

“Consider the Ravens”
Luke 12:22-25
11th Sunday after Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville
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In our Gospel text for this morning, Jesus asks us to consider the ravens.

When was the last time you considered the ravens?

Truth be told, I had not really thought about ravens since...gosh, reading that poem by Edgar Allan Poe back in high school.

You remember the poem, right?

“Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore—

While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.”¹

That someone, of course, turns out to be a raven.

Dark bird. Mysterious bird.
A scavenger of a bird.

Why would Jesus want us to consider the ravens?

It’s not the way Matthew writes it.

In Matthew’s Gospel, very same passage, in which Jesus is telling his disciples not to worry about their life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear...in Matthew, Jesus says:

“Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?”

In Matthew’s Gospel, you see, it’s just the birds of the air.
And we can imagine any bird we want.

¹ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48860/the-raven>

A beautiful bluebird.
 I'm fond of Canada geese.
 Flying in formation.
 Canada geese, loyal to their mates...why not geese?

Or maybe a dove...a dove is a biblical bird, right?

What shape did the Holy Spirit take when Jesus was baptized in the Jordan?

Luke writes:

“...the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove.”

What bird was it that returned to Noah, after Noah sent it out to find dry land?

It was the dove, right?

The dove that came back, with a freshly plucked olive leaf.

But before the dove...do you recall what bird it was that Noah sent—
 that never came back?

The one that just abandoned Noah on the ship?

It was a raven.

The raven, you see, has a history in Scripture.
 And it's not always pretty.

In the 11th chapter of Leviticus, the Israelites are commanded:

“These you shall regard as detestable among the birds...
 the vulture...the buzzard...every raven of any kind.”

In Proverbs, chapter 30, we get this very vivid image:

“The eye that mocks a father and scorns to obey a mother
 will be pecked out by the ravens of the valley
 and eaten by the vultures.”

A bird that goes after someone's eye?

Yuck!

Are you ready yet to forget about the ravens?

I was ready to forget about the ravens, but then I figured I would give it one more shot, Jesus said “consider the ravens”, so clearly the Greek word for “consider” means “google,” so I googled the word “raven,” and I pulled up the website at audubon.org...and then I ran across the following:

“An intelligent and remarkably adaptable bird...it can survive at all seasons in surroundings as different as hot desert and high Arctic tundra.”²

Hmmm.

An intelligent bird?

Adaptable bird?

These do not sound like bad qualities to me.

In fact, an honest look at Scripture does not leave us with a completely unfavorable view of this bird.

In the 17th chapter of 1st Kings, the passage you heard just a few minutes ago...

King Ahab is practicing idolatry, much to God's displeasure.

So God sends the prophet Elijah to Ahab, announcing to Ahab that there will be a drought on the land.

No water, until God says so.

And then God sends Elijah away—

perhaps to hide from Ahab, who does not want to hear this news—

so Elijah is told by God:

² <https://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/common-raven>

“Go from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. You shall drink from the wadi, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.”

Wait.

The ravens...will feed Elijah??!!

Why ravens?

Why not a lovely, peaceful bird?

And verse 6 goes on to say:

“The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening...”

You mean these scavengers—ready to eat anything—carried the meat and bread to Elijah—and did not eat it for themselves?

The ravens did something—not selfish, but selfless?

Consider the ravens, Jesus tells us.

I wonder if Jesus had this passage about Elijah in mind when he spoke those words.

Think about what God was doing when God chose ravens to do God’s work and show God’s love. Ravens, who didn’t have a perfect track record...ravens, who might eat the food instead of gently carrying the food for Elijah.

What was God doing, when God chose ravens?

God was taking a chance.

God was being a little risky with whom God was sending,
with how God was showing God’s love.

In other words, *God could have played it safe.*

God could have chosen some other creature, some other means of saving Elijah's life. God could have just dropped manna from heaven, like God did with the Israelites all those years before.

But God took a chance with how God shared God's love.

God was not cautious with God's love.

God was—can I put it like this—maybe even a little RECKLESS with God's love, when God chose to send the ravens.

So perhaps the message for today is this:

God loves taking chances with God's love.

And so should we.

I sometimes wonder if the biggest mistake that Christians make these days is not being hypocritical with the gospel...but being HYPER-CAUTIOUS with it. Too cautious with the grace of God, too careful with how we offer God's compassion in the world.

I once heard a story about a soldier.

The teller of the story was a seminary professor.

He was to speak at a military base in December,
so he arrived at the airport, where this professor was met
by a soldier named Ralph.

Ralph had been sent to meet him at the airport,
and, after they had introduced themselves,
they headed toward the baggage claim.

All the way down the concourse, RALPH kept disappearing:
--once to help an older woman whose suitcase had fallen open;
--once to lift two toddlers up so they could see Santa Claus;
--and AGAIN, to give directions to someone who was lost.

EACH TIME, he came back with a big smile on his face
and picked up the conversation where he had left off.
The professor could NOT figure him out....

"Where did you learn to do that?" he asked Ralph.

"Do what?" Ralph said.

"Where did you learn to live like that?"

"Oh" Ralph said, "during the war, I guess."

And, over the course of the next hour or so,
he told the professor about his tour of duty in Vietnam.

About HOW it was his job to clear mine fields,
and about HOW he watched one of his friends
after another die in front of his eyes.

"...I learned to live between steps," Ralph said.

