

LIKE A MOTHER HEN

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Luke 13:31-35

July 28, 2019

Last Sunday, my message emphasized the importance of our individual, personal relationship with God. I had you look at Martha and her sister Mary. We saw how Martha's many tasks and responsibilities kept her so busy that she was unable to give any attention to her relationship with God. But Mary chose differently, she laid aside her daily tasks and household responsibilities so that she could sit at the feet of Jesus and hear God's Word. In the midst of the scriptural contrast (Lk 10:38-42) between Martha and Mary, Jesus declared to us that Mary had made the better choice. Clearly, tending to our individual relationship with God is very important.

However, I am convinced we miss something vital to our faith if we only approach God one on one. And that's because our individual relationship does not make us the body of Christ. It is only our life as Christian community that makes us Christ's body – a mysterious entity that is actually much more than simply a collection of individuals. When Christians come together to worship and to serve, we form an entity with a name and even an address that has its own life and reputation. We call this entity the church – now I'm not talking about a building, but the people. It's like the song says "the church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place, the church is a people."

Following Pentecost's descending power of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus' small group of about 120 followers, communities of Jesus followers started forming, churches were established. These churches met in homes, beside lakes and rivers, and even in caves when it became dangerous to be a church. The phenomenon that is the church has been around since those days following Pentecost – those days when Peter became that Rock upon which the church was built and when people like Stephen, Barnabas and Paul were having their own significant impact on the newly forming faith communities. We know that much of our New Testament is made up of letters Paul wrote to those early established churches in places like Rome, Ephesus, Philippi and Thessalonica.

When you and I identify ourselves as members of the church, we get credit for some great things we did not personally do. Of course, we may also get blame for things we did not do, but the point is the church is always more than its individual members. As a church we have a community identity and a community mandate. We stand for something beyond our individual selves, and it's good that we recall and re-embrace that mandate from time to time. As the body of Christ, it's good to regularly consider whether we resemble Christ or whether we have taken on the characteristics of someone else. Are we being true to our head or are we giving our Lord a headache by turning away and refusing to belong to him and to do our part as his body in the world?

In the thirteenth chapter of Luke's Gospel we hear the kind of anguish we cause Jesus when we turn away and refuse to do our part. While choking back tears, Jesus says, "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!" (Luke 13:34) Clearly, these words come from one whose love has been scorned, whose protection has been rejected, and whose words have been ignored.

At great risk to his own life, Jesus brought the precious kingdom of God within reach of the beloved city of God, but the city was not interested. Jerusalem and its people have better things to do than to hide under the shelter of a mother hen's wings. Jerusalem has a fox as its head, who commands a great deal more respect. Consider the contrast: Jesus has disciples – Herod has soldiers. Jesus serves – Herod rules. Jesus prays for his enemies – Herod kills his enemies. In a contest between a fox and a hen, which one would you bet on?

I've read that there is a small chapel, the Dominus Felix chapel that sets on a hill opposite Jerusalem. It is built on the spot where tradition holds that Jesus wept for the city. The wall behind the altar is a big window, giving people an amazing view of the skyline of Jerusalem. On the front of the altar located in front of that window is the image of a hen protecting under her wings a flock of little chicks. However, some say the fierceness of the tile image makes it look more like a rooster than a hen. It would certainly be understandable of the artist to take some liberties. After all, a rooster doesn't hesitate to defend himself. A rooster has a more aggressive personality than a hen and can peck quite hard – he also does not hesitate to peck first. And then there are those talon spikes on the back of his feet that work a bit like sharp stilettos on anyone who bothers him. I'm told that trying to get eggs from a hen house with a rooster on the loose can be both difficult and painful.

But Jesus did not liken himself to a rooster. He likened himself to a hen, whose main purpose in life is to protect her young. This protecting is done without talons and nothing much in the way of a beak. About all she can do is fluff herself up and sit on her chicks. As ill-equipped physically as she is, she at least places herself between her chicks and the fox. At the very least, she hopes she satisfies the fox's appetite so that he leaves her babies alone.

