

Psalm 84-1-4
Consider the Birds: the Sparrow
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When there isn't a lot of something, we tend to assign it more value. We experienced that last year during the drought. Water was scarce, so we paid more for it.

And when a manufacturer tells us their product is a limited or special edition, we flock to the store to buy it. In January, Stanley introduced a "special edition" Galentine's Day cup for women to gift to their gal pals.

Here's what happened at one Target:

* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=koCSf3LB3G0>

4 minutes. They are currently selling on eBay for over \$100.

In a 2016 story in the New Yorker magazine, I learned that there is a bourbon called Pappy Van Winkle. And I learned that most high-quality bourbon sits in a barrel for between eight and twelve years, Pappy ages for as long as twenty-three years. A bottle of top-shelf twelve-year-old bourbon sells for around \$100. Because the Pappy bourbon has aged for twice as long, \$249, the list price for a bottle of Pappy Twenty-Three-Year doesn't seem crazy. But most people can't buy Pappy at its list price. The Van Winkle family only releases seven thousand bottles each year. The demand for this bourbon is so high that most bottles are bought by resellers. On the resale market, it sells for as much as four thousand dollars a bottle, sixteen times the list price.

Although I imagine it would be hard to quantify, people who know something about bourbon will tell you that Pappy is not sixteen times better than comparable bourbon. Its rarity is the source of its high value. According to Adam Alter, Associate Professor of Marketing at New York University, "Rarity elevates a product or experience by turning its consumption into a notable event. It's through such notable events that one life is distinguished from another; in fact, in an informal way, you might quantify your well-being as the total of notable events you experience across time. As a result, consumers are willing to pay a lot for rarity."¹

"It's through such notable events that one life is distinguished from another..."

I wonder if that is true. And if it is true, does this feed into the negative connotation we have assigned to being ordinary. Ironically, the need not to be ordinary is quite common (or ordinary). We don't want to be like everybody else, and yet, we want to fit in, but we don't want to blend in. We live our lives allowing other people to tell us what we are worth. And ordinary, whether it's whiskey, water, birds, or even people, just isn't worth as much as special or rare. Lots of things about our world today send us this message, even our games.

¹ <https://www.newyorker.com/business/currency/the-endless-and-expensive-quest-for-rare-objects>, accessed 6/20/24.

When the video game company Niantic released Pokémon Go the reviews were not awesome. But that has not stopped millions of players from spending days and weeks chasing rare Pokémon characters. Just as bourbon drinkers will spend thousands of dollars on Pappy, Pokémon players will spend thousands of hours and some of their hard-earned money looking for these special characters.

Some of the rarest are called Shiny Pokémon. Shiny is kind of the opposite of ordinary, right? The game is free to download, but Niantic has made up to \$1.6 million per day from players who pay for items that help them catch Pokémon characters.² As of 2023, the company has made \$566 million off of in-app purchases. The players who catch rare characters earn medals and bonuses and I would imagine this makes them feel special.

Pokémon Go players don't have to spend money or play very long to catch a bird character named Pidgey, though.

Pidgey is a very common bird. In fact, Pidgey is to Pokémon Go what today's bird, the sparrow, is to the bird world. Sparrows are everywhere; they are ordinary and plentiful. Even in the Bible sparrows are used as an example of God's love for what human beings have decided isn't worth much. In Psalm 84, the psalmist writes,

How lovely is your dwelling place,
O Lord of hosts!

² My soul longs, indeed it faints,
for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy
to the living God.

³ Even the sparrow finds a home
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young,
at your altars, O Lord of hosts,
my King and my God.

⁴ Happy are those who live in your house,
ever singing your praise.

In the 10th chapter of Matthew, as Jesus commissioned his disciples to their shared mission, he gave them some instructions. He also acknowledged the fear they were experiencing. The work he was sending them to do would likely be dangerous. He told them they must be "sly like a snake and simple like a dove." And he reminded them that they were not going alone. In verses 29-31, he said,

² <https://www.newyorker.com/business/currency/the-endless-and-expensive-quest-for-rare-objects>, accessed 6/20/24.

²⁹ Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. ³⁰ And even the hairs of your head are all counted. ³¹ So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

In other words, God's eye is on the sparrow.

The Creator's concern for creatures was acknowledged more than once in the Hebrew Bible. Psalm 84 is a good example of that, as is Psalm 8. In the New Testament, the author of Matthew uses sparrows to tell us about God's care for human beings. But in both passages, the sparrow's worth is diminished. "Even the sparrow finds a home..." "...you are of *more value* than many sparrows." There is something about the comparison... how even biblical authors, and potentially Jesus, assign more value to humans than to creatures that rubs me the wrong way. Perhaps that attitude toward animals and birds is one reason human beings act like the planet and its inhabitants are here for our consumption. We believe we are worth more than the creatures with whom we share this planet and that really hasn't served us, the creatures, or the planet well.

In ancient times, the feathers of sparrows (and other small birds) were plucked and the birds were skewered to be sold at the market. They were cheap. In the Gospel of Luke, we are told they were sold 5 for 2 pennies, and in Matthew 2 for a penny. Like the pigeon, sparrows are everywhere humans are and historically, we haven't loved that. They have multiplied as humans have multiplied. They aren't particularly pretty and even their songs are monotonous and a bit annoying to some.³

Over the centuries, there have been various campaigns to get rid of them. In her book *Consider the Birds*, Debbie Blue wrote that in 16th century Germany, a Lutheran clergyman lobbied his local government to rid them of sparrows. Apparently, the sparrow's sexual promiscuity distracted his congregants from his sermons.⁴ I am just going to say this, it is one thing for y'all to be distracted by sweet baby Margaret, but if sparrow intimacy keeps you from listening, I am done.

