



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

## First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

### September 30, 2012

#### "His Eye Is On the Sparrow" - Luke 12:6-7

The Rev. Dr. David Stoker

Recently, I came across a survey of the top ten saddest moments in Disney movie history. Think back over all the Walt Disney movies you have ever watched. Which do you think was the saddest scene?

Here are the top 10:

**10: "WALL-E"** - Wall-e is crushed and broken and can't recognize his robot love, Eve.

**9: "Toy Story 3"** - The toys hold hands into the fiery pit of death.

**8: "Tarzan"** - His parents and Kala's baby are killed by Sabor.

**7: "Beauty and the Beast"** - The Beast dies in Belle's arms.

**6: "Finding Nemo"** - Marlin's wife and eggs are eaten by a barracuda.

**5: "Fox and the Hound"** - Fox is abandoned in the forest.

**4: "Dumbo"** - Dumbo visits his mother in the cage and she cradles him with her trunk.

**3: "Bambi"** - Bambi's mother is shot and killed.

**2: "Up"** - Opening sequence depicting Carl and Ellie's relationship.

And the winner is:

**1: "The Lion King"** - Mufasa's death!

It is incredibly sad when someone we care about is gone. Something else that is sad is what I read about two months ago in the newspaper column "Annie's Mailbox" which is a follow-up to Ann Landers. A lady wrote:

*"I used to have a lot of friends, and then I went through a major depression. I tried not to lean on them too much, but I needed to talk. But I was abandoned by my friends. I was no longer fun. I was too depressed to go out. I couldn't listen to their problems anymore. I wanted them to listen to mine."*

*"So here I am with 350 Facebook friends, yet none of them calls. They are happy to like my Facebook status or comments on a photo, but no one invites me anywhere. When I was at rock bottom I often contemplated suicide. I sought help and got medication and counseling and am better. If anyone sees themselves in this, please check out your roster of friends and show some friendliness. I sure could use some."*

There is nothing much sadder than thinking that my friends don't seem to care about me. Well, there is something sadder than that—the thought that **"God doesn't care about me."** Some people go through life feeling this way.

These were certainly the thoughts of the psalmist when he wrote Psalm 44. He begins with the first three verses which are pretty upbeat:

*"We have heard it with our ears, O God; our ancestors have told us what you did in their days, in days long ago. With your hand you drove out the nations and planted our ancestors; you crushed the peoples and made our ancestors flourish. It was not by their sword that they won the land, nor did their arm bring them victory; it was your right hand, your arm, and the light of your face, for you loved them."*

But life doesn't turn out the way the children of Israel had hoped. Hear the last three verses of Psalm 44:

*"Awake, Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever. Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression? We are brought down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground. Rise up and help us; rescue us because of your unfailing love."*

There is a real sense of defeat and disappointment reflected in this psalm.

Every couple of months someone sends me an email with a list of "Bulletin Bloopers". It contains comments printed in church bulletins that just sort of came out wrong.

One was about a potluck supper advertised with "prayer and meditation to follow."

But the misprint I would share with you this morning was one that was printed in the newsletter of a Lutheran church.

It asked the question, "HAVE YOU COME TO GRIPES WITH JESUS CHRIST?" To which sometimes we answer, "Yes, I have...and with His Dad, too!" We feel a bit like the psalmist: "Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression?"

A mother was preparing a dinner of spaghetti for her family one evening and because it was her five-year-old son's favorite meal, she asked him to say grace. They bowed their heads, and Tommy began, "Dear God, thank You for these pancakes. Amen." When he finished his mother said to him, "Tommy, you knew we were having spaghetti for dinner; why did you thank God for pancakes?" Tommy said, "Because I just wanted to see if God was paying attention."

I believe all of us at times wonder if God is paying attention to the stuff we are going through. I think this was some of the feelings that Jesus' followers were experiencing one day. And so in Luke 12, verses 6 and 7 Jesus says these words: "*Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.*"

The sparrow is a very drab colored bird. If you check your Bible dictionary, you'll discover that sparrows were among the most insignificant birds in Bible times. They were considered food for the

poor. Vendors in the market would pluck their feathers, dip them in a spicy sauce, impale two of them on a stick and sell them for less than a penny.

Because they were so cheap, the poor could offer them in sacrifice to the Lord at the temple if they couldn't afford a lamb or a goat. You could buy two sparrows for a penny. A buck would buy you a whole bag full of sparrows. You could feed your family sparrow casserole for a dime.

One missionary from India wrote that he used to hunt sparrows and eat them. "They were better than chicken," he said. I'll take his word for it. I don't really plan on eating sparrows any time soon.

And Jesus says that if God notices when an insignificant, pretty worthless bird falls to the ground, don't you think He notices about what happens in your life and mine?

