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### **Luke 12:4-7 ESV**

*<sup>4</sup> “I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. <sup>5</sup> But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him! <sup>6</sup> Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. <sup>7</sup> Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows.*

### **Ruth 1:15–18 ESV**

*<sup>15</sup> And she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” <sup>16</sup> But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. <sup>17</sup> Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.” <sup>18</sup> And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.*

### **Just a dog.**

My father loved dogs. All the while I was growing up, my parents owned a series of dogs, sometimes they were more or less my mother’s, sometimes, they were clearly my father’s dogs, but he loved them all. My mother bought a black miniature poodle when I was a little boy and named her Suzie. Suzie died some years later and she bought another poodle and named it Suzie – despite the fact that this one was a boy. My father would bring home strays, rather than buying

pedigree dogs, or he got dogs from what was called the Pound back then. There was a German shepherd, a cocker spaniel mix, a mutt whose mix I couldn't possible identify, a couple of corgis. There was a time, when I was in graduate school, when my parents did not own a single dog, which was very unusual for them. Then one day, my father noticed a stray that was hanging around the neighborhood. The dog was some sort of special poodle breed, and I do remember my father saying that it was a pure bred and was probably quite valuable. The dog was filthy, hungry, and scared. He washed and fed and watered it a few times, and then one day, he decided to follow it. He was worried about the long-term care of the dog and he also wondered just who the owner was. He tracked it to a house a few blocks over. The dog went to a sliding glass door on the side of the house. My father went up to that door and looked in – and saw an elderly woman who had clearly passed away some days before. I'll get back to this.

Let's talk about our Bible passages for today. The first one is there simply because it captures the way my father felt about animals. The quote, from the Gospel of Luke says: *Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God.* In our passage today, Jesus is in the middle of his ministry, on his way to Jerusalem. There is an interesting line in our passage that

says: *But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell.* The Greek word that is translated as hell is the word *Gehenna* and it actually refers to the area southwest of Jerusalem where garbage was dumped. It's not the Greek word *Hades*, which is often translated as Hell. The statement really refers to our need to avoid sin that can truly destroy our souls, turn them into garbage, if you will. The real point of the passage isn't about birds, of course. It has to do with how God loves us and wants the best for us. He even cares about individual sparrows, let alone individual humans. And so, we shouldn't do evil things that God dearly doesn't want us to do. Let God give us life in the Kingdom of Heaven, here on earth, and for eternity, rather than destroying ourselves. But in this passage about living Christ-like lives there is indeed this passing reference to sparrows, and it has gotten a lot of attention over the centuries. In the middle of a passage about not destroying ourselves spiritually despite God's wishes, we are implicitly told about God's deep love for all forms of life, not just people. This is a belief my father shared, and that is why he followed the stray dog.

Let's move on to our second passage. It's from the book of Ruth. The Book of Ruth is one of the shortest books in the Bible and it is probably the easiest to read. It's just a story. It's about a woman named Naomi, who along with her

husband and two sons, leave their hometown of Bethlehem during a drought. Bethlehem means “house of bread”, and it was indeed a major grain producing area for Israel. So, when the drought came, so did famine. The family goes to a non-Israelite area called Moab, a land filled with Gentile people that the Israelites saw as morally and culturally and racially inferior. There, the two sons of Naomi marry Moabite women. But then Naomi’s husband and two sons all die. Naomi is left in a foreign land with her two daughters-in-law. The three widows are now totally destitute. One of the daughters-in-law goes back to her family in Moab. But the other daughter-in-law, Ruth, declares: *“Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. <sup>17</sup> Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.”* Out of loyalty and love for her mother-in-law, Ruth decides to go back to Israel with her mother-in-law Naomi. But Ruth knows in advance that the Israelites hate Moabites and that she, Ruth, is likely to never be able to marry again and that she will probably live in abject poverty in Bethlehem. But she is determined to protect and care for the mother of her dead husband, and so the two women travel to Bethlehem. As it turns out, the drought and the famine back in Bethlehem are over. And, amazingly, Ruth’s beautiful

character captures the heart of an Israelite man named Boaz in Israel. He marries her and they have a long and beautiful life together. They have many children. In the story, we see that God rewards Ruth for her love and her courage. Here's something that makes the story particularly powerful. Ruth has children who are half gentile, something that Israelites would have looked down upon, but she ends up an ancestor of both King David and Jesus. Yes, it turns out that the line of David, of which Jesus is a member, has in it a Moabite, a gentile – that's someone like you and me. This further illustrates God's love and respect for all people, including Gentiles. This is a truly amazing twist to the story. By choosing to go with her mother-in-law back to Israel, in order to care for Naomi, Ruth, instead of ending up being hated and isolated and poor, ends up wealthy, with a beautiful family – and she becomes the great grandmother of King David, an incredible, symbolic honor for Gentiles.