Of course, being me, I had to look this up and sparrows do, in fact, have a lot of sex, even the youngsters. The Puritans claimed nymphomaniac witches transformed themselves into sparrows so they could have lots of sex. In the 18th century, farmers in England suspected sparrows of stealing their seeds, which they claimed was costing them money. There were "Sparrow Clubs" formed to kill them. In China, Mao Tse-tung declared sparrows one of the four pests in his Four Pest Campaign. He claimed the sparrows were robbing people of the fruits of their labor. This was good news for locusts and other crop-eating insects that are normally kept under control by sparrows. The killing campaign was so effective that the tree sparrow was almost

³ Blue, Debbie, *Consider the Birds: A Provocative Guide to Birds of the Bible*, (Abingdon Press: Minneapolis MN, 2013). 129.

⁴ Blue, 130.

extinct in China. And the resulting crop loss contributed to the Great Famine, which killed 30 million people. The bedbug was soon substituted for the sparrow in the pest list.⁵

The sparrow was introduced to North America in the early 1850s. It didn't take long for people to want to kill them here. Within two decades, the Great English Sparrow Wars ensued, in which Elliot Coues and Thomas Mayo Brewer, and people on both sides, debated whether something should be done about them, and everyone was mad. So, what do you do when you get mad and fear losing the debate? You prey on people's fear. According to Blue, the opponents of house sparrows won the argument because they linked their rhetoric to an anti-immigrant sentiment that was prevalent at the time. She writes, "Newspapers described the immigrants as...brutes, red ruffians, bloody monsters, cut-throats, thieves, assassins, and fiends. The press accused them of rioting, pillaging, and murder." According to sociologists, "the language used against human immigrants was almost precisely duplicated in arguments against the house sparrow. Anti-sparrow activists defined the bird as 'a foreigner that competes unfairly with native birds that has an immoral character and that needs to be eliminated from the American community of birds.'" They even referred to their homes as avian ghettos.⁶ At one point, it was illegal to feed, shelter, or protect the sparrow in any way. This sounds like our policies governing the southern border that lack compassion, common sense, and effectiveness. For whatever reason, too many people in this nation, too many Christians, ignore Jesus' command to love their neighbor when it comes to immigrants. It is really stunning...and not in a good way.

Back to the sparrow everywhere it goes, people end up wanting to kill it. I would like to tell you this isn't true today, but even today's birders have issues with them. Sparrows have a reputation for taking over the nests of other birds and sometimes killing their babies. If you put up birdhouses, hoping to attract native species, you will likely end up with houses full of sparrows if you don't know what you are doing. And the problem with us is that when we don't like something, we don't usually react with moderation, we declare an all-out war. So now, in many places, as you would expect, the sparrow population has declined. But they aren't worth much anyway. Who cares?

But that is the point of today's text, even when we can't see worth, in a bird, in our neighbor, and in ourselves, the biblical writers come along to remind us that God cares for and loves even the ones we consider insignificant or worthless. Think about it...the ones who are weak, poor, the widows, the isolated, the stranger...we are told all of them matter to God. And if they matter to God, they must matter to us.

⁵ Blue, 130-132.

⁶ Blue, 134-35.

Hopefully, we know we matter to God, but the truth is we want to matter to other people, too. And we think if we are ordinary, other people, special people, will always matter more. We desperately want to be special. We want to be the best. We want to be the prettiest, the fastest, or the smartest. We want to win. What is it that Ricky Bobby says in Talladega Nights? "If you're not first, you're last."

I wonder...if sparrows had looked like parrots or cockatoos would Jesus have used something else to make his point? Would we feel differently about sparrows if they weren't so dang ordinary? Maybe familiarity does breed contempt. We see these birds all the time. We think we know them...they are everywhere.

Did you know that in Australia (maybe other places too), some sparrows have learned to open automatic doors? They hover over the electric eye until it opens.

Did you sparrows can swim? They will swim to escape a predator if necessary. My friend, Bo Wilson, who has an eye for the ordinary took these pictures this week. (Sparrow pics are scrolled)

Sparrows are amazing creatures. They can do so many things we can't. The average sparrow flies 28 miles an hour. They keep insects in check for farmers and the rest of us. And yes, they are very pushy with other birds, kicking them out of their nests sometimes, but here we are standing on Native land, so what do they say, "People In glass houses shouldn't throw stones."

Here's the thing...There is a lot about everything we don't know. All we know is what we have experienced or what we have taken the time to learn about. So, I think it is safe to assume that every ordinary creature and every ordinary human has worth and when we can't see it, that is blindness on our part, not a flaw or failure on theirs.

Dr. Paul Farmer, a physician who dedicated his life to helping the people in Haiti said something I remind myself of almost daily. "The idea that some lives matter less than others is the root of all that is wrong in the world." If you don't remember anything else I say today, remember that and take it to heart.

Dr. Farmer was talking specifically about people lives, but we have heard over and over again throughout this series that things go wrong when we treat creatures like they don't matter. Life matters. I was talking to a member Friday morning and he said that he was struck recently by just how precious life is...every minute, every second. Another member said to me this week that she hopes that when she dies her essence or energy or soul or whatever will still be a force for good in this world.

Dear ones, the good you are putting out in the world matters. You, ordinary you, are priceless. Our neighbors, our ordinary neighbors, are priceless and the creatures we share this world with are priceless, not because we and they are rare or a limited edition, but because we cannot put a price on life. And the older I get, the more I realize that every moment we have here is priceless.

Live and love every moment. And don't worry, no matter who you are, you are loved. Amen.