

Compassion and Rejection

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor 3/4/07 Luke 13:31-35 (NRSV)

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." [32] He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. [33] Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' [34] Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! [35] See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.' "

WHAT KIND OF ANIMAL?

A long time ago, in a church far, far away ... a young minister decided that he was being called to go to another church. So, he signed up for something called Face to Face. This was an event in which churches from all over the Synod met with ministers from all over the country to see if they could make a match made in heaven.

Most of the young minister's interviews were pretty good. But, one was rather strange. A Pulpit Nominating Committee asked, "If you were an animal, what kind of animal would you be and why?"

The young pastor thought about saying "skunk" because he wanted the interview with these strange birds to be over soon! But, he mumbled something about not having thought about that before and was glad that the interview would soon be over and that there were other churches from which to choose.

MOTHER HEN

I still think that question is still is an unusual one, but today I might have a different answer based upon today's text. I would say that if I were to be an animal, I would be a mother hen protecting her chicks.

That's my image of ministry, and that's the image that Jesus used to describe his feelings toward Jerusalem. He wanted to take that city under his wing, nurture and protect it.

But, he was rejected. Jerusalem wanted no part of his protection or his message. More than that, Jesus was eventually murdered by these people that he loved so much.

Many of us know what it's like to be rejected by people we love. Quite often we want to take people under our wing. We want to help friends escape an addiction. We want to keep our children from making some of the same mistakes that we made. We want to keep someone from entering into an unhealthy relationship.

Sometimes people are willing to let us "take them under our wing." But, quite often they are not willing.

In fact, sometimes they not only reject our advice; they reject us as well. They become angry and tell us to "mind our own business." In extreme cases parents can become estranged from children; friendships can end.

Quite often you hear people say,

"Just leave them alone.

They made their bed. Let them lie in it.

Don't waste any more time with them."

COMPASSION AND CONFLICT

It's very tempting to do just that. We naturally want to avoid conflict and so we just withdraw from conflicted situations. But, Jesus didn't do that.

The love and compassion of Jesus was so strong that his face was set like flint toward Jerusalem. He loved his people enough to tell them the truth ... no matter how much it hurt.

Do you love people enough to tell them the truth no matter how much it hurts?

To tell you the truth sometimes I'm not courageous enough to be that truthful. My counsel is often like the advice that the Pharisees gave Jesus.

Run away. Hide. Don't make waves. Don't rock the boat. Don't make trouble for yourself.

There may be times when that's good advice. But, there are other times when the way out of a problem is to head right for it.

Jesus couldn't defeat Herod by running away from his threat. Jesus had to face him. And so he did.

THE FOX

Jesus responded to the warning that Herod wanted to kill him by saying,

"Go tell that fox that I've got work to do. I'm going to be right here doing that work these next few days. I will be healing people as a sign of the coming kingdom, and then I'm going to head toward Jerusalem."

In other words, Jesus was throwing down the gauntlet. Herod threatened to kill Jesus. Jesus gave Herod his itinerary!

In rabbinic literature a fox was an animal of little importance. Herod thought that he was the Lion of Judah; Jesus said that he was a fox, a worthless pest who threatened barnyard animals.

Again we see how the values of the world are turned on their head. The fox is on the prowl, and what animal does Jesus choose to represent his cause? He doesn't choose a lion or a leopard or an eagle ... all animals used in the Old Testament to represent power and prestige.

No, Jesus chooses to be a mother hen sheltering chicks under her wing. That's touching, but we all know that when the fox is in the hen house, the hens don't make out too well!

No wonder some of Jesus' chicks decide to go with the fox instead of Jesus. The fox seems more powerful. But, in the long run this will prove to be a disastrous course of action ... for the chicks and for the people of Israel.

Jesus said that their house will be left desolate. And it happened that way. Jerusalem chose a military messiah instead of God's suffering servant, and it led them to ruin.

Their nation was destroyed because they refused the protection of the Mother Hen. They would not be taken under her wing.

THE FOX AND THE CHICKEN

The pathos of this moment is captured by the lively imagination of Barbara Brown Taylor. She wrote,

"... a hen is what Jesus chooses, which -- if you think about it -- is pretty typical of him. He is always turning things upside down, so that children and peasants wind up on top while kings and scholars land on the bottom. He is always wrecking our expectations of how things should turn out by giving prizes to losers and paying the last first.

So of course he chooses a chicken, which is about as far from a fox as you can get. That way the options become very clear: you can live by licking your chops or you can die protecting the chicks.

Jesus won't be king of the jungle in this or any other story. What he will be is a mother hen, who stands between the chicks and those who mean to do them harm.

She has no fangs, no claws, no rippling muscles. All she has is her willingness to shield her babies with her own body. If the fox wants them, he will have to kill her first.

Which he does, as it turns out. He slides up on her one night in the yard while all the babies are asleep. When her cry wakens them, they scatter.

She dies the next day where both foxes and chickens can see her -- wings spread, breast exposed -- without a single chick beneath her feathers.

It breaks her heart, but it does not change a thing. If you mean what you say, then this is how you stand."

Some people think that the church should be like "home on the range" ... you know, where "never is heard a discouraging word". But, Jesus conceived of the faithful life in a much different way.

Instead of running from Herod or seeking to appease him, Jesus took a stand against him. Jesus loved his people too much to entrust them to that old fox. And so he is determined to go to Jerusalem. It is in Jerusalem, that place where all the prophets are killed, that Jesus will fight the final battle.

SWIMMING UPSTREAM

There is an Australian film entitled "Swimming Upstream". It's the true story of a dysfunctional family that nevertheless produces some remarkable children, one of whom becomes an Olympic swimmer and a graduate of Harvard University.