"I never knew whether the next one would be my last,
so I learned HOW to get EVERYTHING I could
out of the moment between when I picked up my foot
and when I put it down again."

***"...Every step I took---it was a whole new world,
and I guess I've just been that way ever since."***

When was the last time you lived between your steps?
The last time you were that carefree instead of careful with the love of Jesus
Christ?

Ready not just to show the compassion of Christ here and there, ready to
waste it, toss it like the sower in Jesus' parable, here and there and everywhere?

If there was anything Jesus was criticized for in his life, it was being a little
too reckless, too OVER THE TOP...

Do you remember when he spotted Zacchaeus, that chief tax collector, up in
the tree? Chief tax collector—it meant he was in a sleazy business, despised by his
own people.

Do you think Zacchaeus might have been a raven in Jesus' day?

And Jesus called him down, and he told Zacchaeus that he, Jesus, would be staying at Zacchaeus' house that night.

And all who saw it began to grumble.
Why were they grumbling?

Not because Jesus was being too careful with God's love.
But because Jesus was being too reckless with God's love!

How often are you reckless with God's love?
How often are you willing to be WASTEFUL and PROFLIGATE with that love?

And how often are you being too careful with it?

In his marvelous book *Old Friends*, Tracy Kidder records interviews conducted at nursing homes. In one interview, a man named Art had recently lost his wife to a stroke. Many people Kidder talks with suffer from memory loss, but not Art—he suffers from what he remembers.

Art remembers the day that he and his wife were newlyweds, and by accident she dropped a frying pan, and he yelled at her. Sixty years later, he still remembers it—he yelled at her.

“If she could come back to life now, she could drop a hundred of them and I wouldn't give a darn.”

Art remembers a disagreement that lasted their entire marriage.
His wife wanted him to say more often that he loved her.
Art wasn't comfortable with that.
He wanted to show it, not say it.

“I understand that,” she said, “but sometimes a wife wants to hear it.”

“It doesn’t run in my family to be like that,” he replied.

“And I never said it,” he says, “and then she had her stroke, and I sat by her bed every day, and I said, ‘I love you, I love you, I love you—
and she never looked up and said,
‘I hear you. I forgive you.’”³

The writer Wendell Berry once asked the question:
“What are people for?”⁴

You know what people are for.
We’re put here to say things like, “I love you.”
“I forgive you.”
“What is it like to be you?”
“What can I do to help you?”

Do you think God wants us to be CAUTIOUS about how we use those words?

Do you think God wants us to be WORRIED that we’re saying those words too much?

Consider the ravens, Jesus says.

I was all set to forget about the ravens.
And now I can’t do it.
Now the ravens are stuck in my brain.

Because God took a chance with those ravens long ago, those imperfect creatures of God, God took a chance when God sent them to Elijah.

Just like hundreds of years later, Jesus took a chance by summoning a tax collector named Zacchaeus down from his tree.

³ Tracy Kidder, *Old Friends*, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1993. This story is quoted directly from the book, with the exception of the last quote, which is my paraphrase.

⁴ Wendell Berry, *What Are People For?*, Berkley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2010.

Just like, a couple thousand years after that, Jesus took another chance
when Jesus summoned us from our comfortable lives.

Called by Jesus, sent by Jesus, not to be careful with God's love and grace.
But to spend that love and grace on everyone and anyone.
Even the ravens.

I recall, years ago, when my wife and I first moved to Indiana.
Right after we moved, I had trouble finding a barber in Bloomington.

After a few false starts, I thought I finally had one. I went to him for a
number of months. I was in his shop the day that Reggie Miller retired. Do you
remember Reggie Miller, that marvelous player for the Indiana Pacers back in the
1990s, early 2000s?

Reggie Miller had a prolific career, was an incredible player.

The day that he retired, the retirement announcement was on tv.

The tv was running in the barber shop, and my barber looked up and said,
"Reggie Miller..."—and then he said something I cannot repeat from the pulpit,
but it was an astonishingly racist remark.

The kind of thing that would make your draw drop.
The irony was that the barber wasn't trying to be derogatory.
He was trying to compliment Reggie Miller.
But the remark...it was just hanging there, he didn't even realize what he
had done.

I was mad. I paid my bill and I walked out.

After I walked out, I stopped in the parking lot.

Then I turned around, went back in, and told him in no uncertain terms why I would never be going back to his barbershop again. He wasn't too pleased with what I had to say, but I felt good about having said it.

I never returned to that barbershop.

Today, I wonder if I did the right thing.

I don't mean the right thing about letting him know I took offense at his comment. I'm glad I did that.

I mean the right thing when I stopped getting my haircut there.
I mean...did I do the right thing when I stopped the relationship?

Would it not, in some ways, have been more faithful to the gospel to keep going back to his place to get my haircut, and to keep talking with him about the way he saw the world, and the way I saw the world...

To establish a relationship with him?
A relationship that perhaps, over time, God might work through?

If I had done that, I would have been taking a chance.
(And I don't just mean because he was the one holding the scissors.)

I would have had to spend a lot more energy on that guy.
To express more patience with that guy.
To offer some forgiveness to that guy.

And I may have even needed to make room in my heart to receive him as God's child.

What do you think?
Was I too cautious with the grace and love of Jesus that day?
Did I play the good news of the gospel just a little too close to the vest?

Your answer to that question just may change someone else's life.

In fact, with the help and grace of God,

the life that gets changed when you answer that question...
may very well be your own.

Amen.