And then to drive home the point Jesus says that God knows us so well that he knows how many hairs are on our heads. Have you ever tried to count the number of hairs on your head? Scientists say the average human head is covered with 100,000 strands of hair. They also tell us that 50 strands fall out each day no matter what we do. Interestingly, the amount of hair varies by color. Blondes have an average of 140,000 strands of hair, Brunettes 105,000, and Redheads 90,000.

All of this is fascinating trivia, but it's not something I think about often. And when I do think about my hair, it's always, "Is it too long? Too short? Time for a haircut? Is it combed properly?"

I never pick out a strand of hair

and say to myself, "*I wonder how number 437 is doing?*" I don't number the hairs on my head, but God does. The meaning of this is clear. If God cares for things that matter so little, then He cares for things that matter much more. And that is **us**. All of that should make us feel really good.

But as we dig a little deeper into this verse, we are reminded that even the little sparrows fall to the ground eventually, which means that sooner or later troubles come to all of God's children. Sometimes we get this romantic notion that becoming a Christian will solve all our problems so that we will be free from trouble and sadness. Not so.

What will you do when your loved one is very sick, or your son is arrested, or your home is washed off the side of the mountain by the rains, or your marriage is broken? When it is your biopsy that comes back positive? When your arteries are determined to be 90 % occluded? When it is your business that is placed in Chapter 11? Or when your boss says, "So long, it's been good to know you"?

The Bible is very clear that God makes His rain to fall on the just and the unjust. What happens to people of the world happens to us, too. They get sick, we get sick. They lose their jobs, we lose our jobs. They have family problems, we have family problems. They get cancer, we get cancer. They die, we die. It is the same for us as for everyone else.

Although we know the Lord, we are not exempt from the trials and troubles of this world. And this bothers me, and it might bother some of you. If I were God, which fortunately I'm not, I'd make sure that those who loved me best, suffered the least.

It's the most natural thing in the world to think that God should look out for His own. But that is not the way it seems to work with God. And I have really struggled with this issue as a Christian and as a pastor.

This week I finished reading Henri Nouwen's book Sabbatical Journey. Henri Nouwen was a Catholic priest. His church gave him a sabbatical...a period of time off for spiritual growth and renewal. He kept a daily diary of that year. I found some of Nouwen's comments very telling for me.

Nouwen says, *"I realize that the life of being a pastor leads to hypocrisy, because we who offer spiritual leadership often find ourselves not living what we are preaching or teaching. It is not easy because, wanting to speak in the Name of God, we find ourselves often calling people to a life that we are not fully able to live ourselves. It feels like hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is not so much the result of not living what I preach, but much more of not confessing my inability to fully live up to my own words."*

We all want the words we speak to really reflect what we believe inside. And this is really important to me as a pastor and preacher.

The other day I saw a chameleon. It was as green as the leaf on which it rested. I watched it closely or I would have lost it when it moved from the leaf on to a brown limb and changed its color. Watching that amazing creature, I remembered Carl Sandburg's story about the chameleon who did well changing its colors to match its environment until one day it accidentally crawled onto a scotch plaid sport coat. It had a nervous breakdown trying to appear like all the different colors!

We're like that. Too often, how we appear on the outside is not consistent with what we feel on the inside. And so I have struggled with this issue of God's loving care for us while so many things in our lives turn out much harder than I think they need to be. I believe God has given me some partial answers.

The first partial answer was found in a comment made by Bill Hybels, pastor of the Willow Creek Church. He said: *"I can answer the issue of suffering in five words: 'I don't have a clue.'"*

That simple phrase was actually very helpful to me. Someone whom I admire, who is having a significant ministry, can still minister effectively without having a tight answer to the question of suffering.

Bill Hybels comment reminds me of 1 Corinthians 13, where it says that you and I look through a glass dimly. It is fogged over, cloudy. But someday when we are face-to-face with God, the condensation will be wiped aside from the glass and we will see and understand.

And then I read scripture like Matthew 13: 24-30, which is known as The Parable of the Weeds.

*"Jesus told them this parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. "The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?' "An enemy did this," he replied. "The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?'" "No," he answered,*

*'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'"*

That is the way life is. There are going to be weeds in the garden. There are going to be hard times, suffering. We have to accept there is going to be both **wheat** and **weeds** in life.

As a pastor it is my privilege to be with folks in their times of sorrow. How can we not weep for the loved ones who have left us? But we are to be of good cheer. Death is in God's hands. Last week was the one year anniversary of my mom's death. Not a day goes by that I don't think of her. And every morning when I pray for my dad, I always say, "And God, say 'hi' to mom for me." I know I will see her again.

