

2nd Sunday in Lent (Year C)

Luke 13:31-35

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, 'Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.' 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. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem." 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! 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 I'm about to tell you is a 100% true story that happened this past week. I was listening to the NPR Politics Podcast a few days ago and at the end of each episode, each panelist goes around and shares one thing, politics or otherwise, that they cannot let go of. One of the panelists shared the following story that happened in Northwest France.

Foxes love chickens. This is not news. What is news, however, is when a fox is killed by a bunch of chickens. That's right, last week, in Northwest France, a fox made the unfortunate decision to find a snack at a henhouse in an agricultural school. The peckish fox entered the henhouse and got trapped inside when the light-automated doors closed when the sun went down. As the sun went down, so too did his prospects of success.

The next morning, some students from the agricultural school found the dead body of the fox who had apparently been pecked to death by a group of angry hens.

Thus, the moral of the story, don't mess with a mother hen or, more specifically, a large group of mother hens.

Today's passage calls out a fox. A fox that had a reputation for oppression and violence. His name was Herod and he was a Roman dictator in charge of the occupied portion of Palestine in which Jesus and his followers lived. You might remember him from a certain story of wise men that we journeyed with a few months ago. Herod heard about this new baby being born who was prophesied to be a savior of his people. Herod sent the wise men from the east to discover the location of this child so he could have him summarily executed. When the wise men refused to cooperate, Herod ordered every child in Bethlehem under the age of two systematically slaughtered (Matthew 2:16).

It is then no surprise that Jesus would respond to the Pharisees' warning in today's passage by calling Herod a fox, a relentless predator that had killed much more than his fair share of innocent hens and chicks. But, as this week's story from France reminds us, hens can be a force to be reckoned with.

Jesus considers himself a hen, a hen that has been sent to protect God's children, even if they don't see their own need to be saved. Barbara Brown Taylor says the following on today's passage: "If you have ever loved someone you could not protect, then you understand the depth of Jesus' lament. All you can do is open your arms. You cannot make anyone walk into them. Meanwhile, this is the most vulnerable posture in the world—wings spread, breast exposed—but if you mean what you say, then this is how you stand. . . . 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 if you mean what you say, then this is how you stand."¹

This quote reminds me that if we are called to be the Body of Christ, and if Christ is the hen that is sent to the world to protect the vulnerable chicks from the deadly foxes, then so too are we, the Church, called to be hens that protect those who need protection.

A few days ago, we were reminded of a particular fox that comes in the form of white supremacy and Islamophobia. On Friday, a shooter, armed with military-style assault rifles, entered two separate mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand and killed 50 people and injured 50 more. People who, like our Jewish friends who gathered a few months ago in Pittsburgh, had gathered simply to worship peacefully. It is the deadliest mass shooting in New Zealand's history.

Today's passage calls us to cultivate courage. To cultivate the courage needed to be a Christ-like hen and to stand up, as the body of Christ, and condemn such xenophobic hatred. Friends, the Church cannot stand idly by while such rhetoric seeks to oppress those who worship differently than us. Indeed, the hen does not stand by idly while the fox eats her young. The hen defends her young.

So how do we cultivate the courage needed to stand up for those who worship differently than us? Well, there's a few things. First of all, we can condemn white supremacy and Islamophobia publicly and prophetically from the pulpit and in our prayers. Secondly, we can reach out to our friends in the Muslim community. On the back of the sheet of paper that has the hymn by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette on it, you will find the addresses of the three mosques here in Lexington, Kentucky (one which, by the way, is right around the corner from us on Wellington Way, behind the Palomar Center). I invite you, if you feel so called, to write a letter of love and support to one or more of the mosques listed on that sheet of paper. Tell them we love them. Tell them we mourn with them. Tell them that we condemn all acts of violence against Muslims.

Thirdly, at our monthly meeting this Tuesday, I'm going to encourage the Session to adopt a statement of support for the Muslim community. Now is not the time for silence. Silence only empowers the foxes.

Which brings me to what we are called to let go of today, and all days.

¹"Jesus, Mother Hen: This is the God I Want to Worship," by Leah D. Schade. *Patheos*. May 10, 2017. <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/ecopreacher/2017/05/jesus-mother-hen/>

Today's passage calls us to cultivate courage by letting go of complicity. Complicity is an integral theme in much of our Presbyterian liturgy. Often, during our prayer of confession, we will ask God to forgive us not just for that which we have done, but for that which we have left *undone*.

Lately, Tricia and I have watched *Leaving Neverland* and *Surviving R. Kelly*, two documentaries that describe, with alarming specificity, the alleged abuse of young boys and girls at the hands of Michael Jackson and R. Kelly, respectively. It has been difficult to watch. Both documentaries highlight how both superstars allegedly used their power and influence to abuse the most vulnerable boys and girls around them.

However, what was just as disgusting as what Michael Jackson or R. Kelly most likely did, was what the adults around them *didn't* do. If the allegations are indeed true, then both superstars were surrounded by people who saw these abuses and did nothing. The stage managers. Limo drivers. Personal assistants. Family members. Audio technicians. The list can go on.

Injustices such as these thrive in environments where there are people without the courage to be a hen and to stand up for those who need protection.

I am haunted by the beautiful and painfully-true words we just sang in the third verse of Carolyn Winfrey Gillette's hymn:

We grieve our lack of courage: we tolerate the wrong
of people who are racist; we simply go along.
We let the fear continue; we're slow to challenge hate.
We say, "It's not our issue," until it is too late.²

Friends, Christ came into this world as a mother hen, fiercely protecting those who needed it most. If we don't pick up that mantle, then what exactly are we doing here?

Let us take some time this Lent, to humbly acknowledge the ways we've been complicit in acts of hatred and violence. Just because we didn't pull the trigger doesn't mean we didn't contribute to the culture that brought that person up to think that such actions are acceptable. We must confess the ways that we've failed to be the hen that God calls us to be.

But we must also take courage from the fact that God is not done with us. We must cultivate courage in the fact that God never ceases to be the hen that covers us from the evils that assail us. And once we grow old, we no longer are chicks, but hens that are called to do the work of protecting the vulnerable.

That's the work of the Church, y'all.

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

²https://www.carolynshymns.com/o_god_we_grieve_the_hatred.html