

Foxes and Chickens
Sermon on Luke 13:31-35 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, March 4, 2007

If you have been coming to this chapel long enough, you know well that I am not a fan of the word problem, which I believe is a kind of torture device devised especially for students of algebra. Nor am I a fan of the logic puzzle. One such classic puzzle involves a farmer who is carrying a fox, a chicken, and a sack of grain. He must cross a river using a boat that can only hold the farmer and at most one other thing. If the farmer leaves the fox alone with the chicken, the fox will eat the chicken; and if he leaves the chicken alone with the grain, the chicken will eat the grain. The question is, How can the farmer bring everything to the far side of the river intact?

I was never any good at word problems or logic puzzles, because I kept getting interested in the wrong questions. While the problem of the frustrated farmer asks you to provide the order in which the farmer should ferry his belongings across the river, my question is, What is the man doing carrying both a fox and a chicken since he knows darn well that the fox is likely to eat the chicken? Alternately, why didn't he think about putting the chicken in one of those pet carriers?

Of course, the puzzle never answers those questions, it just assumes that the farmer had both a fox and a chicken and the two coexisted, if not quite peacefully. The hen, it would seem, was content to eat her grain and keep watch over her brood of chicks. How often must the fox, hungry for a quick dinner, stalked that hen, looking for its chance to strike, licking its chops, only to be shooed away by a vigilant farmer? Danger lurked all about in that particular barnyard.

Danger lurked in Galilee, too. It was there, in that remote outpost of the Roman Empire that Jesus was creating something of a stir by preaching the coming kingdom of God—a reign that would overthrow the princes and powers of the earth and lift up the lowly (Lk. 1:52). In God's kingdom, the people who normally had to settle for scraps would be filled with good things, while those who ate chicken divan would be sent away empty (1:53). And Jesus not only

preached about that coming kingdom, he showed signs of its world-changing presence as he healed the sick and cast out demons and fed hungry multitudes.

Of course, that kind of activity is likely to attract the attention of the powers-that-be, and generally not in a way that wins awards and certificates. The kind of activity that stirs up the crowds tends to arouse suspicion among powerful men who send their minions to check things out. Herod was no different. Herod had been appointed tetrarch, or ruler, of Galilee by the Romans, and he governed at their pleasure. Thus he had every reason to insist on law and order, to keep the peace, to quell any movement that threatened to disturb his little corner of the world. When Herod heard the news that Jesus and his disciples were traveling throughout Galilee, “bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere” (9:6), he was perplexed. He thought he had put a stop to all such nonsense when he executed John the Baptist, one of those meddlesome preachers and moralistic prophets who wouldn’t tolerate his marital arrangements. Herod conducted a sweeping intelligence-gathering operation in an effort to find out who was behind this latest surge in religious fervor. It didn’t take long to discover that Jesus of Nazareth was at the center of the healing and curing and feeding.

It was then that some Pharisees came to Jesus and tried to shoo him away. Go, they said. “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you” (13:31). Perhaps Herod’s men had been spotted lurking about, licking their chops, looking for their chance to strike. Jesus was impervious to the threat. He said to the Pharisees, “You go tell that fox that he doesn’t scare me.” When Jesus used the term ‘fox’, he didn’t mean it as a compliment. Foxes represent insignificant or inconsequential creatures, especially in comparison to lions. But of course, foxes are also sly and cunning and “voraciously destructive.”¹

¹ R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary and Notes*, New Interpreters Bible vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) 281.

Herod didn't scare Jesus because Jesus had work to do, work that even a king like Herod could not stop. It was the work of the coming kingdom, of "casting out demons and performing cures," work to be done "today and tomorrow" and finished on the third day (13:32). Jesus knew that danger loomed on the horizon, that his time was short. Day after day, for whatever little time he had left, Jesus had to be doing the will of his Father, working his way toward Jerusalem and the fate that awaited him there. Not even Herod could stop Jesus, for "[T]oday, tomorrow, and the next day," Jesus said, "I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem" (13:33).

Jesus is, for all intents and purposes, a dead man walking. Long ago he had set his face to go to Jerusalem (9:51), and he let no one and nothing interfere with his resolution. Jerusalem, where Jesus "must be on [his] way" in order to accomplish that work which God had begun. Jerusalem, the city of destiny. Jerusalem, a city "exalted above all cities of the world by human sin and God's action."² Jerusalem, where Jesus went not to escape death, but to embrace it.

"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!" (13:34). It is a cry of lament for a city, a people, the very children of God, who for so long had resisted God's every effort to correct their ways, to change their lives, to bring them back to him. "It is the lament of one whose love has been scorned, whose protection has been rejected."³

Of course, if the only thing protecting you from the fox is a chicken, chances are that you will reject that protection. Barbara Brown Taylor tells of visiting a chapel in the Holy Land built on the site where tradition holds that Jesus wept over Jerusalem. On the front of the chapel's

² Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Luke*, trans. David E. Green (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984) 230.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Chickens and Foxes" in *Bread of Angels* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley, 1997) 124.

altar is the image of a rooster—“a bright, fierce-looking bird made out of colored tiles with a flock of little chicks under his wings.”⁴ Obviously, the artist had taken liberties with the text, for Jesus did not say he was a rooster, but a hen. Perhaps the change is understandable, for it represents what we admire about strength. As Rev. Taylor explains, “A rooster can defend himself. He has sharp spikes on the back of his feet that work like little stilettos on anyone who bothers him. A rooster can also peck pretty hard, and he does not wait for you to peck first.”⁵ When it comes to a matter of defense, no one sides with a chicken.

Jesus likened himself to a hen, however, not a rooster, and a hen’s chief purpose in life is to bring her young safely to the other side. She feeds her chicks and teaches them, and leads them out into the world where she protects them as best she can against the foxes of the world. She hasn’t much of a beak, and no talons to speak of. The best she can do is spread her wings over her chicks and place herself between them and the foxes.

Normally, of course, it wouldn’t be much of a contest. Circling and snarling, with a few well-aimed lunges, the foxes typically emerge victorious from amidst the flurry of feathers, death in their jaws. But as Reverend Taylor tells it, this time the hen won:

It did not look that way at first, with feathers all over the place and 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. She died a mother hen, 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, but she would be waiting on the other side, with love stronger than death.⁶

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 126.