I am content to affirm with the writers of the *Heidelberg Catechism* in our *Presbyterian Book of Confessions* regarding question and answer #1, which is drawn from this Luke 12 passage.

Question: "What is your only comfort in life and in death?"

Answer: "That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself, but to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ who, at the cost of His own blood has fully paid for all my sins...that He protects me so well that, without the will of my Father in heaven, not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit His purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by His Holy Spirit He assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for Him."

**W**e have assurance that God is in control.

And it also helps me to realize that **tough times can cause us to grow.**

My small group is currently studying Father Richard Rohr's book entitled Falling Upward. I find Richard Rohr's comments so very helpful:

*"One of the best-kept secrets is that the way up is the way down. It is a secret because we do not want to embark on a deeper spiritual journey if it feels like going down. This is surely the first and primary reason why many people never get to the fulness of their lives. Normally a job, fortune or reputation has to be lost, a death has to be suffered, a house has to be flooded, or a disease has to be endured.*

*"It is not that suffering or failure might happen, or that it will only happen to you if you are bad (which is what religious people think), or that by your cleverness or righteousness you can avoid it. No, it will happen, and to you! Losing, failing and the suffering that comes from those experiences - all of this is a necessary and even good part of the human journey.*

*"Jesus tells the story of the prodigal son. One son, the elder, does his life totally right, and is, in fact, wrong; and the other who does it totally wrong ends up God's beloved! Now deal with that! That might just be the central message of how spiritual growth happens, yet nothing in us wants to believe it. By denying their pain, avoiding the necessary falling, many have kept themselves from their own spiritual depths - and therefore have been kept from their own spiritual heights.*

*"St. Paul taught this unwelcomed message with his words in 2 Corinthians 12:10, 'It is when I am weak that I am strong.'"*

Father Rohr is suggesting that **God can use those tough times to draw us even closer to Him.**

So when things in life don't exactly turn out the way that you and I had hoped, we are experiencing some major bumps, we need to realize that God can use those to make us incredibly deep spiritual people.

God modeled the idea of embracing tough times and hardships of life when He was willing to leave the grandeur of heaven, all of that holiness and worship, to put on human skin in the form of Jesus and get down in the valley with us in our living and suffering.

I want us to understand though, that God didn't do this because we are inherently good people. Much of the suffering in this world is caused by man's inhumanity to man. Our greed, selfishness, and desire to be in control is what causes so much of the pain in this world.

God does not love people because we are good. Rather, we get our value because God loves us, in spite of our sin. We are similar to Mr. Snuggles.

When my daughter Sarah was about three years old we gave her a stuffed monkey she later affectionately named Mr. Snuggles. Sarah sleeps with Mr. Snuggles every night. When we go on vacation, Mr. Snuggles goes on vacation. When Sarah goes off to college next year, Mr. Snuggles will be going to college as well. Mr. Snuggles originally cost about \$10 around 15 years ago. But today I

would easily give a reward of \$100 for his return if he were ever lost.

What makes this monkey so valuable to my child? Mr. Snuggles is old, worn, and ragged. But it is Sarah's love for Mr. Snuggles that makes him so valuable. We too can be worn-out and ragged and almost worthless in the world's sight, but we are of inestimable value because God loves us.

The Apostle Paul expressed it this way in Romans 5:8, *"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."*

Jesus says we are more valuable than the sparrow that falls to the ground. But it is not because of our goodness. If we really want to see what value God places on us, we need just look at the cross. We see the nails in His hands and feet. And we realize that we were worth the pain! God so loved us that He gave His only Son. So that is what we mean to God.

The point is: Christ did not die for a sparrow. He died for us. And a sparrow cannot call God "Father." But we can. We are worth so much more than a sparrow, and yet God even notices when a sparrow falls to the ground.

Last month I received an email from a woman for whom I had performed her wedding 20 years ago. She had tracked me down through the internet. I am going to call her Sally and her husband Bill. She wrote:

*"Hello Pastor David! It is so neat that you are in Hawaii. I keep telling Bill that a trip to Hawaii is needed for our 25th anniversary. My last trip to Hawaii was in 1984, so I'm ready!*

**Y**our children must be nearly adults by now - so quickly time passes. Bill and I weren't able to have children - much to our regret.

As I move into middle age with friends and family now moving into the grand-parenting phase, it's a whole new wave of pain. Sometimes I feel like all I have left to look forward to is "retirement" or the final move to Heaven - and I'm only 50. I know that's a wonderful change of address, but wonder about my purpose for my remaining days here.

"You were still my pastor when my mom died (we had to make life support choice) and I still appreciate your counsel. By the time my father died though, you were gone, but it was another awful choice we had to make - to remove life support. Lots of awful decisions to be faced with over the years. I hope we made the right choices.

