

“The Fox and the Hen”
Luke 13:31-35

The story is told about Christian Herter, the governor of Massachusetts, who ran hard for a second term in office, and one day, after a busy morning chasing votes, he arrived at a church barbecue. It was late afternoon, Herter was famished, and as he moved down the serving line he held out his plate to the woman serving chicken. She put a piece on his plate and turned to the next person in line. "Excuse me," said Herter, "do you mind if I have a second piece of chicken?" "Sorry," the woman told him. "I'm supposed to give only one piece of chicken to each person." "But I'm starved," said Herter. "Sorry," said the woman. "Only one to a customer." "Do you know who I am?" said Herter. "I'm the governor of this state." "Do you know who I am?" replied the woman. "I'm the lady in charge of the chicken. Move along, mister."

This was the tone of Jesus' response to the threat he received from Herod. Some leaders in the community came to Jesus and told him that if he does not run away, he was going to die. Herod was known for being ruthless. He was also known for being an instrument of Roman power. Even though, he was Jewish, he supported the Roman rule and was ruling under their power. He literally had the power to kill Jesus if he felt that Jesus was in any way a threat to the Roman rule in his region. Jesus' response showed no fear. In fact, Jesus challenged Herod by calling him a fox. This was not a compliment. It is actually worse than what we think of foxes today. In the time of Jesus and in his culture, a fox was thought of as cowardly. Herod thought of himself as a lion, but Jesus saw in Herod someone who was inept and worthless. Not only that, but in a few phrases, Jesus talks about an opposite image for his love for the people where he uses the image of a hen gathering her brood under her wings.

This image of a hen has captured the imagination of people over the centuries. In fact, there is a church in Jerusalem that is located on the western slope of the Mount of Olives, just across the Kidron Valley from Jerusalem, that according to tradition, is built where Jesus wept over the city of Jerusalem. Inside the chapel, the altar is centered before a high arched window that looks out over the city. On the front of the altar is a mosaic medallion of a white hen with a golden halo around her head and her wings are spread wide to shelter her chicks that crowd around her feet. The hen looks ready to spit fire if anyone comes near her babies. The medallion is rimmed with red words in Latin. Translated into English they read, "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!"

I think that it is interesting that Jesus used these two opposite metaphors of the fox and the hen to deal with his struggle against the powers of Herod and the Roman Empire. In a sermon on this text, Barbara Brown Taylor questions Jesus' choice of a chicken as the opposite of the fox, "What about the mighty eagle of Exodus or Hosea's stealthy leopard? What about the proud lion of Judah, mowing down his enemies with a roar? Compared to any of those, a mother hen does not inspire much confidence. 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. 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."

What Jesus offers in the face of the oppressive powers of the world is his love and his ability to stand firmly in God's love even at the point of our greatest fears, the point of death. This is our calling. We are called to live lives of commitment to love in the face of violence and fear. Some of us might say, but this was Jesus, I can't be expected to be like him. He had that God thing going, how could we live like that? Is it even possible?

I believe that it is not only possible for us to live this way of love and resistance, but it is also the only way we can ever find peace in our lives and in our world. Our basic instinct for survival is to run away from danger or if Herod is threatening us with some guns, we would go and get bigger guns to ward him off! But how would Jesus have been different from any of the other leaders who resisted the oppression of the Roman rule through violent resistance?

Jesus was not interested in organizing another armed resistance movement or another kingdom. He was interested in transforming the whole system. The only way for true transformation is through the strong love of God which resists evil but only through peaceful means. What is amazing to me about Jesus is his ability to see a different way despite the fact that it seems like everyone around him had a different vision. Most of the resistance movements of his day were violent or non-existent. The people knew that if they spoke against the government that they would be dealt with harshly. Crucifixion was a common form of execution in those days. So, the only option for resistance that seemed viable were the violent ones. In fact, only 35 years after Jesus' crucifixion, the Roman Empire destroyed Jerusalem and its temple in the year 70 CE to get rid of the resistance movement.

So, against this backdrop, we can see how radical Jesus' words to Herod were. They were words that carried the power and strength of someone who knew deeply in his own being the love of God and its transforming power. What is interesting in all of this of course, is the fact that as we look back on both Jesus and Herod, we see that Jesus' work and ministry had the most tremendous amount of impact on our world. Only few people remember Herod and what he did in his life. While around the world, people continue to be inspired and transformed by the amazing gift of love which Jesus offered.

An example from our own community is a small group called Pax Christi which is a national Catholic movement for peace which is open to all people. This group is envisioning a whole movement in Genesee County that would look for ways to teach people ways of peacemaking in their daily life through nonviolence. They would like to invite the whole county to become more aware of the violence that we have in our community in hope of teaching ourselves and our children peaceful ways of dealing with conflict. Even though the group sees that this is a monumental task, they know that this kind of vision is possible. Imagine Genesee County becoming a place that is committed to healing and transforming domestic violence, animal abuse, divisive politics, violent crimes, and hate!

This is not just a dream. It is a very practical way of dealing with oppression and fear. In his book, *Peace*, biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann uses a strong metaphor for the way we live under oppression. He uses the image of "The Brickyard" which comes from the experience of the people of Israel being slaves in Egypt and making bricks for Pharaoh, "A brickyard is a place of competent production. It is where bricks are made to specification and on schedule . . . The brickyard is also a place of coercion and profit. . . the brickyard is a place of unhappiness, oppression, and, of course, enormous hostility . . . Not only must we produce for the others, but there is no prospect, not in our wildest imagination, that things are ever going to change. There will never be enough bricks to meet the quota. Not a single one of us is far removed from that set of realities . . . We are each one of us in the brickyard. We all owe our souls to the

company store... In these days, fear is deep and broad in the land and in the church. Fear does strange things to people. It makes us withdraw from our brothers and sisters and live in a crouch. It makes us attracted to a fetal position. It makes us say things and do things that do not honor us. It makes us hurt one another – all because we fear the world is falling apart. Fear is our modern form of atheism.” According to Brueggemann what brings us hope is the vision, the power and strength of love that could see new possibilities for our world. What we need is to learn to surrender to God’s love and power that is from beyond our realities of conflict and fear. The story is told about a time when a country was at war. The people were terrified, and had fled to the hills in the face of the advancing enemy troops. By the time the army arrived, the place was deserted. The fierce-looking barbarian of a general called his troops together. ‘Where has everyone gone?’ he demanded, raging. ‘They have all fled in fear of us,’ the men replied. ‘Is there no one left to pay tribute? No citizens that we can force into slavery? No one to terrorize, and no treasure to plunder?’ The general’s rage knew no bounds. ‘As far as we can discover, the only living person here for miles around is an old holy man living in a hermitage just outside the village.’ Without any more ado, the general marched to the hermitage and demanded to see the holy man. After a search, he found him quietly meditating. The general was furious that the holy man refused to acknowledge him as conqueror. He shouted at the holy man: ‘Don’t you know who I am? You are looking at the man who could strike you dead without batting an eyelid!’ The holy man raised his eyes and fixed his gaze steadily on the raging commander. ‘Don’t you know,’ he asked calmly, ‘that you are looking at a man who can be struck dead without batting an eyelid?’ For a moment the general was speechless, fixed by the cool gaze of the holy man. Then he bowed low, called his troops together, and left the village without doing any further damage.

This is the call and vision of Christ for our world. Our measure of power and strength are turned upside down through the vision of Christ. May the image of Christ as a hen gathering her brood under her wings inspire you and give you the strength necessary to deal with the fear inflicted on us by the foxes of our world. Amen.