



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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**God Knows**  
Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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*Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows (Luke 12:6-7).*

Our back yard in Mt. Lebanon hosts an assortment of wildlife worthy of St. Francis. We run a bed and breakfast for part of the community's deer herd that camps out overnight and munches on all the flowers they can reach for breakfast or late-evening snacks. Hawks perch on the higher trees, watching nervous mice and chipmunks and rabbits scurrying below. We've deported woodchucks with impressive underground engineering networks. A couple of hummingbirds compete for all the red and purple flowers the deer haven't eaten. Crows hold noisy town meetings, where it always sounds like they're arguing about something. Squirrels cavort by day and bats swoop around by night. There are robins and cardinals and all sorts of common birds everywhere, including the commonest birds of all, the sparrows.

When Jesus says that not one of these little sparrows is forgotten in God's sight, that strikes me as an astonishing claim. And even though Jesus often talks in metaphors and parables and hyperbole, I'm inclined to think he means it quite literally when he talks this way about the sparrows.

People have some funny ideas about God, and one of them is that God is a lot like us: confined to one place at a time, with a limited attention span, needing to focus on just a few things, so that God doesn't really have the bandwidth, as we might say, to pay attention to all of our individual, personal concerns. That's a reasonable notion if we hold a naively anthropomorphic image of God, but Jesus says it's not that way with God. God is not like us in that sense at all.

Of course God is personal, which means that God is intelligent, and God has a will that favors some things and opposes others, and God enjoys relationships. In fact, the Christian concept of the Trinity implies that the very nature of God is relationship—that marvelous relationship among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit within the one true God. God is love, the scripture says. It isn't just that God is capable of love. Rather, God's essential *nature* is to love. Love is what God *does* because it's who God *is*.

Yet this loving God is not confined to a particular place or time but is present always and everywhere. That's one reason why we need to remember the Holy Spirit. We're tempted to focus mostly on the Father and the Son, or Parent and Child, because we can identify with parents and children. We know what those are. But the Holy Spirit reminds us that God is present and active everywhere, like gravity or some other force of nature, except that God is personal, too, and takes an active interest in everything that happens in all of creation.

The point, Jesus says, is that God knows. God knows everything that happens in this world. God pays attention to the sparrows, not because ornithology is one of God's hobbies but because God loves the whole of creation and all of its parts. And if God cares even about the sparrows, you can trust that God cares about you, too, because you are more precious to God than a whole flock of sparrows.

One of our perennial problems in the life of faith is that we wonder whether God is really paying attention, or whether God really cares about whatever is going on in our personal lives, or in the world at large, for that matter. We find it hard to imagine, for all sorts of reasons.

One reason I've already mentioned: that our all-too-human notion of God has trouble believing that God can keep all of us in mind at the same time. We know our own limitations, and even though we understand that God is smarter than we are, we're inclined to think that God has some sort of attention deficit disorder on a cosmic scale.

Another reason it's hard to imagine that God cares for us is our own insecurity. We're all tempted by insecurity at some level, and for understandable reasons. Even a long earthly life is still short in the grand scheme of things, and we're aware of our mortality, even when we try hard not to think about it. I spent an hour or so alone on top of the hill in the Mt. Lebanon cemetery the other night, around midnight, watching for the meteor shower that was supposed to be clearer than any time since 2007. I saw only a couple of meteors in the time I was willing to stay awake, but sitting alone in the cemetery I was acutely aware of how quiet the residents were. Our finitude and mortality cause us to wonder whether we matter much in the end, especially to someone as big and important as God.

All of our clamoring for status and success and recognition in this world is fundamentally a symptom of our insecurity. If we really knew that we were already loved and accepted by the same God who loves and cares for even the sparrows, we wouldn't be so concerned to prove to ourselves and others that we really do matter.

Don't worry, Jesus says. And don't be afraid of those who might harm you. The world Jesus lived in was a scary place. All sorts of bad things could happen to people, and some of those things were more likely to happen then than they are today, even though some people live in a kind of chronic fear because of the terrible things they hear about in the media.

Don't be afraid, Jesus says. Don't be afraid even of those who could kill the body—and surely he means not just the people who might harm us but also the illness and accidents and injuries. Don't be afraid of them, because the worst they can do is bring an end to your body, and one way or another that's sure to happen anyway. If you were going to be afraid of anyone, Jesus says, be afraid of the one who decides the fate of your soul when you die.

Many people live with such an inverted sense of priorities that they're anxious about their physical and material and social status but pay little or no attention to the state of their soul. But remember, Jesus says: God knows. God pays attention to everything in creation, and God knows all the details of our lives. God knows the things we let the world see, and the things we keep to ourselves, and even the things we keep *from* ourselves, because God knows us better than we know ourselves. Nothing is hidden that will not be revealed, so beware of hypocrisy because, of course, you can't keep anything hidden from God.

If you were going to be afraid of anyone, Jesus says, God is the one you should be afraid of. And yet, this same God is the one who made you, and loves you, and wants nothing more than to save you. That's why Jesus came, after all. He came to save us from our sins, and reconcile us to God, and deliver us even from death.

So Jesus tells us we don't have to worry, if we put our trust in him. Even the challenges and temptations of this life Jesus understands, because he's been through many of them himself. As the letter to the Hebrews says, it was fitting that the pioneer of our salvation should be made perfect through sufferings, since suffering is part of the human condition. Jesus himself was tempted, so he knows what

temptation is like, and his Spirit can help us when we are tempted. Jesus has tasted death, too, and he overcame it, so he can free us from death itself, and from the fear of death.

When Jesus tells us not to worry about the afflictions of this world, he knows what he's talking about. Jesus understands the problems that plague us. And because Jesus is the Word of God made flesh, it turns out that the only one we would ever need to fear is the very one who loves us so much that he came to save us. He became like us so that we could become more like him.

God knows all about us—the problems we face, the sins we hide even from ourselves, and all the troubles we bring upon ourselves in our insecurity. God knows, and God cares, and God has come in Christ to deliver us from all of that. All we have to do is accept God's grace in Jesus Christ, and let the Holy Spirit make us a new creation.

The psalmist declares, “How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints, for the courts of the Lord.” We were made to live in the presence of God—the God who made us, and loves us, and knows our every need. For that reason the psalmist says, “A day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.... Happy is everyone who trusts in you.”

And that's the truth. Happy, blessed, is everyone who trusts in God. God knows what each of us needs because God is Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is everywhere. And God loves us because God is love, so the same God who knows all about us wants to redeem us and make us new, beginning right here and now, and continuing through all eternity.



So don't be afraid, Jesus says. Even the sparrow finds a home in God's world, and not one of these sparrows falls to the ground apart from your Father in heaven. How much more, then, will you and I find a place in the heart of the living God.



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