

The Power of Compassion
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Luke 13:31-35

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.’”

THE CHALLENGE OF THE GREAT REVERSAL

In Luke 13:30 (the verse that precedes our lesson for today) Jesus said that in God’s kingdom, “some who are first will be last and some who are last will be first.”

That’s good news for those who are struggling, those who are last. But, for those who have power, those who are first, this is not such good news.

This fits with a theme that runs throughout the gospel of Luke. It is called the great reversal. In the kingdom of God the script will be flipped.

For example, when Mary heard that she was going to bear the son of God, what song filled her heart?

It was a song about the poor being lifted up and the mighty being knocked off their high horse.

Herod's daddy didn't like that song one little bit, and the son undoubtedly had the same viewpoint.

Herod Antipas, the Jewish ruler in that part of the world was one of the ones who had the most to lose in the kingdom that was coming. And like most politicians, he wanted to remain in power.

He would say or do anything to accomplish his purpose.

More than that, the Herods were also known for being a bit unstable emotionally ... to put it mildly. Actually, to put it bluntly they were, as we used to say back home, as crazy as a bedbug.

So when some of the Pharisees came to Jesus and said, "You better get out of town. Herod wants to kill you" there was no reason to doubt their message. Herod had killed John the Baptist; it would have been right in character for him to kill Jesus as well.

THE CHALLENGE TO HEROD

You would think that Jesus might have tried be a bit more diplomatic in his response. He could have said (as he said to Pilate), "Oh, tell Herod he has nothing to worry about. My kingdom is not of this world. I don't want his throne."

But, Jesus didn't say that. Instead, Jesus said, "Tell that fox I'm not going anywhere. I'm going to keep on preaching and teaching and healing and casting out demons right here. And I won't quit until I'm good and ready. And then I'll go on down to Jerusalem.

And when I get to Jerusalem (and not before) I will be killed. I'll take my place with the prophets who have come before me because that's how it always goes.

God sends prophets to Jerusalem to warn them to change their ways, and they are mistreated and killed. It'll be the same with me."

THE TEMPTATION OF FEAR

In the gospels people are always trying to manipulate Jesus. Some want him to be a warrior/king in the mold of King David.

That was one of the temptations of the devil that we talked about last week. Since you're the Son of God, Jesus, it's time to start the revolution.

Jesus rejected that temptation.

But, today's lesson presents a different temptation. It's not the temptation of power. It is the temptation of fear.

Apparently the ministry of Jesus was challenging the power of Herod. This religious leader, Jesus had the temerity to say something that had political implications. And Herod didn't like it one bit.

So Herod wants to kill him. And some of the Pharisees come to warn Jesus.

Let's be real about this. Most of the Pharisees have been Jesus' adversaries if not his enemies from the very beginning.

And so now they come and suggest that they have his best interests at heart? They want to warn Jesus about the murderous intent of Herod?

Anyone reading the gospel of Luke has no difficulty reading between the lines.

They don't want to help Jesus. They just want to use this threat to shut him up and get him out of the way.

But, it doesn't work.

Jesus knew that they were in cahoots with Herod so he tells the Pharisees,

"You go tell him that he's not the boss of me. I will die. But I will die on my terms and not on his.

He has no power at all. He's a fox, a pest, a varmint who threatens to destroy the very people he is supposed to be serving."

It's obvious that Jesus will not be influenced by fear, not even the fear of death. On the contrary, he tells his disciples that the cross and resurrection will be the final act in his ministry.

The cross will become more than just a tragic miscarriage of justice. The cross will become a symbol of forgiveness and salvation.

And through the cross and resurrection, the world will be given hope for life eternal.

That's what makes Jesus so dangerous to the powers that be. Even the threat of the cross isn't enough to control him.

Jesus claims a powerful promise.

The power of the resurrection is greater than the power of the cross. The power of God to save is greater than the power of men and women to destroy.

And so Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem.

But, he will not be hurried, not by Herod or the Pharisees or anyone else for that matter.

He will make the journey on his terms and in his own way.

He knows who he is. He is the Son of God.

He will not succumb to the temptations of power or fear. He will continue his journey toward Jerusalem.

OUR JOURNEY

In this season of Lent season we are once again making the journey with Jesus to Jerusalem. But, on our journey some will come to us with a warning.

"Don't dare mix religion and politics.

If you do they'll crucify you.

Better to stay as far away as possible from the political realm.

Stay behind the four walls of the church and you'll be safe from Herod. Your relationship with God is a private, personal thing.

Don't dare act like what you believe should influence what you do in the world."

(It seems to me there was something about that in the news this past week. Some religious leader giving a political leader a harsh word. What was that thing about mixing politics and faith?)

We might say that politics and faith don't mix. In response to the Pope's comments last week all the commentators on TV said that faith is a private, personal thing.

How dare we judge someone by their fruits?
That's not in the Bible.
Oh, wait, it is.

Jesus' insistence on going to Jerusalem suggests that faith is not a private, personal thing.

Those who follow Jesus are like the prophets.
They speak speak truth to power.
They call out those who perpetuate injustice and exploit the weak.

And that's dangerous.
Herod will still seek to kill the true prophet.
Following Jesus still requires courage.

Did Jesus ever tell his disciples that following him would be a bed of roses?

No.

Jesus told his followers that foxes have dens and birds have nests, but those who followed him wouldn't have a place to lay their head. If the "powers that be" mistreated Jesus, guess what will happen to Jesus' disciples? The same thing. We too must take up a cross and follow. (Luke 9:58; Matthew 10:24)

But, we take solace in the fact that those who oppose the ministry of Jesus are like foxes.

They are destructive varmints, but in the end they have no real power.

They are merely a nuisance.

