

“No Chick Left Behind”

Luke 13:31-35

February 28, 2010

Today is the third Sunday that a group of us will gather in the fellowship hall to talk about the Minor Prophets. Actually, the study has been more thought provoking than I had imagined it would be. For one thing, the prophets lump everybody together. In Ancient Israel, you could not get away with ONLY claiming God as your personal Savior and doing what you felt to be right in your own heart; you were part of a larger group. When one person turned away, everybody hurt. The sin of one affected everyone. While I don't like the idea of being responsible for someone else's waywardness, I am convinced that we sacrifice something terribly important to our faith when we insist on filing up to God one by one. Yes, our individual relationships to God are important, but they do not make us the Body of Christ. It is our life together that makes us Christ's body. So, a good question to ask every now and again is how is our body shaping up? Do we look like Jesus at all? Are we making him proud? Does he claim bragging rights for how faithful we are?

Or do we, too, inspire Jesus to say, “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.” That's a good depressing, Lenten passage, isn't it, but its sentiment is not unfamiliar. If you have ever loved someone you could not be with, if you have ever loved someone you could not protect, then you have a taste of what Jesus is talking about. For all the power of love and the crazy things it inspires in us, when it comes down to it, all you can do is open your arms. You cannot make anyone walk into them.

Think of the father saying to his son, “You could avoid so much grief and pain if you would just listen to me and learn from my mistakes, but you were not willing.” Think of the mother reaching out to hug her teenage daughter, and the girl squirming away in embarrassment. “I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing.”

Same thing with rebellious Jerusalem – knowing itself to be God's child and yet stomping its foot and insisting on its own way - making its own spectacular mistakes. We could call Jerusalem a clergy killer city, a place that could not hang on to a prophet for long without literally killing them or without running them off one by one. It was enough to make anyone cry, - tears of frustration, tears for their future, tears for the broken relationship and tears over your powerlessness to do anything to stop their self-destruction. You want to take them by the shoulders and shake them and say, “Stop, can't you see what you're doing?”

But, right at that point, do you ever look at your hard-headed, stiff necked child and see remnants of yourself? We can sit in our beautiful sanctuary and look at stubborn, stupid Jerusalem – who had Jesus RIGHT THERE and did not get him. But, it can be like looking at our own reflection. All of us could make a list, probably a long one, of the times and ways when God asked for our help, and we were not willing. What should raise a red flag for us as we gaze into Jerusalem are the specifics of what they were unwilling to do. I totally get resisting God's judgment. As I said, we're reading the Minor Prophets and I get resisting the fire and locusts and bloodshed that are summed up as judgment from the Divine Warrior. I get wanting to run and hide, just like Adam and Eve in the garden, when God is walking near and we suspect that we might possibly have done something wrong.

But, that's not what was happening in Jerusalem. Jesus seems to be lamenting that Jerusalem resists God's GRACE. Jerusalem does not want to be gathered in, sheltered, and protected by God. That seems crazy to me, so wrong on so many different levels, until once again, I see traces of our reflection. Do you ever look in the mirror and you see the circles under your eyes and the fatigue tugging at the corners of your mouth and you hear God saying, "How often would I have gathered you to myself in a huge embrace, but you were not willing." Do you ever look in the mirror and see frustration or despair blankly staring back at you? "How often would I have sheltered you under my wing, but you were not willing."

I have some suspicions about why that is. One thing is that if we welcome God's grace into our lives and we slip under his wing, we have to be ready to change. We can squirm and cluck all we want but the love from the mother hen takes our whole lives under her wing – the good AND the bad, and she warms even those places in our little chick hearts that make us feel insecure - that we don't talk about – the resentments that shame us, the anger that sharpens us, the negativity that isolates us, the fears that numb us. You know the places where you would rather God not look. Grace says, "Man, you've got to own this." Years ago, a ministerial group worked to pass a resolution to the state legislature demanding that all state-owned buildings be accessible to persons with handicapping disabilities. They were on a higher ground spiritually, making sure God's grace gets out THERE. Until a woman stood up and said, "My daughter cannot walk. You are a bunch of hypocrites! There is not one pastor here who serves a church that is completely accessible to the handicapped. You ought to get your own house in order." Ouch. If we take cover under God's wing, it's not just to sign a petition or make a resolution about others and what others are not doing or what others could do better in our humble opinion. Anybody can do that. When WE head for the wings, it is to warm something up on the inside of OUR lives – to transform something in us – to make us think about what WE are not doing and what WE could do better. Oh, it would be easier if Jesus used his last days to write a resolution to attack that old fox, but his last words of judgment are for his followers. How often would he have gathered us together under his wings, and we were not willing.

