

The Lament over Jerusalem

(Mt 23.37—39)

³¹ At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” ³² 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. ³³ Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.’ ³⁴ 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! ³⁵ 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.’ ”

Mother Hen

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford, Massachusetts

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Text: *Luke 13:31-35*

Nowhere else in all the Bible, except in this story, do we read about a hen, or a chicken. Unique as it is, though, this story in which Jesus compares himself to a mother hen is a powerful metaphor. It says a lot about Jesus. Have you ever seen a hen protect her brood, her young chicks?

Here in the city of Medford you can't find many hens anymore. I doubt that zoning laws would allow you us to put up a chicken coop out in the backyard. The neighbors were upset enough when Vinny put the shed out there. Imagine if he opened the doors this spring and out came a bunch of chickens, and a rooster crowing at the crack of dawn every morning. No, no, no. That would not be a good thing.

But down South, where my mother came from, there were lots of chickens. And they weren't all kept in fenced chicken coops. There would be chickens out in the woods, out in the yard, and out in the road. You actually had to drive pretty carefully so that you didn't run them over.

Now chickens aren't very trainable—think cats and then multiply by ten. We tried to get the chickens to lay their eggs in the chicken shed, where we could go and collect them. But the chickens would just as often lay them in a tuft of grass out behind the well, or in a dusty spot under the porch. Sometimes I had the job of hunting around for the outliers. I'd look all over the yard, crawl under the out-buildings and anyplace else I could imagine a wayward hen laying her eggs. But despite everyone's best efforts, the chickens would often successfully hide their eggs. Then they would incubate them until a few weeks later a little bunch of chicks would crack their way through the shells, a bunch of wiggling fluffy yellow chirpers.

At that point, when her chicks came to life, the hen morphed instantly into a mother. Her whole outlook on life became protecting her chicks. And she relied on a couple of reliable strategies. If an animal, human or some other threat, began to get too close to the nest, she would run away in another direction. Now, you might think that that's why people are sometimes called chicken, because they run away from danger. But the mother hen was actually doing something quite different. She would run away from the nest, and then when she was a good ways away, she would start squawking and acting like she had a broken wing. She'd flop her wing, run around in circles, to draw the attention of the would-be predator. She acted like she had a broken wing so that the predator would think she was an easy mark. Very often it worked. The predator would bound after the hen with visions of chicken dinner dancing in his head. But the hen was pretending, and she would stay just far enough ahead to keep the predator's interest, and he would follow as she led him on a wild-goose chase, so to speak.

But sometimes it wouldn't work. Sometimes the predator would get close to the nest and realize that little yellow appetizers were just there for the taking. Then the hen would literally attack the predator, who was much bigger and more dangerous than she. She would hit it with

her wings and claws and peck at it with her beak. Often the predator would give up and head for easier dinner. But if it persisted, the hen would then go to the nest and gather the brood under her wings. She would cover them completely and put her body between the threat and her chicks. Quite literally, she would sacrifice herself, before she let the brood be harmed. It was a beautiful example of the depth of love a parent may have for a child.

It is this example that Jesus is calling to mind. Jesus has pointed himself toward Jerusalem for his rendezvous with destiny. He tells the Pharisees who warn him of Herod's deadly intentions that he will not turn away. He will continue on his journey of healing and preaching, irrespective of what happens to him.

Jesus went through the countryside bringing a message of transformation to all who would listen. He thought of the people as children, or chicks, that he wanted to protect from the temptations and the predators of the world. Jesus, like a mother hen, was trying to save the very lives of his chicks. It was the point of his whole ministry. It's what draws us to Jesus even now, isn't it? Are we not drawn by a love so deep that it would protect us with its life? The temptations we talked of last week seek to lead us to their false promises of power and fame. Also, many of us have experienced the brokenness of the world. Even the most loved of us has known loneliness and heartbreak. In many ways we are but chicks in a world of danger. And we sense that in Jesus there is a love that stands between us and all that breaks and threatens us, a love that will not be put off by danger or fear, a love that won't back down, a love that won't run out of gas or in the other direction, a love that won't get distracted and leave us alone. In Jesus we have a love that we can trust to the fullest, to protect us even to the point of death.

