

PROPER SEVEN, PENTECOST FOUR YEAR A, JUNE 25, 2023

Encapsulated in today's gospel are two African American gospel hymns that capture the contrast between this seemingly harsh yet also comforting gospel. The first gospel hymn is very well known as "His eye is on the sparrow." Some of the lyrics are: When Jesus is my portion, My constant friend is He, His eye is on the sparrow and I know He watches me. The second gospel song is a lesser known one titled Sometimes I feel like a motherless child. The lyrics repeat that phrase three times and ends with sometimes I feel like a motherless child a long way from home. The second verse says Sometimes I feel like I'm almost done a long way from home.

This second gospel/spiritual stems from the days of slavery and was sung by a people who knew the reality of being torn from home and the degradation, violence and torment of slavery. This plaintive song tells the story of a people whose mothers were rendered childless, whose children were orphaned, whose very being was often destroyed as their families were split apart. The anguished weeping of human experience at its bitterest is heard in these words. The spiritual hits hard the unbearable experience of loss and lostness as the bonds of belonging, security and trust no longer work for those who experienced it and sang about it.

When we hear in today's Gospel ' 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; does not sound like the good news of Jesus. It appears to compound the hurt, piles on the agony and fuels the terrifying isolation of cruelty and despair to anyone who has been intentionally separated from their parent or child or lost a parent or child no matter what the circumstance.

In these, and a multitude of other human circumstances, to be told '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 that I must love Jesus more than my baby, my husband or wife, my mom, my dad, again doesn't sound like good news. All of us define ourselves by such relationships. We know how crucial the love in them is. The baby learns to be a person by being loved. What's life without loving because when these relationships fail us, or we fail them, every one of us knows what a struggle life becomes. It is hard to see the good news in these words of Jesus. Is there any good news in this Gospel? I believe there is.

If we go back to the ten commandments, the fifth commandment says "Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long and that it may go well with you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you." We're all familiar with that commandment. It is a commandment that puts the respect of parents as a priority.

Now what you probably didn't notice between the commandment of honoring your parents and Jesus' statement about child against parent is that these are all generational relationships. What Jesus is presenting is a broader meaning to the fifth commandment.

In Jesus' day a family was usually several generations living together. This household was ruled by the oldest father. And I do mean ruled. By tradition this oldest male was referred to as Lord of his wife and children. He was the patriarch. Much of our religious language starts from this household structure. The patriarch's authority in

the family was supreme, for example, he could annul any vow his wife made. The patriarch made sure that the life of everyone in the household worked towards the continuance of the family. Marriages were, therefore, nothing more than a matter of contract between patriarchs.

Such households made for strong bonds of responsibility and care where every individual had a clear place in this network of relationships. They maintained family and property and this is how a person was defined by their place and position within the family.

These household structures had two big drawbacks. First, such a patriarchal ordering of relationships pushed women to the edges of social significance. In the reality of the whole thing, women really didn't count for much. And second, organizing life in these authoritarian generational terms meant that troubles often lasted across generations. Disagreements, hatreds, and blood feuding was passed on from generation to generation. Think Hatfield and McCoy. So, in this way of understanding belonging, women are defined out of the social system, and old hostilities are maintained as fundamental to who and what an individual is. Jesus says no to this structure and tells us God's priorities aren't that narrow. So, God's people's priorities mustn't be that narrow either.

In other words, the source of our love isn't social conventions, restrictions or romantic ideals, but the perfect and eternal love that comes from God. There is a saying that goes, 'To love God is to love your brother and sister, but not your brother and sister because he is the son or she the daughter of your mother, but because he is your brother and she is your sister who is everybody.'

That's why these strange words of Jesus are good news. We define ourselves by our significant relationships. We count ourselves as successes or failures by those relationships. We are easily guilt-ridden and neurotic, or maybe self-absorbed and complacent within them. We worry and fret. It's hard to be at home with ourselves.

Well, says Jesus, if it feels to you as if those things are all you are, the truth is they are not. There is a prior relationship that is absolutely gracious. Jesus tells us we have the love of God who counts every hair on our heads, as it were, and that God will never ever abandon us. We are beloved of God. The God who even watches the sparrow watches over us. Jesus say, let that be the definition of you from which all other things flow. Let that be the order of your priorities. Let that be the bedrock on which you can love, forgive, hope, strive, and belong. Lose your life in God's love and you will find it.

The theologian Paul Tillich once famously preached on this gracious acceptance by God. He said, 'remember the miracle of grace when you are able to look frankly into the eyes of another. Remember the miracle of grace when you understand another's words, not just literally but also what lies behind them. Remember the miracle of grace in being able to accept the life of another even when it is hostile to you, for you know it belongs to the same God who accepts you. And experience the miracle of grace which is able to overcome the tragic separation between sexes, generations, races, nations, even humanity and nature itself. Sometimes grace appears in all these separations to reunite us with those whom we belong. For life belongs to life' from the God of love.

This is why the great singer and actress Ethel Waters made the song His eye is on the Sparrow her anthem at the Billy Graham crusades and popularized it. Ethel

Waters knew fear and pain, neglect and worthlessness from the time she was born. Her birth resulted from the rape of her teenage mother. She grew up without a father in severe poverty. In her autobiography, she wrote that she never lived in the same place more than fifteen months. "I never was a child. I never was cuddled, or liked, or understood by my family." She married when she was thirteen, left that abusive man, then worked as a maid in Philadelphia for .75 a week.

But despite all that, Waters testified to God's providential care: "His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me." She knew what it meant to be a motherless child who was a long way from home to finding her home at the door of God's welcome and love.

This Gospel tells us not to be defined by others but rather embrace who we are, recognizing the unfathomable love of God that we enjoy simply by being a child of God. Because when we do, we hear Jesus saying "Each one of us is worth more than many sparrows. It's when we believe in God's immeasurable love that we can sing: When Jesus is my portion, my constant friend is he, His eye is on the sparrow and I know he watches me. I sing because I'm happy, I sing because I'm free. His eye is on the sparrow and I know he watches me. What more can we ask for. Amen.