

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
February 28, 2010
Luke 13:31-35

“Jesus as Mother Hen: Strong and Tender”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

My friend Connie Fitzgerald has a tiny farm on South Main Street in Haydenville. Well it's not really a farm, she has a normal looking house on a regular street. But when you go out back there's a chicken house. Connie built that chicken house over twenty years ago. She currently has eight chickens and she knows them all well. Connie loves her chickens and she enjoys their eggs—it is a cozy set-up if ever there was one.

After I read the Lectionary passage for today from the Gospel of Luke in which Jesus refers to King Herod as a fox and himself as a hen gathering her brood under her wings, I called my friend Connie at her little, not-quite-a-farm farm and asked her about chickens and hens. Connie told me more than I could have dreamed of about the behavior of chickens and hens. She told me that every spring the hens “go broody”—they sit on a clutch of eggs to keep them warm. And those hens, when they “go broody,” won't leave their nests to eat, drink or take a dust bath. Connie told me how the hens protect their clutch of eggs and how, if she tries to take an egg out from under them, they will peck at her with their little beaks.

I asked Connie if the hens have any other way to protect their eggs or their chicks. They have that beak but is that it? I wondered. Connie said the hens don't have talons like owls or spurs like roosters. She paused and then said, “Basically the hens just have their beaks.” Then Connie continued, “Well, when threatened hens do puff up and try to look bigger and scarier—they fluff out their feathers to look larger than they really are.” Oh I thought. To protect themselves, their eggs and their chicks, hens have a beak and puffy feathers. That's it. Sure a beak can ward off Connie who does not want to be pecked. But foxes raid chicken houses and all the hens have to protect their brood is their beak and their puffed out feathers. Hm-m-m-m-m-m I thought.

I asked Connie, “If a fox comes into the chicken house, what does the hen do? Does she run or fight?”

“Oh,” Connie said, “the hen will fight to the death to protect her chicks. The chicks will scatter and the hen will fight. She will not run and hide, she’ll fight to the death.”

“But,” I started to moan, suddenly concerned for hens everywhere, “the hen doesn’t have a chance. The fox will always win.”

“The hen doesn’t have a chance,” Connie said wistfully. “The fox always wins.”

Filled with my new-found knowledge of hens, chicks and foxes, I read the Luke passage again and found myself wondering about Jesus’ choice of images. Jesus calls Herod a fox:

*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.”

And later in the passage, Jesus refers to himself as a hen:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem...How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

Given the range of animals in the world and the vivid animal imagery in the Hebrew Scriptures, it is interesting that Jesus chose a hen to describe his impulses. Why not refer to the soaring eagle mentioned in Exodus, or the leopard referred to in the Book of Hosea? Why not conjure the image of the proud lion of Judah? Compared to those images, a mother hen does not seem very mighty.

But Jesus chose to refer to himself as a mother hen and isn’t that consistent with who he is, how he speaks, and his ministry overall? Jesus was always reversing the order of things....turning things upside down so the wounded, children and peasants end up on top, and rulers, rich men and scholars land on the bottom. Jesus is always flipping things around so what we expect is not at all what he says or does....the first shall be last and the last first...blessed are the poor for theirs is the kingdom of heaven....

Of course Jesus would choose a hen as the image for himself—it is as far from a fox as you can get. Jesus won’t be an eagle, a leopard or a lion in this or any other story. He will be a mother hen who has nothing but her beak and her puffed up feathers to protect her babies.

Jesus will be like a mother hen who will stand between the fox and her chickens. If the fox wants her chicks, he will have to kill her first.

Writing about this text, theologian Barbara Brown Taylor said, “At the very least, the mother hen can hope that she satisfies the fox’s appetite so that he leaves her babies alone.” Taylor then goes on to reflect on the resurrection—“the cosmic battle of all time, in which the power of tooth and fang was put up against the power of a mother’s love for her chicks.”

“And,” Barbara Brown Taylor continues, “God bet the farm on the hen.”

Connie Fitzgerald said: the fox always wins.

Barbara Brown Taylor said: and God bet the farm on the hen.

Jesus put his body on the line. Like a mother hen, he stood up to the fox. He did not run, he did not stop his work, he did not change his plans. You tell that fox, he said to the Pharisees, I am casting out demons and performing cures. Jesus was busy caring for his chicks. And all Jesus had to combat that fox Herod was his beak—his words....just his words. Jesus’ words got him into trouble and protected him as well.

There is a belief and an all-too-common saying that Jesus died for our sins.

I don’t think so.

I don’t think Jesus died FOR our sins, I think Jesus died BECAUSE of our sins.