But there's even more to the story. Much more.

When the mother hen's brood begins to grow up, something happens. When they get out of line, she disciplines them. And finally, when the chicks begin to get too big for their fuzzy britches and begin to tell their mother a thing or two, she will turn on them. At a point, she changes from mother to just another chicken in the flock trying to protect her own place in the pecking order. At a point her chicks become just that many more competitors, and the mother hen throws them out on their own.

And this is where our story branches off. Jesus looks at Jerusalem and muses, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!" There is something remarkable here. Picture Jesus looking out over Jerusalem. He knows that Herod wants to be rid of him. He knows that the Roman authorities are going to brook no breach of the peace. He knows that the religious authorities are jealous of him. And he knows that even the people of good will, including his own disciples, lack the nerve to stay by his side. Jesus looks out over Jerusalem, and he cannot help but see those who would do him in and those who would not lift a finger to prevent it. Jesus looks out over Jerusalem and sees his brood, and his brood has turned ugly and murderous. And yet his reaction is to mourn out of love for them: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!"

And then he adds, "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" Do you see the incredible, determined, unflinching, unyielding love that we have pictured for us? Jesus looks at those who would harm him, those who a short time in the future will in fact harm him, and he wishes that he could save them from their misguided and murderous ways. He wants to cover them as a mother hen covers her brood with her wings.

And of course, Jesus holds fast to this course right to the very bitter end. And the payoff was in some cases very good. Some of those whom he love recovered from their fear and some, like Paul, even from their malevolence, and they began the church to which we are heirs today. It's fair to say that Jesus' unflinching love made the church possible.

And Jesus remains the same for us today. Just as when he was in the flesh, he says that he came to heal the sick and the sin-sick among us. As the great Augustine understood at the beginning of the fifth century, the church is not for the holy. The church is for those who are broken and imperfect. Oddly enough, even as we harm Jesus, even in the church, even as the church goes astray, Jesus weeps and gathers us under his wings. This more than anything else is what it means to say that Jesus saves. Notice that Jesus doesn't limit himself to saving those who believe the right thing, or utter the right formula, or belong to the right sect. Jesus saves those whom any mother hen would knock in the head and kick out of the nest.

Speaking of the mother hen, let's return to her for just a moment. When the mother hen scolds and physically attacks her disobedient and disorderly chicks, there is an interesting movement in what is taking place. When you see a mother chicken walking with her young brood in a line behind her, very often one or two chicks will get distracted by curiosity and get out of line and wander off. Pretty soon the mother hen rounds them up. She scolds them, telling them in chicken talk, "I'm screaming at you because I love you. If you don't stay in line and follow me, you're going to get run over by a truck or eaten by a fox. So, don't you ever get out of line again." But over time the mother hen's attitude changes. The chicks grow, and her discipline becomes more physical. She tries to bash some sense into them. And finally, when they become her competitors in the flock, she uses force still to teach them a lesson. This time the lesson is that she's the boss, and if they challenge her, they had better be prepared for a fight.

This chicken progression is a very human progression, it seems to me. Human beings tend to believe that force and violence are the ways to keep people in line and teach them lessons. And yet we are learning, very slowly learning, that violence posing as love in families is really abuse. We are learning that violence simply does not teach the other person the lessons we intend. In our most recent example, we have created more terrorists, not fewer, by trying to teach them a lesson.

Jesus broke away from this way of doing business. He understood that love and nonviolence were far better teachers. So, when Jesus loves us, when Jesus wishes to take us under his wing no matter what, he is saving us and loving us by grace, saving us from ourselves. Saving and loving us by grace stands at the heart of the Christian message. But there is an additional component, and it's all about the church. Jesus also means to teach us and thereby enlist us into discipleship. By loving us when we don't really deserve it, by saving us from ourselves, he is trying to teach us to do the same thing with others. Jesus knows that we are changed by love, and that by loving we may change others as well. Jesus knows that we are taught by love, and that by loving we may teach others as well. With his own life he loved us and taught us, and even now he is doing the same. [Have people form a circle and put their arms (wings) over each other.]