



# SAINT MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*7A Value and Sparrows  
St. Mark's June 25<sup>th</sup>  
Matthew 10:24-39*

*Sparrows Christian Century Kathleen Battle*

“Or 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.” Matthew 10:29-31

Civilla Martin, a Canadian schoolteacher, composes in 1905 a beloved poem, “His **Eye** is On the Sparrow”, based on this passage from Matthew. /“His **eye** is on the sparrow, and I **know**, he **watches** me.”/

Noted song writer, Charles Gabriel, transforms the words into music to become the well-known gospel hymn that brings **comfort** to congregations in African-American churches in our past century/ where their race is not valued in the world's economy. I will never forget hearing Kathleen Battle, American operatic soprano noted for her distinctive vocal range and tone, sing this hymn A cappella at a concert with the National Symphony at the Kennedy Center the year we help with a pilgrimage to the National Cathedral. We are on the first-row

center where we our line of vision is directly at all the well shined shoes of the orchestra members. Battle is there standing in front of us, a foot away, / wearing a striking floor length, dark red velvet dress. Her soul is singing

from something deep inside of her. These words, this music, and Kathleen Battle indeed speak **beyond** words about how valuable we each are to God. So often I meet and talk with people who **do not** feel **valued** by God. As I listen, I so wish I could honor what we have learned from our country's African American tradition/ and maybe sing this hymn like Kathleen Battle to tell them their **worth**,/ but alas, I will have to try **something** else.

Instead I could quote this scripture from Jesus' "missionary discourse" about two sparrows sold for a copper coin, 1/16<sup>th</sup> of a denarius, 1/16<sup>th</sup> of a day's wages. In Jesus' day, sparrows are the meat or the "ground chuck" of the poor. Yet, God cares for the sparrows, the food of the poor, and even gives them special attention. God cares about what is considered by first century Christians as the least valuable. So, Jesus makes the argument that does it not make sense/ that God cares for,/ watches over,/ values/ each of us even more. The knowledge that God cares and loves **us** so deeply is Jesus' **antidote** to **fear**,/ any fear we may have, especially as we are sent out as disciples into the world. But Jesus also cautions us about a rabbit hole. He mentions that we may have a

**cross** to bear, and there is no magical spell preventing us from suffering. What Jesus does try to relay instead/ is how deeply God cares/ and knows/ and loves us; God so intimately cherishes us that God knows even the number of hairs in our head.

If scripture doesn't work, I could next try reason which also includes our **experience**.

I might tell the story from the recent *Christian Century* article by Liddy Barlow, the executive minister of Christian Associates of Southwest Pennsylvania. She introduces us to the dilemma faced by the lawyer Kenneth Feinberg, who chairs the September 11 Victim Compensation Fund giving money to the families of those who died in the terrorist attack. He devises a formula for proportional compensation depending on the **present** income and **estimated** loss from future earnings of each victim,/ ranging from busboys at the Windows on the World Restaurant to Wall Street traders. Feinberg's training in law and particularly his experience in compensation law and mediation for victims of Agent Orange leads him to believe that people will have different values. He even writes a book about his experience, *What Is Life Worth?*, describing an eight-part plan to determine the value of someone's life depending on the person's age, dependents, income, and their earning potential. Feinberg describes his work as grueling, like being in a tsunami as he works for 33 months *pro bono* for the 9/11 Victim Compensation Fund. Seven billion dollars in compensations are given

for the 5300 families of the victims of 9/11, ranging from \$250, 000 for blue collar workers to \$7.1 million for some executives. At the conclusion of this experience, Feinberg **struggles** with this differentiation as he **personally** learns more about each victim and their loved ones left behind. He wonders if it is possible that the value of a wealthy person is truly 28 times as valuable as a worker? In the process, Feinberg is transformed. “I regret presenting myself in a more lawyer-like way rather than in a more empathetic, sensitive way. It took me awhile to evolve into that more sensitive person, **listening**, rather than talking. There is **nothing** you can say that can alleviate their pain. Better I have a background as a priest or a rabbi or a psychiatrist.”

Feinberg later relates his story on NPR in May 2008 and on the anniversary of 9/11 last year. He next is consulted by the president of Virginia Tech as how to distribute the private funds for compensation to the families of those killed in the mass shooting at that campus on April 16, 2007, where 32 people are killed and 17 wounded. On these broadcasts, we can hear Feinberg saying, **/singing** “His Eye is on the Sparrow” in the language of an experienced lawyer as he speaks, / “Trained in the law, I had always accepted that no two lives were worth the same in financial terms. But now I found the law in conflict with my growing belief in the equality of all life.” Feinberg had listened to the voices of families from 9/11. “Mr. Feinberg, my husband was a fireman and died a hero at the World Trade Center. Why are you giving me **less**

money than the banker who represented Enron? Why are you demeaning the memory of my husband?”/ Feinberg, again working *pro bono* at Virginia Tech, **this** time recommends that all victims at Virginia Tech, students and faculty receive the same compensation./

So, what do we do when we are with someone who does not feel valued by God? We **listen** and **listen** to **their** story. Then our Anglican tradition tells us we have at least three possible *genre* of stories we can share with them,/ stories from our tradition,/ stories from scripture,/ and stories from our reason or experience. **Next**, we again listen and listen for the Spirit to speak for us and make connections so that we both are no longer fearful people, so that together we can go out into a fearful world to become the people God created us to be.

So today, I share with you **my** stories from my tradition, knowledge of scripture, and my reason and experience of the God of my understanding, the God who so desperately loves/ and so desperately values each of us./ **Now**, it is your turn for you to make the connections,/ listen/ as the Holy Spirit in this long Pentecost season moves through you,/ moves through each of us/ as we remember how **valued** we are by God,/ so that we are no longer fearful of **going out** into this world/ and sharing God’s story of love.

Liddy Barlow, “Living the Word,” *Christian Century*, p. 20, June 7, 2017.

Ross Barkan, “Meet Ken Feinberg, the Master of disasters,” 3/9/16, *New York Observer*, *observer.com*. A version of this story appeared on the cover of the March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2016 edition of the *New York Observer*.

Kenneth Feinberg, “Lawyer Describes the Emotional Toll of Calculating Victims’ Compensation,” *All Things Considered*, NPR, Host, Ray Suarez, September 11, 2016, 5:06 pm ET.

Kenneth Feinberg, “What is the Value of a Human Life?,” *Weekend Edition Sunday NPR, This I Believe*, May 25, 2008, 4 am ET