Jesus died because of the sins of humanity—greed, the love of power, the need to dominate, the thirst for violence. Jesus preached about justice in an unjust world, he modeled loving kindness in a time of brutal empire, he broke purity laws and violated the Sabbath by touching lepers and healing the sick, he dined with those who were reviled.

Jesus loved the poor and the lowly and protected them like a mother hen without claws, talons or fangs.

And he died because those in power found his nonviolent approach too threatening.

He was fomenting a revolution—causing people to act up, act out, act on love.

In an era when there was a strict social hierarchy from the lowest slaves to the highest military leaders and kings, Jesus flattened the pecking order, leveled the playing field, disrupted the accepted hierarchy, preached about an egalitarian human family in which every single person was loved and cherished by God.

Jesus did not die for the sins of humanity, he died because of the sins of humanity. He died because those in power around him were threatened, frightened, greedy, and invested in maintaining the status quo.

Keep the riff-raff in their place, that was their goal. Don't empower the poor, don't recognize women and slaves, don't break purity laws, don't stir up trouble. Keep a lid on things.

Jesus was stirring up trouble. He stayed true to what he believed, he preached the good news, he talked about the kingdom of God on earth and he paid with his life. In the end, Jesus died like a mother hen. He stood up to the fox, with the only weapons he had—his words and his body.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes so beautifully about this text in Luke with its images of Herod as the fox, and Jesus as the mother hen....the mother hen that offers the little she has to protect her chicks, all in the name of love, and triumphs over death in the end. Listen:

“Having loved her own who were in the world, she loved them to the end. She died a mother hen, and afterwards she came back to them with teeth marks on her body to make sure they got the point: that the power of foxes could not kill her love for them, nor could it steal them away from her. They might have to go through what she went through in order to get past the foxes, but she would be waiting for them on the other side, with love stronger than death.”

Jesus did not offer himself as a sacrificial lamb because violence was needed or necessary to absolve us of our sins.

Jesus died because he loved humanity with a radical, vocal and inclusive love and his love was considered dangerous.

Jesus' gentleness was threatening, his preaching caused restlessness, his vision of the inbreaking of God's kingdom on earth stood in contrast to life under the Roman Empire, and his care of the meek caused those on the margins to feel visible, hopeful and even powerful.

Jesus communed with God, held a vision, and lived what he preached about love, justice and peace.

He fought the foxes of his time with the only weapons he had: his words and his actions.

He faced the cross with courage and strength because it was the last and most dramatic gift he could offer us....he gave us a model of the deepest form of love.

Jesus showed the foxes of his time, and all of us through the ages, that no matter what horror was inflicted upon him he would not strike back.

It has been said: “Sometimes the power of the cross is refusing to use power.” Jesus refused to use the power of violence when confronted with the power of violence. He went to his death with words of love and forgiveness on his lips.

After Connie taught me so much about her chickens and hens, I asked her one last time about what the hens had in their arsenal to protect their babies from harm. “They have the “force of will,” Connie said, and their “maternal instinct.”

Like a mother hen, Jesus had the force of will and, it seems, a maternal instinct. Filled with the Spirit of God, Jesus had the force of will to turn his face toward the cross and go bravely to his death.

And what he reveals in this passage in Luke is an almost maternal instinct to provide for us a model of love and courage to emulate when foxes pounce.

Earlier in our service, we sang the hymn “Under His Wings I Am Safely Abiding.”

*Under His wings I am safely abiding;
Though the night deepens and tempests are wild,
Still I can trust Him—I know He will keep me;
He has redeemed me and I am His child.
Under His wings, under His wings, Who from His love can sever?
Under His wings my soul shall abide, Safely abide forever.*

Beautiful words and strong images. YES we are safe in this world for Jesus has gone before...preaching love and forgiveness and showing us that death does not have the last word.

But Jesus’ legacy also demands that we not remain forever in the shelter of his wings.

There we find comfort, solace and peace.

There we are strengthened and fortified but we are called to go into the world and be a mother hen for others.

Like Jesus, we use the only weapons we have: nonviolence, love, our words, our work and our witness.

We can and do take shelter under Jesus wings, but when strengthened and fortified, we step out from under those wings, puff up our feathers and spread our wings to be shelter for others.

Like the mother hen Jesus is to us, we then are mother hen to others—to those today who are on the margins of privilege and power.

There are foxes at work today, and so we are called to step out from under Jesus' wings and imitate his behavior as a mother hen.

Jesus loved deeply. He provides us comfort and strength.

He also provides us a model which we seek to follow.

We take refuge under his strong wings, AND we step out from that shelter and face the foxes of today with courage and with love.

Oh Jesus, you are our teacher, our model and guide. And we love you.

Great is thy faithfulness, great is thy faithfulness!

Morning by morning new mercies I see;

All I have needed thy hand hath provided—

Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me.

Amen.