

Sparrow

“It’s going to be alright.”

Luke 12:4-7

The Gods Must be Crazy: Faith for troubled times #2

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Insecurity

When I was little my family used to drive from our home in Dearborn to the East Side of Detroit where my cousins lived. We’d eat a big meal, usually on some holiday or a Sunday, with the adults at the big dining room table and the four of us kids on little chairs gathered around a little table in the other room. Aside from our sprinkling pepper in each others’ milk and other minor pranks, the arrangement seemed to work rather well.

After dinner the adults would talk and we’d go play, sometimes outside and sometimes in the basement. Most of the basement was a fine place to be. The dad was a science teacher and he had enough stuff down there for classroom experiments to keep four little ones occupied for some time. But there was another room in the basement that was altogether different. It was dark and it was closed off by a door with a latch on it. I had no idea what was there, but was certain that it had to be filled with ghosts.

So, as long as we played down there, this was the one spot I did not want to go. Which encouraged the older girls to cast my little cousin and me into the dark abyss all-the-more. The experience was made even more terrifying by the successful addition of a noise maker that sounded like a cow mooing when turned over, which they were certain to throw in after me.

I was generally a brave little boy; but THIS was one of the few experiences I remember as being absolutely terrified.

Moo.

What terrorizes you?

A fund development professional once told me that there had been a study to determine the greatest fears people face in our day. She said that the study showed

the fear that ranked greatest was public speaking. The second-biggest fear was asking people for money. The third-greatest fear was death: which means that most people would rather die before speaking publically or raising funds. (That also pretty-well describes much of what I'm supposed to do for a living!)

Different studies have yielded different results, but I expect that one that was conducted for *The Wall Street Journal* is close to the truth. Its findings were that the biggest fear of people world-wide is, actually, the category of death, illness and injury in the family. The second-most dreaded worry is "a financial crisis caused by job loss some other reason."¹

What if you had no source of income? What if you couldn't pay for health care or food or the kids' education? What if you were homeless? The thought of it can worry *me*.

The Problem with Entitlement

For good reason, a good many people are concerned about maintaining a steady income these days. In the 1980's our manufacturing jobs started going south to non-union states. From the '90's the losses accelerated as the jobs were shipped overseas, and we haven't been replacing many of these jobs with new ones that fit the global economy. The Upper Midwest has been stressed by mounting unemployment for over 20 years;² and now, over the last several months, it seems like the floodgates were opened and the good jobs we once had are flowing out of the state with an alarming rush. Unemployment in Metropolitan Detroit rose to 17.1% in June.³ It's estimated that Michigan will lose over 300,000 jobs this year.⁴

There's reason to worry. The second-most scary thing people fear is here. The gods must be crazy: a lot of people must be wondering where God is for us right now; and what does our faith say for times like this.

Keeping a livelihood was important in Jesus' day, just as it is today. The biggest difference was probably that people he knew belonged to an economy based on agricultural rather than manufacturing; but they still had grave concerns. Galilee had rich soil and became a sort-of bread basket for the Roman Empire. They were expected to grow food to be exported and, in the mean-time were over taxed by both the Romans and Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. Each year they faced increasing debt, whether the crops prospered or failed. So wealthy business owners in Jerusalem sent their stewards to Galilee getting them to hand over their farms in exchange for taxes to

be paid. So they lost the farm and became tenement farmers.⁵ You might say that they had come to “owe their souls to the company store.”

Moo. Increasingly in debt and without assets, they were exploited by the powerful and the wealthy. They lived lives without certainty. There were a lot of people whom they had good cause to fear.

It's to them that Jesus counters their day-to-day fears with this statement that must have sounded as challenging then as it does today. I'd paraphrase it this way: “Don't stand in awe of those who can kill the body but can't do any more damage beyond that. If you want to respect someone, respect God whose reach is eternal. But don't be afraid of God. You know how you can buy five sparrows for the amount a day laborer would earn in an hour-and-a-half – 18 minutes a sparrow! Yet, even a sparrow is important to God. One falls to the ground and God is going to know about it.

“Then think about how much you must mean to God – you. God is so interested in you he's got the number of hairs on your head all-counted up (an easier job for some of you than other's I suppose). Stop being scared, then!”⁶

Losing your job, or concerned about it? Watching your pension funds shrink? Hearing the reports from Finance Committee that the economy's made a mess of the church budget – that the Recession's come here to roost, too? Look at the big picture.

