

February 21, 2016

TEXT: Luke 13:31–35

TITLE: Foxes and Hens

There are only five verses in today's reading from Luke's gospel. But at first hearing, those five verses seem to overflow with violent, unpleasant images: Pharisees saying to Jesus, "Herod wants to kill you." Talk of demons and stonings and prophets being killed in Jerusalem. Offers of shelter being refused by stubborn, unwilling people, who will not see Jesus again until the end of days. For today and the next two Sundays, we will explore passages from Luke 13, and honestly all of them are troubling. All of them point to disagreements, judgments, accusations of hypocrisy and words of warning. But if you look at the passages closely, they also contain words of hope and promise and grace—something that takes root in our souls when you pair the stories with the language from the Confession of Belhar about anti-racism and reconciliation.

So let's begin again. The five verses in today's reading from Luke 13 seem to overflow with violent images. And the first word that pops out and grabs our attention is when Jesus calls King Herod a "fox." In the Old Testament, foxes were always viewed negatively. They were sneaky predators who prowled around cities left in ruins—unwanted scavengers who ate rabbits and chickens. They were also symbols of cunning and trickery, since they often outwitted the hunters chasing them. On that day long ago, Jewish leaders came to Jesus with a word of warning: "You'd better get out of town, because Herod wants to kill you." I'm not sure what their motives were, but let's give them the benefit of the doubt and assume they truly wanted to warn Jesus that his life was in danger. But Jesus had no intention of running from Herod or any other Roman authority.

The answer Jesus gave back to the Pharisees is a fascinating one. He calls Herod a fox, showing a strong streak of defiance regarding the powers-that-be. And rightly so—sitting on earthly thrones should never be considered validation for defying the Lord of justice who sits on a heavenly throne. Remember when Jesus held up a government minted coin and said, *Give to Caesar that which is Caesar's, but give to God that which is God's* (Luke 20:25)—intending that we should always remember which command takes precedence. Herod was no paragon of virtue. His beheading of John the Baptist had already proven that fact.

Jesus not only refuses to run; he sends back a message that he will continue to do what he has been doing today and tomorrow—right now and for the foreseeable future. He describes it as casting out demons and curing those who are ill. We can expand that to mean he will be about the work of God's kingdom—teaching, encouraging, lifting up those pushed down, shining light into places of darkness. That work will continue, because it is work of faith—a compassionate, active faith that gives life to all who follow his example.

Then Jesus turned to look into the distance toward the capital city of Jerusalem and his heart grew heavy. The animal imagery shifted dramatically from a fox to that of a mother hen—from a sharp-toothed predator to a feathered chicken whose wings are puffed out in a defensive crouch trying to shield her chicks from danger. Sadly, the world around us values foxes—they may not always like them, but they usually respect them. Not so for chickens, unless you learn to see them in a different light.

Walt Bettinger is C.E.O. of the Charles Schwab Corporation. In a recent interview he told how he had maintained a perfect 4.0 grade point average in college until it came down to a final exam in a business course. He'd spent hours studying and memorizing formulas, but when the teacher handed out the exam, it was one piece of paper and both sides of it were blank. Then the professor said, "I've taught you everything I can about business in the last 10 weeks, but the most important message, the most important question, is this: What's the name of the lady who cleans this building?" Bettinger admitted that he'd often seen her but never taken the time to ask her name. It was the only test he ever failed. Her name was Dottie. Bettinger went on to say that he's tried to know every Dottie he's worked with ever since.¹

CEOs, professors, foxes—and then there are the people we overlook, the Dotties, the mother hens, the least in the world who often are first in the eyes of God, if seen with eyes of faith. Five times in the book of Psalms a place of spiritual refuge is described as being protected under the wings of the Lord. *Psalm 17: Guard me as the apple of the eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings.* For me, the most beautiful one is *Psalm 91: You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress; my God in whom I trust." God will cover you with God's pinions; under the Lord's wings you will find refuge.*

What is described is a place of loving safety—finding shelter from life's storms beneath the arms of God. But faith is not simply about hiding under the wings of God. It's not about running away. It's not about escapism. It's much more than that. When there is trouble all around you, God, like that mother hen, is the point of reference. God is the place we run to, the place we seek out, the true north for our moral compass. And this safe place beneath the Lord's wings is not for single occupancy. It is intended for all—it is big enough and wide enough and strong enough to shelter all people. It is a place of courage, safety and strength.

Let me tell another story. Have you heard about the battle of Combahee River? Since this is Black History month, you should learn about this. Combahee River is in South Carolina, just north of Hilton Head. On June 2, 1863 during the Civil War, the Union army sent three boats up that river with the intent of attacking plantations of leading secessionist families. It was a dangerous mission, so they enlisted the help of someone who could get them critical information—Harriet Tubman. It was the only time a military campaign has been led by a woman on

U.S. soil. Tubman worked with Col. James Montgomery and his group of 150 African American soldiers by sharing information she'd learned about military defenses along that river. As the Union boats went upstream, slaves raced to the river's edge. But they were scared to get on board until Tubman spread out her arms of welcome and over 750 escaped to freedom that day. The plantations of their slave owners were burnt and destroyed, and even when Confederate troops raced back to confront the attackers, Tubman's skill and knowledge of the area meant that not a single Union casualty happened that day on Combahee River.

Faith in God is not a passive thing. It is not a cozy blanket we wrap around our shoulders when a chill from the world blows over us. It is not a closet hiding place we enter and allow God to deal with whatever is happening outside that door. Faith is an active thing. It moves from places of danger to places of God's shelter. It involves taking individual lives being threatened and transforms them into communities of mutual support and activism. It calls us together under the saving arms of God. In the words of Jesus, faith doesn't reject the voices of prophets or throw stones at those calling for justice and peace. Faith responds as God in Christ gathers us together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.

My favorite phrase from the Confession of Belhar is where it says "unity is both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ." It is not something we passively step into. It is made real by the love and grace of God, yet its acceptance places an obligation upon us – to nurture this unity, to protect and preserve and actively fight against anything that would destroy the deep oneness made real in Christ. The pope is right: It is unchristian to promote building walls when what the world needs is more bridges.

Again, Psalm 91: You who live in the shelter of the Lord, who have found refuge under the Lord's wings, are to say daily "My God in whom I trust." That trust changes us—it is a gift and an obligation. It means stepping away from all that enslaves us and stepping onto the boats of freedom. It means learning the names of those toiling beside you who far too often are invisible and anonymous in a fox-focused world. It's this wonderful paradox: under the shadow of God's wings, we finally come to live in the light of true life.

It's true—at first hearing, the five verses in this passage from Luke 13 seem to overflow with violent images—death threats, demons, stonings, refusing shelter. Yet that's because our ears are filled with the world's fox-like focus on violence and tales of ruin. When heard with a heart of faith, the same passage reminds us that Christ is working now—today and tomorrow, casting out demons, performing cures. Worldly plans linked to fear and intimidation will always be impossible ones because of the transformative power of Christ, our Savior who finished his work on the third day—because of Christ, the one who calls us to shelter and faith and unity beneath his wings—because of Christ, the one who frees us to proclaim, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

AMEN

¹ “You’ve Got to Open Up to Move Up,” Corner Office by Adam Bryant; interview with Walt Bettinger, *New York Times*, February 7, 2016; p. BU 2.