

“A Fox is in the Henhouse!”

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Scripture: Luke 13: 31-25

31 At that time some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, “Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you.”

32 He replied, “Go tell that fox, ‘I will keep on driving out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.’ 33 In any case, I must press on today and tomorrow and the next day—for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!

34 “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. 35 Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

Sermon

Jesus seemed to be on a roll. Following his confrontation with the devil in the wilderness, where he basically ignored the devil until he finally just slinked away, Jesus continued his offensive by going all around the countryside healing folks and casting out other demons! “Take that, devil!”

And suddenly, a new character has appeared on the horizon. But unlike the devil he is introduced as a very real threat not only to Jesus but his entire movement as well!

Now, for the sake of clarification, this is not the same Herod of Jesus’ lowly birth; that would have been Herod the Great. This Herod was his son, Herod Antipas, who did his darndest to carry on his father’s murderous and oppressive regime as the local Jewish manager of the mighty Roman Empire. Like his father, he too fancied himself as a “King” though Rome had granted him the much lesser title of “tetrarch.”

But Jesus knows who he is and what he’s really up to, and sends out a warning that a hungry fox is on the prowl, looking for easy prey like a juicy, defenseless domesticated fowl, to fill his belly. Hen and fox, Jesus and Herod are extreme opposites; one has claws and sharp teeth designed to kill and destroy, while the other is a rather defenseless vegetarian with soft feathers more suited to fill a comforter.

But the fox is a real danger and a force that the hen should fear, while the hen, on the other hand, is inviting and compassionate. Which force will triumph in the end? Well, according to Jesus, it may not be the one you might think.

Now as a boy growing up on the farm, one of my first paid jobs was to gather the eggs each afternoon after school. I think I got maybe a quarter per day? Every once in a while I would encounter a hen who wanted to “set” on her eggs, meaning she was ready to begin the 21-day process of incubating her eggs until they hatched. We had no rooster, so those eggs would never result in chicks!

During this period of time, she would leave the nest for only a few minutes to drink some water and eat some feed. The rest of the time she would refuse to leave the nest no matter

who or what might threaten her. Whenever I began to approach her, she would ruffle her feathers, begin clucking and then try to peck me with her fairly sharp beak.

And since I did manage to get pecked a number of times during my egg gathering career, I certainly learned to be afraid then of a “setting” hen and decided that they were best left alone. Usually what ended up happening, was that my father, with his rough, calloused, “farmer hands,” would join me in the henhouse and with both hands he would quickly lift her off the nest while I quickly gathered her eggs. Usually after a couple days of this the hen would finally give up.

But no matter how fierce a mother hen can try to be, she will never be any match for an old farmer or a fox. She will cover her chicks, protecting them even unto the death, in attempt to save them. The analogy is even more potent since we all know that Herod did manage to help remove Jesus from the scene, but in the end, he was not able to stop the movement that Jesus had hatched.

Herod was in many ways, a fox in the henhouse. He was a local boy, a Palestinian Jew, part of a dynasty placed into power by Rome to try and control what was one of Rome’s more “unruly” provinces. Rebellions seemed to pop up on a consistent basis, typically inspired by the local populace’s stubborn resistance to the imposition of Roman empirical religion over their centuries of devotion to their one true God, Yahweh. As a “puppet” ruler, Herod was a Jewish collaborator and thus despised by the folks he ruled.

Culturally and religiously, he was more Roman than Jewish, and he wanted the Jews to put aside their ancient superstitions, modernize it, and get on board with the Roman empirical project, and thus, enjoy the benefits that cooperation could bring. He was also never at all shy to use his murderous powers to suppress his “own” people when they stood in his way.

In fact it got so bad that within a few years after the execution of Jesus, Rome felt the need to remove him from power since his excesses were actually making it harder for Rome to rule Palestine.

According to Jesus, a proverbial fox had been allowed into the henhouse and was causing the expected havoc. Jesus however, portrays himself as the better alternative to the rule of fear and as a mother hen he too clucks gently, inviting the chicks to gather under the safety of her wings. And the chicks always do come running, voluntarily, to Mama when she calls, for under her wings they find warmth and safety.

Now the fox is really only interested in the hen, since she is actually large enough to satiate his appetite. This will allow the chicks enough time to scatter and survive, eventually hatching even more broods of chicks. Herod’s hunger for power compelled him to eliminate Jesus whom he perceived as a threat to his power. But in the end, neither he, nor the Roman Empire nor any other governing body has ever been able to stop the movement hatched by that simple laborer from Nazareth.

Those of us gathered here today, in the safety and warmth of this place and within this community are also hatchlings of that same hen.