The father of this family has been abused as a child, and he in turn (as it often happens) becomes an abuser himself.

He drinks too much and verbally berates all of his five children, trying to make them into the man that he himself never became.

At times he resorts to beating them, and that's when the mother steps in. But, the mother pays a high price for her protection.

She is battered and bruised again and again in her attempts to keep her children safe. After a particularly vicious encounter with her husband, she holds the young man she has been protecting tight and tells him, "You are my hero."

A few years later when that son leaves home for good; he holds his mother tight and tells her, "You are MY hero!"

We sometimes think that heroes and leaders are those who are the most powerful. But, our lesson for today reverses our notions about leadership and power. True power is not found in "lording it over" others. True power is found in protecting others ... no matter what the cost.

There will always be a Herod who will insist upon having his way through the use of force and political power. We have them in our own country, our own community and maybe in our own family.

We will be tempted to meet force with force. But, quite often, when we do that, like the father in the film "Swimming Upstream", we become what we hate. We will dish out the same kind of abuse to others. The cycle of violence and evil will be perpetuated forever.

I HAVE DECIDED TO FOLLOW JESUS

But, Jesus the mother hen has shown us a new way, the way of the cross.

We used to sing,

"I have decided to follow Jesus. I have decided to follow Jesus. I have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back. No turning back.

The cross before me, the world behind me, the cross before me, the world behind me, the cross before me, the world behind me, no turning back, no turning back."

We don't sing songs like that any more ... at least not as much. And I think it is because we have forgotten the nature of Christian discipleship.

Christian discipleship means to follow in the way of Christ, to take up a cross, to care enough about people enough to take them under your wing.

You are willing to take them under your wing even though you know that many or maybe all of them will reject your love. If you want to protect others, you become vulnerable to being hurt by those you seek to protect and those foxes who seek to do them harm.

THE THIRD DAY

Where can we find that kind of courage? How can we find the strength to become Mother Hens instead of Foxy Herods? There is a hint in our lesson for today. Jesus in his reply to Herod's threat said that he would be healing and casting out demons for the next few days and on the "third day" he would complete his work.

Of course for us that last phrase holds a lot meaning. We say it every week. “On the third day he rose from the dead.” On the third day we find out that the Foxy Herods aren’t really in charge. On the third day we find that the Mother Hen has for the first time defeated the fox and all those other foxes that will come after him.

Evil will not have the last word.
God will have the last word.

This, of course, is just a hint of that unexpected victory. We are still early in the journey of Lent. We are still a long way from the joy of the “Third Day” that we call Easter.

And I suspect that many of you here today feel like you are a long way from that Third Day as well. The Herods in your life seem to be in charge, and there seems to be no way out.

Take heart. The Third Day is on the way. Hang in there. Easter is just around the corner. There is hope beyond the cross, and there is hope for you no matter what is going on in your life. In fact, sometimes we can see the glory of the resurrection most clearly from the mount of struggle.

Jesus was murdered by people he loved.
And yet that is not the end of the story.

The third day is still coming. And that third day still gives us the hope and the courage to live today in a way that is different from the world’s way.

THE AMISH WAY

Many of you have been to Pennsylvania and have seen the Amish people. They seem to be stuck in some sort of strange time warp.

They, by and large, reject modern conveniences in favor of doing things the old way. They drive horse and buggy instead of cars and keep to themselves. They dress in a unique fashion.

Their odd appearance often causes people to point or stare. Maybe some even feel sorry for them.

Not too long ago a tragedy came to this tight knit community, and it was widely reported by the national news.

A disturbed man came to an Amish school and killed several young girls. This was totally unexpected. The killer (who took his own life after killing the children) had a wife and children of his own.

There was no real indication that anything was wrong with him. But, now many families were grieving because of what he did.

This past week a friend reminded me of the rest of the story. The horrified wife of this killer was a Christian, and she went to the Amish to express her sorrow and ask for forgiveness. The Amish not only accepted her expression of regret they also took up a collection for her family.

How could they do that? Obviously they are different in more than the way that they dress. They live by a different moral standard as well.

Like Jesus they sought to protect those who had done them great harm. They sought to overcome this tragedy with love and forgiveness. Like a mother hen seeking to protect her chicks, they embraced the family of the one who harmed them.

I was delighted as I watched the foxy news analysts try to make heads or tails out of that one!

Maybe the radically different lifestyle of the Amish should be a witness to those of us who are all too anxious to embrace the modern world.

We embrace a way of life that rules out sacrifice for the sake of convenience. We embrace a way of life that emphasizes revenge over forgiveness. We embrace a way of life that is often totally foreign to the way of life revealed in God's Son, Jesus.

THE LORD'S SUPPER

The sacrament of the Lord's Supper with its disturbing symbols of death and sacrifice reminds us of who we are and what we are called to be.

His body was broken for us. His blood was shed for us. And as he has served us, we are called to serve others in his name.

I think that one way we serve him is by taking his little ones under our wing. We serve him by having the courage to speak truth to power. We serve him by believing in the power of the Third Day even when all around us there are prophets of doom and gloom.

Friends, don't listen to those who say that we should fear Herod and all that he represents. Don't listen to your fear.

Instead have the courage to tell the truth in love.
Listen to the words of our Savior, who tells us,

"Do this in remembrance of me.
Stretch out your arms in compassion. Dare to love even your enemies in my name."

If you do this, you will begin to see a whole new world coming. You too will be able to cheer as Jesus enters Jerusalem. You too will be able to shout,

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

Amen.

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