wellbeing of your children or grandchildren? Declining health? Cancer? Being put in a nursing home? Death?

What are you afraid of? It is a question we should not avoid, but rather should live with, a question which we should open ourselves to and ask ourselves over and over again throughout our life, confronting the fears which keep us from living life fully. For the more we fear, the less we love. The more we fear, the less we trust God.

What are you afraid of?

Ask yourself that question; live with that question. But then ask yourself two more questions, and live with them, too:

“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet how much more does God love you?”

AMEN