

By and By (How Much More)
Matthew 10:24-32
June 25, 2023
First Presbyterian, Luling

We're starting in an unexpected place this morning: the dentist's office. When we lived in Buda, just across the road from our neighborhood, we found the best pediatric dentist ever. He helped the kids defeat, once and for all, their fear...unease...trepidation, about going to the dentist. He accommodated their quirks and obligingly has quirks of his own. When we moved to La Grange, we decided it was worth the drive to keep seeing Dr. Matt as the kids' dentist. It became evident that one of them needed some orthodontic help, and I was dreading trying to accustom her to a new office and provider, and accustom the new provider and office to her. Soon after, we got an email announcing the arrival of an orthodontist, an addition to Dr. Matt's dental practice.

Just the type of doctor we needed, in a place where they were already comfortable and known. Perfect. It has gone quite well, and the orthodontist has accommodated our quirks just as well as Dr. Matt. What quality of orthodontist she was, I had no idea. At their next cleaning, I was saying how happy I was that the office had an orthodontist, and Dr. Matt told me how she had come to their practice. He'd been looking to add an orthodontist for a long time, he said, but he couldn't find one who met his standards. This orthodontist, he said, was impressive. He said of course they don't have any long term results to track yet, since she had only been there a few months, but he was impressed by her meticulous attention to detail. There's never an extra blob of glue on a tooth, everything is all tidy both in mouths and in the office. And then he said "That doesn't guarantee good results, but I can guarantee you that an orthodontist who is sloppy with the details will have sloppy results. An orthodontist who has good results will always have been attentive to the details." I trust he knows what he's talking about.

I've told you this story, which is otherwise probably not very interesting, because Dr. Matt's description of the orthodontist is an excellent example of a kind of logic that the rabbis used. It's a logical argument called in Hebrew "qal vahomer" or almost the same thing in Latin which I have even less idea how to pronounce, which is translated "from the light to the heavy" in Hebrew or "from the minor to the major" in Latin. If I were naming it, I'd call it "how much more," because that's either in the sentence or implied. If the light thing is true, then how much more will the heavy thing be true. If the orthodontist is good with the light or minor thing—the details of attaching braces to teeth—then how much more will she be good at the heavy or minor thing—getting kids' teeth to be straight.

This kind of logic is all over the place, throughout the Bible, once you have your ear tuned to it. Moses says to God, when God calls him to free the people from the Pharaoh: God, my own people won't even listen to me, how much more will Pharaoh ignore me? (Exodus 6:12). The light, or minor, subject is Moses' own people—the ones who know him best, the ones who knew God best before they were enslaved, the very ones who should want to be liberated, whatever it takes. They won't listen. The heavy, or major subject is Pharaoh, because he has all the power, ultimate earthly power. If Moses can't even get his own people to listen, then how much more will Pharaoh not listen? A lot more. Pharaoh will not listen a lot more.

Jesus uses this form, too, quite frequently. Earlier in Matthew, in the Sermon on the Mount, he says this: *Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?* (6:26). The minor or light subject is the lilies of the field. The major or heavy subject is you. God cares for and clothes the mere flowers in the field, so of course God will care for and clothe you, a precious human being. God will care for you how much more? A lot more.

There are tons of other examples, but let's look at today's passage. When Jesus says "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by 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." (10:29-31), he is using this same structure of argument, though not the actual "how much more" words. Again, the minor or light subject is the sparrows. They were sold in the Temple, for the smallest possible price, so that those who were poor would be able to make their sacrifices at the Temple. Their monetary value was tiny. But their value to those who needed them, and their value to God was great. The hairs of your head are also the minor or light subject: each one insignificant by itself, but even so, God knows about each one of them, counts them.

The major or heavy subject is you. Us. If God cares about tiny sparrows and the number of hairs on your head, how much more does God care about us? A lot more is the answer. This is the third time Jesus has told them not to fear, and this is the why and how. Why aren't they to be afraid? Because God, who has power over both body and soul, cares for them. And how is it that they aren't to be afraid? Because they can look around, at the lilies of the field and the sparrows in the Temple courts, and the hairs on their head and know how much more God cares for them.

At some point, probably many points, in our lives, we feel insignificant, unimportant, unvalued. All we're good for is some menial task that we repeat over and over. Or we aren't productive in a culture that measures our worth by our work. Or we just don't feel seen or important or loved. Or any number of other ways we feel insignificant. But God cares about even those little sparrows, meant for the poorest people, who also thought they were insignificant. How much more does God care about us? A lot more is always the answer.

Or we're a small congregation, and we're not in the big city. Everything around us tells us bigger is better, and more people and more money and more busy-ness are goods in and of themselves and signal success. So if we're small, we must be unsuccessful and unimportant and insignificant and ignorable. Not so. God perceives the sparrows. God notices them. They are significant, important to God. If even sparrows are valued, if God's eye is on the sparrow, then how much more does God value us. A lot more.

We sing because we are set free from the world's ideas of what's most valuable. We sing because God watches us, and loves us, a whole lot more.