But, there is another practical reason for our resistance. The grace of being a under a brooding hen's wings does not look like anything we admire – it's not a strong position. Jesus called Herod a fox –and that's more than an insult – it is a word play, because after Jesus calls Herod a fox, how does he refer to himself? A chicken. A brooding hen, whose chief purpose in life is to protect her young. She has nothing much in the way of a beak and nothing at all in the way of talons. About all she can do is fluff herself up and sit on her chicks and put herself between them and the fox and hope that she is finger licking good enough to satisfy his appetite. So, how do you like that image of God? If you are like me, it's great when you are hurting and you need a little comfort and warmth, but in terms of protection, a chicken leaves something to be desired. When the foxes of this world suit up and go on the prowl, I don't want to be holed up in the henhouse. I want to go after them with fangs and claws.

Here's what I mean, and this example is for Joe and all you men out there. I have seen more Clint Eastwood movies and John Wayne movies than anybody should ever be subjected to. But, my long suffering will not be in vain this morning. I'm putting one of those movies to good spiritual use. Did you ever see Clint Eastwood in Pale Rider? Clint played a frontier preacher with a past. What kind of past is not clear, but he walked around in a clerical collar looking pained as only Clint Eastwood can, and once when he took his shirt off you could see the scars of three old bullet holes in his back.

One day, he rode into a mining town that had been overrun by foxes. The corrupt sheriff was in cahoots with a bunch of armed bullies who were always taking things that did not belong to them and then killing anyone who got in their way. At first, Clint just took it all in. You don't want to believe such things about people. But, one day, he had seen enough. He walked into the bank and produced a key to a safe deposit box (a clue to his past in that very town). Alone in the vault, he pulled the box from the wall and opened the lid. Inside was a pair of six shooters and a belt full of bullets. Clint took it out and strapped it around his waist. Reverend Eastwood he was no more. He took off that clerical collar and put it in the empty box. Wouldn't it be nice to be able to just strip off your faith and your integrity just like that? Go get em, Clint. Gun down those foxes and nail their tails to the wall. Which is exactly what he did.

But, that was Clint Eastwood, and Jesus was Jesus. He too had scars on his body. He too meant to protect the chicks from the foxes but here's the difference. Jesus would not become a fox himself in order to do it. He refused to fight fire with fire. When Herod and his bullies came after Jesus and his brood, he did not produce any six shooters to take them out. He just put himself between them and the chicks.

That contest between the mother hen and the fox turned out to be the holy mother battle of all time, in which the power of brute force and meanness was put up against the power of a mother's love for her chicks. And, God bet the farm on the chicken. Turns out that was a good bet. It did not look that way at first, with feathers all over the place and baby chicks running for cover. But, as time went on, it became clear what she had done. She had refused to run from the foxes, and she had refused to become one of them. Having loved her own who were in the world, she loved them to the end, and afterwards she came back to them with teeth marks on her body to make sure they got the point: that the power of foxes could not kill her love for them, nor could it steal them away from her. They might have to go through what she went through in order to get past the foxes – and sometimes that is exactly what we must do, but she would be waiting for them on the other side, with a love that is stronger than death.

I want that. I want Jesus to look at me, I want Jesus to look at this church and say, "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were more than willing – you came running. And, you didn't do it one by one. You grabbed each other. You came running together, shoulder to shoulder, and hand in hand – not wanting anybody to miss out – no chick left behind." You see, when we refuse to take on the way of the fox, when we refuse to fight ugly with ugly, we grow from chicks to chickens – by giving what we have received, by teaching what we learned, and by loving as we have been loved – by a mother hen who would give her life to gather us under her wings.