But here's something else interesting about the story. It is set during the time of the Judges, around 1100 B.C. This is before the time of the Kings, including David. But the book of Ruth itself is thought to have been written perhaps six hundred years later, after the return from exile in Babylon. What's intriguing is that it was only during this later period that the Israelites started to become snobby and almost racist in their beliefs, not during the time the story

took place. The people of this later time, when the story was written, shunned outsiders who did not share their faith and culture. The author of the story was probably using the tale of Ruth, which was set during a much, much earlier time, as a way of gently criticizing people of his or her current day. By using the story to innocently accuse people in the past of being bigoted, the author was telling people of the current time, in a non-confrontational way, that they need to be more open, that they need to love all people. The author points out that God loves all people and rewards those who feel the same way as God.

What does the story of Ruth have to do with my father and the valuable stray dog that was some kind of special poodle breed? Here it is. My father of course contacted the authorities when he found the woman. Her family was called. Her adult children came from either out of state or from other cities, I don't remember. There was a daughter and a couple of sons maybe. Importantly, they hadn't been getting along for years, and they had had little contact with each other or with their mother. The three of them met with my father in our house. He had been taking care of the dog, and it was now living in our house. They were deeply touched by the fact that my father chose to care for a stray, and to follow it back to its home, in order to see what was going on with its owner. His love and his concern for all life, the dog and the woman alike,

meant a lot to them. These younger adults ended up coming back together as a family. I remember them being in our living room, their initially clumsy discussions growing warmer as they renewed their family ties.

As it turned out, none of these people had much money, but they wanted to give my father a reward. They decided as a group of siblings to offer my father the only thing they could: the very valuable dog. They told him he could sell it if he wanted, that it was worth thousands of dollars. This was back when my father earned about ten thousand dollars a year. That dog represented a good piece of cash to him. But my father told them that he would just keep it as a pet. He and my mother had grown to love it. I remember thinking well, you'd better keep it locked in the house. If this thing gets run over by a car or something, it's going to be one expensive accident. The adult children of the woman who owned the dog were incredibly touched by my father's decision to just treat the dog as a pet and give it a good life.

What's the point? In the Book of Ruth, Naomi followed her heart. She did what she thought was right. Now, my father didn't take a physical risk like she did. Taking care of that dog, following it to its owner, deciding to keep it as a pet, this didn't put my dad in harm's way. But it did show that he was simply concerned about doing what he knew was the right thing to do, that he was a

kind, caring, loving person – like Ruth. In the end, God rewarded Ruth. He also rewarded my father, with a very expensive pet that did manage to live to an old age and not get run over by a car, in case you were wondering. But God also rewarded my father in another way – by bringing back together a family that had fallen apart. By the time they left our house to go deal with their mother’s house, they were getting along. They hugged my father and my mother. They lovingly said goodbye to the dog. My mother, who loved poodles, took to the dog amazingly, and it was the first time that my two parents truly owned a dog together, instead of having his or hers dogs. And of course, in keeping with her tradition, she named the poodle Suzie. Yes, the dog was a boy.

Finally, there’s a parallel between the story of the sparrows and the story of Ruth. The sparrow is used as an example of a seemingly meaningless, minor animal, small, highly prevalent, with a short lifespan – an animal that had no value as food or companionship. And that dog that my dad took care of, well, it was just a dog. Society didn’t expect my father to take care of it; nor did he expect to get any benefit out of doing so. Ruth was a Moabite, a Gentile, a poor woman who was a young widow with no foreseeable way to a better future. Those sparrows, that high end poodle, and Ruth, represent us. We’re just regular people, with no particular power in this world, but as it turns out, we mean as



much to God as any other human, including very powerful ones. What God wants us to do is treat other people the same way God treats us. Please pray with me.

*God, thank you for loving us the same way you do a sparrow worth a fraction of a penny. Thank you for holding us to a high standard, one of love and support for other people, even when it doesn't seem to do us any personal good. May we always live like Ruth. May we be loyal, courageous, and not expect anything in return. We know that the greatest reward is something that you have already given us: the kingdom of Heaven, right here on earth, and for all of eternity. Amen.*