Jesus is telling you and me that God's care runs deep.

No more *moo*. From now on, think of the *sparrow*. The *sparrow* means that the Presence in the darkness is not one of threat, but of protection, and comfort, and direction to an open door.

So, dealing with this boils down to a matter of faith. How much do you really think God cares? How faithful do you think God is going to be?

If God is faithful and you believe it, then how will that faith shape the way you deal with the crisis? Will you be overwhelmed by the darkness, or will you be one who knows the extent of God's unwavering care? Remember the sparrow, and live like it.

Laura and I once attended a parent's training session where we heard an expert talk about personal resilience. She said that she had been encouraging people to cope with impending adversity by writing out the worst thing that might happen in a given situation.

She said, then, write out three things that you can do that would be positive possibilities if it were to happen. She said that she had challenged listeners in a West Coast audience to do that in a lecture one year. Then she happened to return to the same area a year later. A man who had attended both sessions met her after her second talk.

He said to her that at the time she delivered her first seminar he became angry. He was a teacher, and had just been told that quite a number of pink slips were going to be issued to members of the faculty by the end of the school year. At first, he refused to go along with her advice. Then, after a while he got to thinking about it and wrote down something he could do if he lost his job. After a while he was able to write a second possibility and then the third: probably things like, "I could open a coffee shop" or "I could become a consultant." A while after that, it dawned on him that if he were to lose his job it might turn out alright after all. He wasn't going to be stuck. A while still later, he actually started to warm up to his ideas: more and more, in fact. By the time he neared the anticipated announcement he found himself not only *looking forward* to being pink slipped, but was actually *a bit fearful that he might not be let-go!*

Sparrow. The power of Christ's promise allows you to confront all of life that way. Trusting in God can allow you to think clearly and stay alert when otherwise you could well be swallowed up by the darkness. When you ask God to reveal your new opportunities – and keep your eyes focused on God's presence – then...

What seems to be a loss may actually open the way to be a gain.

Sparrow. The door swings open. The lights go on. You are not alone.

I wouldn't, for a moment, trivialize the prospect of financial ruin. Losing your job or the prospect of losing your home is huge. But these are matters that God cares about, that that counts for a lot. Jesus would have you know that you can trust in God whose faithfulness to you is infinite. When you start at the place of knowing that, and that there is no problem bigger than God, you reach to the big hand of God which is reaching for you and you will be led.

Leaders in our Career Ministry try to embody that presence. At a time when you feel most alone, members of our team move beside you. You're not alone. The presence of Christ is in friends who listen to you again and again and care. Then, helping with resume writing, building strategies and getting connected to people and potential employers and reminding you to take care of yourself and make a plan and follow it through, they join with you to find your way through the dark and check out the doors.

No matter how long it takes.

May you know that you are the apple of God's eye: no matter what.

May you know that there are always new possibilities and that God is your present guide. And may you be available to become the flesh and blood of God's presence for someone else, if you should see them in need.

Worth

A friend of mine pinned a note on his office bulletin board. It caught my eye; and the message stuck. Sometimes it's come in very handy.

***The only thing that's the end of the world
is the end of the world.***

And those of us whose hairs are numbered know that the end of the world is never.

¹“Ranking People’s Day-to-Day Fears”, *Infinite Health Resources* web site. January 21, 2008. © 2004-2009. The column cites a survey conducted in the U.S. and 19 other countries (mostly European). By GfK Custom Research for The Wall Street Journal. Adults were asked to identify their “greatest day-to-day fear.” <http://www.infinitehealthresources.com/Store/Resource/Article/1-10/2/1593.html>.

² Read an account of the shifts in America’s Upper Midwest economy in *Caught in the Middle: America’s Heartland in an Age of Globalization* by Richard C. Longworth, New York: Bloomsbury USA. © 2007.

³ Aaron Foley, “Unemployment in Metro Detroit rises 2.2 percent from May to June.” MLive.com, July 23, 2009. http://www.mlive.com/news/detroit/index.ssf/2009/07/unemployment_in_metro_detroit.html.

⁴ “Report: Michigan to lose more than 300k jobs this year” Louis Aguilar / *The Detroit News*, July 6, 2009.

⁵ This description of the First Century Galilean farmer was given by Brian McLaren at a workshop held in San Diego, California on February 9-10, 2009 at the National Pastor’s Convention.

⁶ R. Alan Culpepper, “The Gospel of Luke,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*, vol. IX. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. © 1995. p 252.