

Message – Cincinnati Friends Meeting
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Rosalind the Obnoxious

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Matthew 10:29-31

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.

This is one of my favorite passages. Here is why.

My mother loved wild birds. When she and my dad first moved to the rock house on the plains east of Albuquerque, there were still trees around it—an ancient peach tree and some cottonwoods; a row of Russian olives and a cluster of lilac bushes around the concrete tank below the old windmill. The trees and bushes attracted lots of birds—meadowlarks, English sparrows, quail, swallows, occasional blue jays from the foothills, and passing flocks of more exotic birds. Over time, however, the trees died, one by one, until finally only some rangy elms remained. And then a neighbor a few miles north built a sanctuary for raptors—various kinds of hawks—that preyed on all smaller birds for miles around. Finally, the only birds my mother could count on seeing were the small gray-brown phoebes that returned each spring, in spite of all the nests and babies they lost. Mom watched out her window for hours, noting the construction process of each new nest, the laying of how many eggs and the parents' diligent care.

When I went home to visit her, she would recount the story of the phoebes' spring—when they came back this year; how they built the nest in the eaves above the service porch, or in the elm tree in the front yard. I would hear the story of the snake that almost got the nest

full of babies and how Mom slapped the snake off the tree with a hoe, and how Scratch, the black terrier, scooped it up and shook it to death. She told me the adventures of baby phoebes learning to fly, and how Mama Phoebe and Papa Phoebe took turns watching from the telephone line, of their heart-breaking struggle to protect their fledglings from the hawk that finally killed and ate all the babies.

My mother appreciated all creatures, great and small—birds, cats, dogs, chickens, ducks, guineas, sheep, skunks, coyotes, antelope—she saw each one as a BEING with personality and intention. Though she was not religious in any traditional sense, Mom saw “that of God” in all of nature. I have rarely felt the presence of the holy more intensely than when my mother talked about a creature or event in the natural world.

No doubt because of what I learned from her, I am one of those people who swerve my car to avoid hitting birds on the road—I need a bumper sticker that says “I brake for birds and turtles.” The line in the passage from Matthew 10 about not one sparrow falling to the ground unperceived by the Creator is among my favorite quotations. This teaching from Jesus reflects other Hebrew teachings about God’s care for creation, which no doubt Jesus learned as a good Jewish boy. The Kabbalah of medieval Jewish mysticism contains this version of the teaching: “God nourishes everything, from the horned buffalo to nits, disdaining no creature—for if God disdained creatures due to their insignificance, they could not endure for even a moment. Rather God gazes and emanates compassion upon them all. So should you be good to all creatures, disdaining none.”

Most of us tend to dismiss the idea that God’s “eye is on the sparrow,” saying yes, yes, nice sentiment, but really—sparrows? Surely the Creator of the Universe has better things to

do! We can't wrap our minds around a divinity extensive enough to be concerned with the tiny; it is counter-cultural for us. Yet physicists studying chaos theory and string theory keep finding tinier and tinier pieces of creation. What if infinity goes *both* ways, i.e., all the way out beyond the universe *and all the way in* to . . . what? And if the flap of a butterfly's wings in Brazil can set off a tornado in Texas,¹ what effect might my slapping a child have on earth?

For me, Matthew's words about sparrows falling and the hairs of my head being counted emphasize the Creator's attention to detail and the idea that no living thing is insignificant to the One who created it. I take these words at face value because I believe that every life has "that of God" within it. One of my most direct lessons about this came from an obnoxious critter—a cat named Rosalind.

Down the road from Mom & Dad's house lived their closest neighbor, Mr. Begley, who in his 70s had planted a small orchard of carefully tended peach and apple trees and rows of poplars as a windbreak around his house. For as long as the weather wasn't too dry, or as long as he could get out and water the trees, Mr. Begley kept his little patch of green in the yellow plains. But after several years of drought and his own failing health, most of his trees died, too. But I digress. Mr. Begley heated his house with a big wood stove, so he needed wood, and he had managed to accumulate a pile of wood as big as this room and probably 12 feet high. It was a **big** woodpile. At some point, Mr. Begley's barn cats began to inhabit the woodpile and have their kittens there. He always had kittens he was trying to give away, so when I came back from Brazil and moved to Monte Vista, Colorado, I decided I probably needed some cats. I had seen several pretty, long-haired cats when I visited him, but the two he'd picked out for me

¹ An example of chaos theory first described by physicist Edward Lorenz at the 1972 meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

were short-haired gray tabbies—sisters, he said—and almost completely wild. He managed to catch them and put them in the kennel I brought with me, but they were clearly terrified and would have nothing to do with me.