“God’s ways,” as our Lenten theme says, “are not our ways.” God chooses the side of the defenseless and the persecuted, whether it’s hen vs. fox, lambs vs. lions, Jesus vs. Herod, Roman Empire vs. the Christians, or even in the politics that seek to divide us today. The

wealthy and powerful oppressors and their many collaborators may indeed win today, but God's way will ultimately prevail!

Last week I tried to scandalize you a bit by encouraging you to try and have just a little sympathy for the devil. Try as he might, the devil could not interest Jesus in diverting from the path that God had called him to. Jesus, as I tried to point out, didn't even seem to be all that "tempted."

Why? Because Jesus had experienced God as enough - more than enough. And when you experience having more than enough, the need for security can give way to generosity. Generosity, we also know can actually lead to true security since it can create true communities of justice, equality, as we start treating others the same way we want to be treated.

In a place of true security we can then begin to deal with some of our deepest fears. And then, as this morning's theme states, *"As we seek God's way, we move from a place where fear dictates our actions to a space where our response to others is guided by compassion."*

Of course, we are not talking about those momentary fears, like the one that wisely kept me from jumping into the deep end of the pool as a child before I learned how to swim. What we are talking about are those constant fears that are often created and then manipulated by outside forces to get us to first distrust and then to eventually hurt others.

The current war in Ukraine unfortunately provides us a prime and very painful example. We see both responses to fear, "flight" and "fight." Refugees, flowing into bordering countries from their bombed-out cities, are running from a very legitimate fear. And it is also certainly understandable, why some have decided to stay and fight, at the risk of their own lives, as a rational response to the fear of what life under Russian occupation might entail.

But we know that the stronger invader must drum up a sufficient level of fear in order to motivate their own soldiers to do their bloody duty and the invader must also garner civilian support and sacrifice so their destructive and dehumanizing endeavor can succeed.

We know this to be true from exposing our own country's behavior in our most recent violent interventions. But God's ways are not like our ways, thank goodness, because in God's way, fear is replaced with compassion. Fear perceives the stranger, that one who is different, as a threat, a competitor for power, land and scarce natural resources. But through the eye of compassion, we realize that the "stranger" is actually a whole lot like us with the same hopes and dreams. And through the lens of God's compassion, we begin to actually empathize with the struggles the stranger bears. This is the norm, this is what is intended to be natural, this is the way we were created by God to live.

Constant fear corrupts God's way and the bible gives us the antidote, a way out "Perfect love casts out fear!" Christians correctly affirm that, "God is Love!" But I think a more definitive summation is "God is perfect love!"

To be in God, to follow God, is to be in the process of being perfected in love! Love can only be known through experience, through actions, and the fire of love begins with the spark of compassion. When we feel or see something that is wrong, when we see someone suffering and feel the immediate desire to reach out and help, that instinct is compassion and that is good.

Sadly, far too often, we let our fears talk us out of following through with a natural, compassionate response. We hear this all the time especially in reference to the homeless. "But if I stop, they will ask me for money. What if they use the money to buy drugs? Using drugs will not help them get off the streets. If they really wanted to not be homeless they would get a job. Giving them food, or a blanket, or even a tent can do more harm than good since it only encourages them to live on the street and use drugs."

This then morphs into an attitude that we must actually make life harder for the homeless to help them. That makes no sense, but it does ensure that lots of folks will off the streets via coffins!

The impulse to make the plight of another my own, is a good and necessary part of what makes us human. When we begin to repress our impulse toward compassion, we then begin to chip away our very humanity! In the end we must stop and lend a hand to those in need, not because it will solve a particular social problem and especially not because it may lead to a change in that person's negative behaviors. Rather, we stop and try to help so that we will not lose our humanity.

And if we cannot compassionately come to the aid of those literally strewn along our daily path, then how in God's name can we ever expect to bring an end to those things that lead to war!

Stopping along our way, may lead to some conundrums on what are some of the best ways to actually help. Many times, when I have actually stopped, I've learned that some folks don't want money or food; what they truly hunger for is simple kindness and a human connection. Now of course, we know that not every action is truly compassionate and our charity should never be a substitute for true justice. But for God's sake, let us never interrupt our inclination towards kindness.

True compassion does kick start us along the way that our God calls us to walk, with God as our constant companion. A journey where we are never, ever alone! A path toward love, a perfect love that will cast out all those destructive fears that are slowly eating us away like a social cancer that is destroying our world.

Not only is our individual humanity at stake, but so too is our collective humanity! Letting fear control us, is just like letting a fox into the henhouse and I think we all know that just ain't gonna end well - for any of us.

However, our fears can instead be transformed into a far more powerful force - compassion! And I think we all know that that will end up a whole lot better, for all of us!

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