So, what do you think about this image of God? If you are like me, it is fine in terms of comfort, but in terms of protection it leaves something to be desired. When the foxes of this world start prowling really close to home, when you hear them right outside the door, then it is nice to have a little bigger defense budget for the hen house. It's nice to have a big, fierce rooster on the premises.

Perhaps some of you have seen the old 1985 Clint Eastwood movie called "Pale Rider." In that movie, Clint plays a frontier minister, referred to most often in the movie as Preacher. He is a preacher with a past. Exactly what kind of past is never completely made clear, but he walks around in a clerical collar looking deeply pained most of the time, and once when he takes off his shirt we see the scars of three old bullet holes in his back.

Well, one day he rides into a mining town that has been overrun by foxes. The corrupt sheriff is in cahoots with a bunch of armed bullies who are always taking things that do not belong to them and killing anyone who gets in their way. At first the Preacher just seems to take it all in. He doesn't stir up trouble, but tries to keep everyone calm. But then one day he walks into the bank and produces the key to a safe deposit box – it's a box that holds a clue to his past. While alone in the vault, he pulls the box from the wall and opens the lid. Inside is a pair of six shooters and a belt full of bullets. Clint carefully takes it out and straps it around his waist. Then he takes off his clerical collar and puts it in the box.

At this point in the movie, most of us watching are saying, "Yes! Go get 'em, Clint! Gun down those foxes." Which, of course, is exactly what he does to the satisfaction of all of us who are watching. It's classic Clint Eastwood as the really bad guys get what they deserve.

But Jesus did thing differently. He too bore old scars on his body. He too wanted to protect his chicks from the foxes, but Jesus refused to become a fox himself in order to do it. He refused to fight fire with fire. When Herod and his bullies came after Jesus and his group of disciples, he did not produce six shooters to stop them in their tracks. He did, however, put himself between the foxes and the chicks, just like a mother hen.

Now at the time it may have looked like a minor, insignificant skirmish to those who were there, but that contest between the hen and the fox turned out to be the cosmic battle of all time. In that battle, the power of tooth and fang was put up against the power of a mother's love for her chicks. And you know what, God bet the farm on that hen!

Depending on whom you believe, the hen won. Of course, it did not look that way at first, with feathers all over the place and chicks running for cover. But as time went on, it became clear what the hen had done. The hen had refused to run from the foxes, and the hen had refused to become one of them. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. Jesus died a mother hen, and afterwards he came back to them with the marks of attack and death on his body to make sure they got the point that the power of foxes cannot steal away or kill his love for them. They might have to go through what he went through in order to get past the foxes, but he would be waiting for them on the other side with a love stronger than death.

Now if Jesus is like a mother hen, then I'm thinking the church, Christ's Body on earth, is also called to be like a mother hen. Let's consider the church of Jesus Christ as a big, fluffed up, brooding hen, offering warmth and shelter to all kinds of chicks, including those that are orphans and runts, as well as those who are ducks and turkeys and pigeons and doves... (I hope you get my point) Compelled by Jesus' example, the church plants herself between the foxes of this world and the fragile chicks, offering herself up to be eaten before she would ever sacrifice even one of her precious children. It's about the church of Jesus Christ staying true to whose body she is and remembering always where her breath and life come from by refusing to run from the foxes and also by refusing to become one of them.

Who would have thought being a mother hen offered such opportunities for courage and sacrifice? Maybe that's why the church has often been referred to as "Mother Church" throughout the centuries. The church of Jesus Christ is meant to be that place where we and others come to be fed and sheltered, to be taught and strengthened. The church is where we come to stand firm with others who both need and are willing to share these very same things. It is where we grow from chicks into chickens by giving away that which we have receive, by teaching that which we have learned, and by loving the way we ourselves have been loved. Because Jesus is a lot like a mother hen and the church is meant to be like Jesus the implications is that we should be a lot like a mother hen.

Are we? Does our life together as the Body of Christ reflect what Jesus would do? Do we as a church offer comfort and care, protection and advocacy to others? Clearly, the daily contests between the powers of this world and the power of God are no less real today than in Jesus day. In the midst of the reality of this daily struggle, may it be said that we for one are willing to bet our lives on Jesus and his way every day, all the time! Amen.