

In the Hen House

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February 28, 2010

Psalm 27

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Luke 13:31-35

Foxes and hens. We associate these animals more with Aesop's fables or fairy tales than the Bible. But here they are in the gospel. It is not the first time in Luke that Jesus refers to foxes and birds. You know the saying, "Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Chosen One has no place to lay his head." (Luke 9:58) But this time it is a bit more cryptic.

This year during Lent we are practicing holding on and letting go. But how does one hold on and let go? Do we hold on like a fox or let go like a hen? And what would that mean?

The Pharisees have come to warn Jesus that Herod wants to kill him. Knowing that his cousin, John the Baptist, has been beheaded by Herod ought to make Jesus take this warning seriously. But does he?

It seems strange that the Pharisees come to caution Jesus. After all, as depicted in Luke, Jesus does not have a good relationship with the Pharisees. At best, the religious leaders are skeptical of Jesus and his methods. At the very beginning of his ministry, in Luke 4, Jesus is run out of his hometown synagogue.

In Luke 5, the Pharisees question Jesus' audacity to forgive sins and heal paralysis.

In Luke 6, the Pharisees challenge Jesus and his disciples when they pick grain on the Sabbath and again when Jesus heals on the Sabbath. In fact, the

scribes and Pharisees lay in wait for Jesus, looking for grounds to accuse him of breaking the religious law. It infuriates and threatens them to see Jesus interpreting the law differently than they do themselves.

In chapter 7, one of the Pharisees tries a different tact. He invites Jesus home for dinner. This is the scene where the woman washes Jesus' feet with her tears and dries them with her hair. She anoints his feet with expensive oil. In Matthew and John, it is the disciples that have a fit about this lavish display. But in Luke the disciples aren't there; it is the Pharisee that finds the woman inappropriate. The Pharisee is offended not so much because of the waste, but because the woman is obviously a sinner. Jesus should know better than to associate with her, to allow her to touch him. Jesus responds by calling the Pharisee on his own inhospitality, his own inability to forgive and offer forgiveness.

By the time we get to chapter 9, Herod has heard rumors about this Jesus. Herod is quite sure that he had John beheaded so he doesn't think this is John come back to life. But who is this Jesus? Luke says simply that Herod is interested in seeing Jesus.

In chapter 11, Jesus receives another dinner invitation from a Pharisee. This time there is no woman to wash Jesus' feet; in fact Jesus doesn't wash at all before the meal. According to Luke, the host observes this blatant disregard for tradition "with amazement" though I wonder if the writer doesn't really mean consternation. The attitude of his host sets Jesus off on a rant against the Pharisees, those that strictly follow the religious traditions but ignore justice. The

other invited guests, the lawyers, are insulted by Jesus' tirade against the Pharisees and speak up in defense of their host. Instead of backing down, Jesus goes on to insult the lawyers directly for their unjust behavior.

After this episode, Luke tells us that the scribes and Pharisees are beginning "to get very hostile toward Jesus, cross-examining him and waiting to catch him in something he might say." Luke tells us next that thousands come to hear Jesus. It is like a soccer match or a rock concert, or Wal-Mart on Black Friday. There are so many people that some are trampled. The people have come to hear Jesus preach and teach. And his sermon title for the day? "Beware the yeast of the Pharisees, that is, their hypocrisy."

With all of his criticism of the Pharisees it would be easy for us to think that Jesus was against Jews and Judaism. Sometimes Christians forget that Jesus was Jewish, as were many of his followers. He is not critical of the Jews per se. He is railing against the religious leaders for being inconsistent, for holding to the rule of law rather than the justice behind the law.

So with all this evidence of a tempestuous relationship between Jesus and the Pharisees, is it any wonder that Jesus (and we the readers) might be suspicious when the Pharisees come to warn him (in chapter 13) that Herod is out to get him?

But even as the warning is delivered, Jesus doesn't panic. And he certainly doesn't thank the Pharisees for their kind counsel. He says, "Go tell that fox for me..." He spits out an insult to Herod, but might it also apply to the ones delivering the message?

I just finished five days in the “Values Based Leadership Program.” I spent two and a half days in September and another two and a half days this past week at Laurelville Church Center in western PA with 34 other leaders. We were there to learn how to lead more effectively, with integrity. We spent a lot of time with tools such as the Leadership Practices Inventory, the Everything DiSC, the Leadership 363, the Six Hats Theory and even reading the Bible. We did not learn the “animal personality index” that Jesus seems to be using.

