

March 17, 2019

Second Sunday in Lent

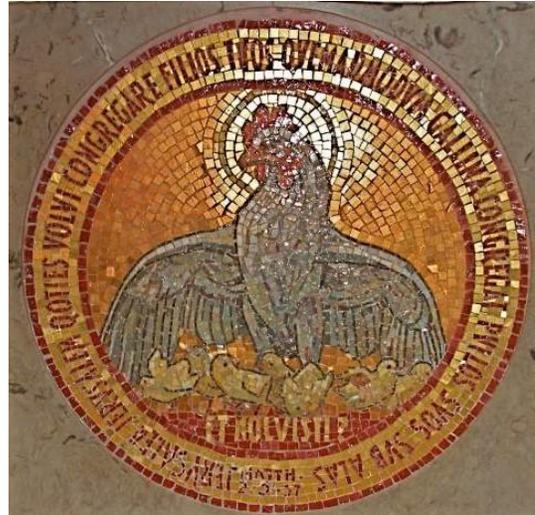
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Luke 13:31-35

A Hen, a Fox, a Pig and a Cow

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

– Luke 13:34b



Tile work on the altar of Dominus Flevit Church, Jerusalem

There are some sites that stay with you forever. Here is one of those unforgettable places. This is the view of the Old City of Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. The Temple Mount is on the left and the Western Wall. The golden dome in the center is the Dome of the Rock, a holy site in Islam.



Pilgrims usually walk down from the Mount of Olives to the Garden of Gethsemane, past the Jewish Cemetery. The Russian Orthodox Church of Mary Magdalene is visible in the distance.



Halfway down the hill is a small chapel nestled in the hillside, the Catholic Church, Dominus Flevit (Dominus Flay-vee-it) is shaped like a teardrop. The Latin name means “The Lord Wept.”



Inside, the wall behind the altar is made of iron work and glass giving worshipers a stunning view of the holy city.

On the front of the marble altar there is an intricate mosaic design. A photo of the mosaic is on the cover of your bulletin this morning.



The Latin words around the edges of the mosaic are from our text this morning. It says:

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!

Do you notice anything surprising about the mosaic? The Wednesday Bible Study figured this out right away. It's a rooster, not a hen! Why do you think the artist did that? Jesus didn't say "I desire to gather you as a rooster gathers his brood." Roosters don't gather and they don't have broods. No, Luke says *ornis*, which means hen, a she-chicken, one of the most common and least powerful of all God's creatures.

It's true. Here in the 13th chapter of Luke's gospel, Jesus calls himself a mother hen, and I am fascinated by the image.

There is a very similar verse in 2 Esdras, an apocryphal book of sayings attributed to Ezra, the 5th century Hebrew priest of Jerusalem's reconstruction. In it a steadfast God laments over Israel saying:

Have I not pleaded with you as a father with his sons, as a mother to her daughters, as a nurse with her children? ... I gathered you as a hen gathers her brood beneath her wing. But now what am I to do with you? ⁱ

As a hen gathers her brood beneath her wings...
God gathers the beloved of God.

Now I didn't grow up on a farm, but I did get to spend many summers on my dad's cousins' farm when I was young. We had plenty of chickens and practically every other kind of farm animal you can imagine. I learned that a hen is a vigilant mother.





At the slightest hint of danger, she makes a couple of loud, squawking sounds, and her chicks come running from every direction.



In a split second they disappear beneath her wings ... it looks like this. How many feet does she have there?

Jesus longs to be the sheltering wings of protection for his people but they do not come.

*I piped but you would not dance.*ⁱⁱ That's what he told them.

When his warning cry rang out on the lips of the prophets, and finally on his own lips, Jerusalem's reaction was to *kill those God sent to them*. To all the messengers of love God sent, the reaction was the same, the same fate that Herod intended for Jesus. The Pharisees warned him, *Herod wants to kill you*.

No kidding! Remember the slaughter of the innocents? That was a different Herod, but the two were pretty much the same. On that one point Jesus and the Pharisees agreed. Jesus was unwavering: *Go tell that old fox I am busy – healing today and tomorrow and on the third day I will be finished*.

On the third day he will go to Jerusalem. You know what happened. He went willingly, even resolutely, to the City of God to proclaim the Kingdom of Peace. But Jerusalem did not receive him. Jerusalem had "better things to do" than to take shelter under his wings. It had a fox as its leader; he commanded a great deal more respect.

Consider the contrast:

Jesus had disciples; Herod had soldiers

Jesus serves; Herod rules.

Jesus prays for his enemies; Herod kills his enemies.

In a contest between a fox and a hen, who would YOU bet on?ⁱⁱⁱ

Maybe that's why the artist who made the mosaic on the altar at Dominus Flevit pictured Jesus that way – as a fighting cock instead of a mother hen. Truth is, we all have some trouble buying the idea of strength in weakness and power in sacrifice. Like the artist, we want to give Jesus talons and mighty wings, but the fact of the matter is – Jesus did not liken himself to a fighting gamecock. He called himself a brooding hen.

A hen doesn't have much in the way of defenses. About all she can do is fluff herself up and sit on her children. (Parents, there's your new parenting technique – look big and sit hard!) What a mother hen does is put herself between her children and the fox. She pecks and scratches if needed, but ultimately her hope is that her flesh will satisfy the foxes' appetites, and they will leave her chicks alone. We have a word for this. It's called sacrifice.

