

sermon-2/28/10 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Choices on the Way”
Luke 13:31-35

This little passage in Luke goes against popular understandings of the Pharisees, Jesus, and the metaphors we use for God. Most of us have looked at the Pharisees as the bad guys in the Gospels. Aren't they the ones who are constantly trying to trap Jesus, or turn him into the authorities. But here in Luke 13 they actually warn Jesus about Herod's plot to kill him. Apparently there were some Pharisees who liked Jesus. This warns us about writing off a whole group of people, painting them with one brush. People are much more complicated than that.

When it comes to Jesus, many of us have a mental picture of gentle Jesus, meek and mild. The pictures we all grew up with in Sunday school show a kind man who loves children. He doesn't look like he has a sarcastic bone in his body, let alone a mean one. But here he has some very harsh words for Herod. “Go tell that fox. . .” That is far from being mild. He is basically calling Herod a sly, conniving weasel. Not very nice.

Many in the larger church think the only appropriate metaphor for God is masculine. After all, does not the Lord's Prayer begin “Our Father. . .” But here Jesus uses the metaphor of a mother hen to talk about himself. If Jesus is the incarnation of God, then this metaphor rubs off on how we are to think about God as well. Certainly God is neither male nor female. Using a variety of metaphors for God helps us see God in a broader, less paternalistic way.

While it is always interesting to have pre-conceived notions challenged, there is more to this passage than new perspectives on the Pharisees, on Jesus' character, and on the metaphors we use for God. We need to look a little deeper to explore some very challenging issues this passage raises for us today.

A good place to start is the contrast being drawn between the fox and the hen. Herod is the fox and Jesus is the chicken. Just putting it that way helps us see the shocking difference between these two metaphors. Luke is letting us know we have a choice to make on our faith journey. Will we go with the fox or the hen? When we feel challenged, when life gets tough, when we are afraid or feel vulnerable, do we want the fox or the hen beside us?

Foxes are more ferocious than chickens, but they are also trouble. That was certainly true of Herod. Like some in power, when he was threatened he immediately turns to violence. Kill the threat. He was after Jesus. Of course, any who follow Jesus would also be in danger.

As one commentator says, when a fox comes after us, we would much prefer a lion for protection, rather than a mother hen. Sure the mother hen will shelter her chicks under her wings, but in a fight between a fox and a chicken, we know who wins that fight.

It is easy to see why countries choose the fox over the hen. When we were attacked on 9/11 we immediately wanted to go after those who attacked us. If we can just kill them all or intimidate them so they won't attack us again, then we would be safe. This instinct is certainly understandable. Sadly, it has led us into a war on terrorism that seems endless. Some of us even fear the violence and torture we have committed in response to those initial attacks will only lead to creating more people who hate us.

What would be a mother hen kind of response to being attacked? Would it involve spending money on building schools in Afghanistan, like Greg Mortenson, the author of *Seven Cups of Tea* suggests? Is that just naïve? Can it be a both/and response?

The choice between the fox or the hen becomes clearer if we limit the discussion to those who call themselves Christians. It is most likely unreasonable to expect our secular government to follow the example of the hen. That doesn't mean Christians shouldn't challenge their government on its policies. First, however, we need to get our own houses in order.

If you go back to Jesus' day, sadly the good religious folks, the leaders in Jerusalem, the Temple priests, the Sadducees and Pharisees chose to go with the fox and not the hen. They eventually supported killing Jesus.

They did this for various reasons. One commentator says Jerusalem wanted to keep its religious standing with Rome at all costs. Jesus threatened that standing, so they went after him. That ought to give us Christians pause in our day. If the best religious folks in Jesus' day opposed him, what does that say about us?

We know when it comes to torture, our government has some of its biggest supporters among evangelical Christians who condone torture as a way to keep us safe. The mother hen won't protect us. We need a fox of our own to fight the enemy.

When Jesus confronted Jerusalem he sadly laments their poor choices down through history. The New English Bible's translation of verse 35 in our passage puts this bluntly. Jesus, in speaking to Jerusalem says, "Look, look! there is your temple, forsaken by God." You may be religious, in other words, but you are not on God's side.

So, how does choosing to follow the mother hen distinguish Christians from the larger culture that more often than not chooses the fox? We talked about that in our lectionary class. People came up with several ideas. It is how we love one another that distinguishes us. It is our choosing to forgive those who have hurt us that is distinctive. It is how we use our resources, where we spend our best energies, that define us. It is how we deal with conflict.

We might look to Jesus' example in this passage to get some ideas. When he learns Herod is after him and is warned to flee, he does not back down. He says Herod does not call the shots in his life. He will do what God has called him to do regardless of the consequences. Such fearlessness in the face of someone who can have him tortured and

killed is incredibly moving. It was his great love for the people that nurtured that fearlessness. In it we learn of God's great love for us. That is a kind of love that can save us.

The Bible affirms that God was in Jesus, the mother hen, doing the work of salvation. As one commentator says, this reminds us that because God worked through Jesus' in all his vulnerability, God will work with our frailty too. God always seems to pick the seemingly weak to carry on God's work. God always goes with the mother hen over the fox.

I realize that is not all that comforting. Does that mean if we choose the chicken over the fox we, too, might have to pay a price? Jesus seems to think so when he says to follow him means picking up our own crosses and following him.

Is there no protection, no safety in choosing the mother hen? Another scholar says when we choose the hen over the fox we will experience God's protection. That protection is the protection of "parental love, the strength of a home and an identity, but not the safety of immunity from trouble."

There are no simple answers as to what it would mean in a specific situation to go with the hen and not the fox. How does that help us in personal conflicts with a co-worker, a family member, a school mate? How does that determine what policies we support with our elected officials?

What this does mean is that we are on a journey in life, a spiritual journey. We especially focus on that journey during Lent. We say we follow the one who chose suffering over violence when it came to his enemies. We recognize good religious folks do not have a great track record when it comes to choosing the hen over the fox. Where does that leave us? Amen