Jesus calls Herod a fox. Foxes are known for being clever, wily, solitary hunters. In fairy tales, they fool others into giving up a desired food or object. Think of the fox and the crow, where the fox fools the vain crow into dropping the cheese out of her mouth into the fox’s mouth. Or the gingerbread man who runs from everyone and then is helped across the river by the fox, only to be eaten by the fox in the end.

Do these characteristics apply to what we know of Herod? Is Jesus taking this opportunity to insinuate that the Pharisees also are foxes? After all, they have been using their cleverness to try and catch Jesus for quite some time now.

Even though Jesus is being warned of a death threat, he doesn’t appear afraid or anxious. He simply uses this as another opportunity to let people know about his mission. He has more healing to do, more demons to cast out. He is a prophet, and since prophets can only be killed in Jerusalem, he will do his work elsewhere, for a while.

Jesus calls Herod (and perhaps by inference the Pharisees) a fox. Then he compares himself to a hen. While I have heard of a number of fierce rooster

attacks, this is not behavior we associate with hens. Hens might get “broody” and protective over their eggs and chicks, but fierce? Our stories about hens include The Little Red Hen who works hard but doesn’t get help from others. And Chicken Little who, upon having a nut fall on her head, believes the sky is falling.

Foxes are known for attacking hen houses.

So just what kind of defense, what kind of “chicken” leadership, is Jesus proposing?

The standard question posed to those who espouse non-violence is: “what would you do if someone attacked your child?” The expected answer is, “Okay, you got me. That is the one time that I would use violence, when I would pull out my weapons and fight to the bitter end.” In essence, this is the question to which Jesus is responding. Herod wants to kill him. Wouldn’t it be logical for Jesus either to run or to plan a violent defense? He does neither. Instead he provokes the situation further by calling Herod a fox. And then he says he wants to hold the people of Jerusalem to him, like a hen protects her chicks.

It is the people in Jerusalem, Herod as well as the religious leaders, that would harm him. Hold them under his wings? Instead of fighting back, instead of running away, he wants to hold these enemies to himself to protect them!

That is his response to a threat? It certainly is unpredictable.

Perhaps it is like the story I heard recently of the bank teller in Indiana, who when a man came to rob the bank she said, “You look stressed out, you don’t look like a typical robber. Have you lost your job in this bad economy? Are

you sure you want to do this? Would you like me to pray with you?" The robber said, "yes." After the prayer, he robbed the bank and was caught soon after.

In the gospels we read that we are to love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us. Here Jesus demonstrates what he means. Hold out your arms, gather in those who threaten you. Lift your wings and pull them close.

Feminists have long referenced this passage where Jesus refers to himself as a hen to show that feminine images of God are in the Bible. Feminine images of God are valid. Taking the illustration a step further we have an image of God as regenerative, laying eggs, providing new life and food for others, from herself. This is a picture of a protective God, keeping her chicks safe and warm.

As Mennonites, we often look to Jesus not only as saving but as a model for our own lives. But I am not sure we strong women and girls and egalitarian men and boys ought to go much further with this metaphor. A hen may be protective, sheltering her chicks under her wings for warmth. The chicks are protected from the elements. But are they really safe from foxes? The well-intentioned hen is protecting her chicks, but she is still vulnerable to the fox. Is Jesus is showing us another way?

One of the important qualities we learned about in the leadership program was vulnerability. Besides encouraging others, modeling the way for others, inspiring a shared vision, challenging the current process, we were told that leaders are to open themselves up to others, to show vulnerability.

Jesus is saying that a way to deal with those who we love, and those who we expect may have suspicious motives, is to open our arms. He is not running

from his problems. Luke infers that later Jesus will go to Jerusalem and there he will hear the people say, "Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord." And once in Jerusalem Jesus will pray for the people, he will gather them into his arms and he will be killed.

Here another caution is in order. Vulnerability is a defense and a way to show leadership when it is chosen. If vulnerability is imposed we call it oppression, coercion or abuse, not leadership. Jesus chooses his actions carefully and while he may not desire death, he is willing to accept that as a consequence of his misunderstood ministry.

Jesus holds out his arms to those who hate him and those who love him, but his death is not the end. In the hen house, where the hen gathers her chicks, the cycle starts all over again. The eggs hatch, the chicks are protected and grow.

Now we are the hens who hold out our wings to the young, to the old, to those with whom we disagree, to those whom we love. We know that there are foxes afoot. We also know that as hens, we let go of our power and are held in the arms of God.