Some years ago, when my friend Bob passed away, I was going through his papers and came across a story, a barnyard scene. It's about a pig who was complaining to a cow about how unpopular he was.

“People like *you*,” said the pig to the cow.

“They are always talking about your gentleness and your kind eyes. Sure you give milk and cream, but I give more. I give bacon and ham. I give rinds. They even pickle my feet! Still nobody likes me!”

“Well,” said the cow with gentle eyes, “maybe people like me because I'm giving while I'm still living!”

Giving while we're still living is one of the Bible's key messages. My friend Bob certainly lived that way. He was always reminding me that we who have shelter need to be the shelter for those who have little strength or power to resist the foxes of this world. Giving -- now and at our life's end -- is one way that we live our Lord's commandment to *lay down our lives for one another*.^{iv}

Sacrifices like the cow's that allow us to keep all the comforts of our lives, our strength, and our dignity are the most popular kind. But Jesus did not choose the popular way. He chose the way of sacrifice. He became to sacrifice, he became -- and he called all those who want to follow him *to deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me*.^v

Sacrifice. “Do your giving while you're living, so you're knowing where it's going.” Have you ever heard that?

It's about sacrifice -- all this exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees. It's what Jesus' life and teachings are all about, but not enough of us take it seriously. The writer of 1 John put it this way: *By this we know love; that he laid down his life for his friends*.^{vi} That should be you and me.

The vicious attack in Christchurch and the rise of white supremacy in our own country and around the world has horrified all of us. One of you asked me this week if we might hold up the heroes, celebrate those who sacrifice.

You are right, that is the most important thing we can and should do. That got me thinking about Chiune Sugihara (Chee-oo'-nay Sue-gee-hara') -- do you know that name? He was born in Japan to a physician and his wife on the same day as my grandmother, January 1, 1900. An excellent student, Chiune intentionally flunked the med school exam cherishing a dream of becoming an international diplomat. At age 19 he passed the Foreign Service exam, learned Russian, and in the 1930s he became vice-counsel of Japan's Consulate in Kaunas (Cone'-us) Lithuania. He met and married a Russian Orthodox Christian and converted to the faith of Jesus.

In 1939 there were over 30,000 Jews living in Kaunas, some Lithuanian, and some who had escaped Nazi occupied Poland. One morning, a huge throng of people gathered outside his home. They were asking for visas, which would allow them to escape Eastern Europe via Japan. Sugihara sent three different telegrams to Tokyo requesting the visas. The first two times the answer came back, “No.” The third time he asked, the answer was, “Absolutely no.”

Sugihara faced a terrible choice, the fulfillment of his lifelong dream to become an ambassador, or helping the desperate refugees. He chose the sacrifice. For twenty-eight days, he hunkered

down at the Consulate writing visas by hand 20-hours a day. Japan responded by shutting down the consulate. Sugihara was still writing visas on the way to the train station, shoving them through the train windows into the hands of refugees who ran alongside the train. It's estimated that Sugihara's act of civil disobedience saved 6,000 lives.

In Israel he is called "the Japanese Schindler." Sugihara was not only a courageous man; he was also a committed Christian. After he left the Foreign Service, he spent the last years of his life doing menial work. It wasn't until after his death that his story became finally known. His son was asked, "How did your father feel about his choice?" The young man replied, "My father's life was fulfilled. When God needed him to do the right thing, he was available to do it."^{vii}

When Herod and his thugs came after Jesus, he didn't raise a hand. Instead he put himself between them and the chicks, all fluffed up and hunkered down like a mother hen. At first, it looked as if the fox had won the battle, but then... maybe not.

Barbara Brown Taylor, in her commentary on this passage noted that,

"It might have looked like a minor skirmish to those who were there, but the contest between the chicken and the fox turns out to be 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 children. God bet the farm on that hen.

"And the hen won. It didn't look that way at first with feathers all over the place, and chicks running for cover."^{viii}

But as time went on it became clear that he had won. He refused to run from the foxes and refused to become one of them. *Having loved his own who were in the world he loved them to the end.*^{ix} He died a mother hen and came back to them with the wounds on his body to make sure they got the point – that the power of evil could not kill his love, nor could it steal them away from him. They might have to go through what he went through, but he would be waiting for them on the other side, with love stronger than death.^x

There is nothing that can separate us from that love. The scriptures tell us that there is nothing – no power of height nor depth nor anything else in all creation that can overcome it. *For we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.*^{xi} Amen? Amen.

ⁱ 2 Esdras 1:28-30

ⁱⁱ Matthew 11:17

ⁱⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor makes this point in *Bread of Angels*, Cowley, 1997, 124

^{iv} 1 John 3:16b

^v Luke 9:23

^{vi} 1 John 3:16a

^{vii} This quote is from *Preaching Today*, February 14, 2003. There are many accounts of Chiune Sugihara's story. I recommend the Jewish Virtual Library www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/chiune-sugihara

^{viii} Taylor, op. cit. 126

^{ix} John 13:1b

^x Taylor, op.cit, 126

^{xi} Romans 8:37