We believe that God's ability to save is greater than the destructive powers in this world.

When all is said and done, the cross will not be a symbol of death but a symbol of life.

And the prophet killing powers in Jerusalem will be disarmed once and for all.

So, we too are called to make our way to Jerusalem and proclaim this message.

THE POWER OF COMPASSION

But, how will this happen?

What will change a world that seems hell bent on destruction?

What kind of power is God calling us to wield?

It will not be political or military power.

It will be the power of God's compassion and grace as it is revealed in Jesus Christ.

Jesus calls Jerusalem the city that kills the prophets and stones those who were sent to it.

But, notice what comes next.

It is not final condemnation but an expression of love for those who have proven to be enemies. Jesus said, "How often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings."

The symbolic use of animals plays a big role in our lesson for today. Herod is a fox, a cunning animal who is out for his own good.

Jesus is a mother hen.

Jesus desires to gather the little ones under his wing in order to protect them.

But, the little ones in Jerusalem were not willing.
They shouted give us Barabbas.
They shouted crucify him.

And the result is recorded in verse 35, "Your house is left to you."

This means that when the people of Jerusalem rejected the grace of God as revealed in Jesus, they were left desolate.

They had refused the grace of God as revealed in Jesus, and the result was tragic.

MURDERED BY PEOPLE HE LOVED

There's a line in a prayer that I use when we have the Lord's Supper.

It states that Jesus was "murdered by people he loved."

Every time I say that I wonder if we murder the one who loves us. I wonder if we reject the grace of God as revealed in Jesus by what we say or what we don't say.

I wonder. Are we like the people of Jerusalem who stone the prophets and kill those who are sent to help us? Are we unwilling to accept the grace and forgiveness of the one who wants to take us under his wing?

Do we find ourselves in a lonely place because grace and forgiveness have not played a big role in our lives?

Do we feel that God in Christ is far from us?

Quite often that is true.
How can we make our way back home?

SINGING GOD'S SONG

Perhaps the answer is to proclaim the name of Jesus on our way into Jerusalem.

Jesus closes our lesson for today by saying to the religious leaders, "You will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

That last line probably sounds familiar to you. It is from a Psalm (118:26) that was sung as pilgrims entered the city of Jerusalem.

The disciples sang nearly identical words as they entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. But, the Pharisees tell his disciples to be quiet. (Luke 19:38)

The city is not ready to sing those words.
They are unable to really see Jesus.
They are not ready for a Savior like him.

But, no matter.
Jesus said that if his disciples didn't sing, the very stones would cry out in praise.

You see, in the final analysis, the power of God's grace is not dependent upon men and women singing His praise. The power of God's grace is built into the fabric of creation.

As a mother hen shelters her young so God in Christ seeks to guide and comfort His people.

Sometimes we reject that grace and our spiritual vision is impaired. And sometimes we receive that grace, and our lives are transformed.

VULNERABILITY

How can we truly call Jesus Lord?
How can we exhibit grace in a world that is out to get us?

David Lose in a commentary on this passage suggested something that I think is helpful.

He talks about the courage of one who makes himself vulnerable for the sake of others.

In our culture we don't connect vulnerability with courage and strength. We may think of vulnerability in terms of love and concern, but not strength.

And sometimes we even think vulnerability is a sign of weakness. For example, the leading political candidates for the presidency seek to avoid any sign of vulnerability. Heaven forbid that anyone ever apologize or ask for forgiveness.

But, in our passage for today, the example Jesus uses suggests that vulnerability is the essence of courage.

Jesus describes himself as a hen gathering her brood of chicks for protection. It is this image that Jesus chose to illustrate his love for God's people.

It is an image of care and concern, but it also an image that emphasizes vulnerability.

When the fox and the hen get together the fox always wins despite the hen's desire to protect the chicks.

But, the hen still tries.

The hen puts her life on the line against overwhelming odds.

She is vulnerable.

That's a powerful image.

Jesus marches on toward Jerusalem.

He marches toward the cross that awaits him.

And he does it out of love.

It is the fierce love of a mother who will stop at nothing to protect her children.

POLITICS AND GRACE

This political season causes many of us to become a bit cynical and discouraged.

But, even on the road to Jerusalem (or in this case Washington) there are still moments where the grace of God breaks through.

This past week one of those moments occurred during a campaign stop by John Kasich.

John was at one of those town hall affairs and a young man wearing a Kasich button rose to speak.

I guess the young college student was going to ask a question, but in an unstructured group setting we sometimes let some things slip out that are more personal and real than what we would normally share.

I think that's what happened in this case.
The young man said that he was "in a really dark place" recently.

A close friend had committed suicide.
His parents got divorced.
His dad lost his job.

But, he continued, "I found hope in the Lord and in my friends and now I've found it in my presidential candidate I support."

It was obvious that this young man's political activism was a way to fill a personal void in this dark time.

And so Kasich did what some other candidates have done during other touching moments like this one. He walked up and gave the young man a long hug and whispered something in his ear.

In a campaign filled with moments that are staged, the crowd responded warmly to a moment that seemed real and caring.

And when Kasich got back on stage he said,

"I've heard about the pain of people all across this country, and what I've learned is we're going too fast in our lives. Let's care about one another and not be disconnected and together we will rise this country."

In the vulnerable moment, we sometimes get an opportunity to see something greater.

It's not about power and fear. It's about love.

Don't misunderstand my example.

This is not an endorsement of the politics of a certain person.

But, it is the endorsement of what one writer called the politics of Jesus.

Jesus came to challenge the foxes of the world with a courage born of vulnerability and love.

And we are called to demonstrate that same kind of love. In a world that is moving too fast we have the courage to become vulnerable and give those who are hurting a hug.

That kind of love changes everything.

Amen.