"When I grew up we weren't a church-going family. One Christmas Eve night, we were on our way to a family gathering and stopped at the drug store for something - film or something. I remember watching the folks going in for the service at your church and thinking, "I want that". Soon after, my sister Mary and I started attending. In 2001, Mary took her life. I haven't completely come to terms with that. Sorry to have this sad story - I would rather tell you of children and even grandchildren by now.

"I'm looking for a local church and think I've found it...a non-denominational Bible teaching church near where I live now."

There is so much sadness and disappointment in the events of life flowing through Sally's email. I have spent about a month thinking through this morning's sermon. It

influenced my email response back to Sally. Let me share that with you:

"Sally, good to hear from you. So pleased to know that after 20 years, you and Bill are still married. Quite an accomplishment when about half of the marriages fail today. Congrats. I still fondly recall our wedding and how you got a case of the giggles during the saying of your vows. Every wedding needs a touch of levity.

"I am sorry to hear of some of the pain you have experienced in life. The fact that you and Bill were not able to be parents. The painful deaths of your parents. The death of your sister Mary. You have had more than your share of heartaches in life. I cannot explain them. As your friend and pastor I am reminded that for many of us, life does not play itself out like we had hoped.

"1 Corinthians 13 says that we see through a glass dimly. I think of an old lantern that becomes smudged up and we cannot clearly see the flame. But the Bible tells us that someday when we are in God's presence face to face (heaven) we will see through that glass clearly. And some of the things that don't seem to make sense now, will become clearer.

"Sometimes I believe if we could see all the events of our lives before us, it would be too overwhelming. Something like the headlights of a car. They provide light for about 500 feet down the road before us. If we saw the entire highway before us, it might be too much.

"In the midst of all this I am reminded of the words of Luke 12: 5-6, where Jesus says that God notices everything about our lives...and He cares! Even as He notices when a sparrow falls down

to the ground, so He even more so, watches over us. His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He cares for me.

"I encourage you to go ahead and make the step to joining the Bible church you mentioned. Get in a small group. When you are comfortable with the trust level in the group, share your life story. A sorrow shared is cut in half, and a joy shared is doubled. Perhaps spend some time with a Stephen Minister in that congregation, or share your story with the pastor. You will be in my thoughts and prayers. Please stay in touch. His and yours, Pastor David"

I grew up as a young boy in the South. It was very common about every three months for there to be a Billy Graham Crusade on television. And we would gather as a family around the television and watch the crusade. And it was always special to hear George Beverly Shea sing, "How Great Thou Art." And the other musical anthem that was so special was hearing Ethel Waters sing that wonderful song, "His Eye Is On the Sparrow." And maybe some of you remember Whitney Houston singing, "His Eye Is On the Sparrow" in the movie "Sparkle".

"His Eye Is On The Sparrow" was written by the song writer Civilia Martin. In the early spring of 1905 she and her husband were traveling in Elmira, New York. They had developed a deep friendship with a couple by the name of Mr. and Mrs. Doolittle who were true saints of God. Mrs. Doolittle had been bedridden for nearly twenty years. Her husband was a partial invalid who managed his business from a wheel chair. Despite their afflictions, they lived happy Christian lives, bringing comfort to all who knew them.

**O**n that day while Civilia and her husband were visiting with the Doolittles. Civilia asked them how they kept from being discouraged. Mrs. Doolittle’s reply was simple.

**“Mrs. Martin, how can I be discouraged when my Heavenly Father watches over every little sparrow and I know He cares for me?”**

Those simple words really gripped the heart and imagination of Civilia Martin.

Later that afternoon she grabbed a piece of paper and wrote the hymn, “His Eye Is on the Sparrow” in a matter of minutes.

*Why should I feel discouraged,  
why should the shadows come,  
Why should my heart be  
lonely, and long for heaven and  
home, when Jesus is my portion?  
My constant friend is He:  
His eye is on the sparrow, and I  
know He watches me;  
His eye is on the sparrow, and I  
know He watches me.*

Let us pray.

Father in heaven, and we are so glad that we can call You Father. Our lives do not always turn out the way we had hoped. There are times that we feel dis-couraged. Times that the shadows come. And we are so grateful we have this church to come to, and be reminded of Your love for us.

We are grateful for our friends here, who share our burdens and support us along the way. But most of all we are grateful for Your presence in our lives—to know that You care for us. Fill us afresh with your Holy Spirit so that as we experience the bumps in life, we can become deeper people. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

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*Note: Our Sunday sermon texts are also available at [www.fpchawaii.org](http://www.fpchawaii.org). The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes or from [fpc.posterous.com](http://fpc.posterous.com). It can also be sent to you by e-mail. You may request the free audio version at: [fpchkoolau@gmail.com](mailto:fpchkoolau@gmail.com)*