When I got to my house in Monte Vista, Colorado, I took them inside and let them out of the kennel to explore while I unloaded the suitcases. They promptly disappeared and I didn't see them for a couple of days. I called and called; I left out food and water. But they had vanished. I finally found one of them inside the kitchen cabinet under the sink. She hissed and spat every time I opened the door; I named her "Kate" after Shakespeare's character in *Taming of the Shrew*. Hearing all the commotion, the other one wandered out from somewhere and let herself be enticed with a little cat food and water. I named her Rosalind after another Shakespeare heroine.

As they grew up, Kate became a beautiful, sleek and lanky cat; perfectly composed and self-possessed as only a cat can be. After a couple of years, she slept with me and would sit on my lap, though she still ran and hid when anyone else came around. Rosalind had exactly the same coloring as her sister, but her body length was shorter and rounder; she reminded me of a little gray hen. She was more stand-offish than Kate and never came around to cuddle.

So long as I lived in Monte Vista with a big house that had a pet door, they seemed to get along okay. But when I moved to Colorado Springs and lived in a small house with no way for them to go outside unless I opened a door, I became aware that the two sisters despised each other. I came home from work one day to find Kate with a chunk of flesh the size of my thumb missing from her right hip. Any time Rosalind came into the room, Kate hissed, growled

and left. After that, I made sure to leave a window and screen open so Kate could get away if necessary.

Over the years, the sisters did not mellow toward each other. When I was there, I shushed the hisses and growls they spat at each other; when I was gone, I tried to provide for Kate to have some way to escape from Roz while they were alone. After a while I noticed that even my dog, Dodger, gave Rosalind a wide berth, and I had a sense that Rosalind was aware her power. Early in the morning, she would sit at the bottom of the stairs, a wild look in her eyes, and hold Dodger and Kate at bay at the top of the stairs until I came down and shoed her away. Rosalind was a strange, slightly crazy, obnoxious little cat.

Kate was the beautiful, accomplished older sister; Rosalind the chubby, awkward one who didn't understand how to be an attractive cat. Rosalind was the only cat I ever knew that could stomp. Kate curled contentedly in my lap or purred beside me on the bed; Roz stomped onto my lap and offered me her backside to smell. She never got it that people are not charmed by such customs, no matter how many times I pushed her around so her face was toward me. She nudged my hand aggressively, butting her head against it repeatedly until I gave up and petted her, or hid my hand by sitting on it. It wasn't that I never petted her—I did. But she didn't like it unless *she* initiated it and if *I* did, she was likely to turn around and nip my hand. Finally, by the time I moved to Richmond, Indiana to go to seminary in 2002, no one in the family really liked Rosalind—not her sister, not the dog, not my grandson; I wasn't particularly fond of her. She was obnoxious. Still, she was part of the family.

One day I was reading some Quaker text for a class assignment when I glanced up to see Rosalind sitting on the floor, staring at Kate sleeping peacefully in the big chair. Suddenly she

leaped up onto the edge of the chair, purposely startling Kate, who hissed, spat, jumped down and streaked off up the stairs. I watched Rosalind's face as her sister run away, and I thought, "You poor, strange, lonely, little creature." And the thought came to me unbidden: "There is that of God in you, too." After that, when I looked at Roz, I saw "that of God" in her—not in as nice a package as it was in Kate or my delightful grandson, but still, *the Light was there*. She was a flawed creature, but still a container for "that of God," and she was being the best cat *she knew how to be*.

And then there was my obnoxious son-in-law, who irritated and infuriated me at times, and was definitely a flawed creature (just ask me about his flaws). But after I perceived "that of God" in Roz, I saw that my son-in-law too had that of God within him, and that *he* was being the best human *he knew how to be*. Then it occurred to me that I, too, am a flawed creature, being the best sort of person I know how to be, far from perfect, struggling to live up to the measure of Light I have been given.

I try to keep this awareness before me now in all my dealings with other living creatures, i.e., no matter how small or unimportant they may seem in the larger scheme of things, God's eye is on them, they are containers of the Light, and they matter. If the Creator loves sparrows, and Rosalind, and other strange, obnoxious creatures, I can believe I too am beloved.