

Foxes and Hens¹
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I remember receiving thousands of messages about how to be a “proper” man when I was growing up. Many of them were subliminal. There were occasional sour looks if I behaved in ways considered to be unmanly. Or jokes about men behaving in ways outside of the cultural norms meeting with dire consequences for doing so. On occasion—when I really crossed the line—I would receive outright lectures. I would bet that many of the men here heard ones like them, too. They were full of short sentences designed for quick correction. Things like: “You hold that hammer like a girl,” when I was just beginning to learn how to use one at all. Or, “Don’t be such a baby,” if I cried about something that was confusing or upsetting. Then there was *this* supposedly helpful comment: “Boys don’t cry.” Even when I was very young that baffled me—after all *I was a boy*, and I was usually already crying when I heard this expression, so it never made sense to me, obviously boys *could* and *did* cry... I didn’t understand it better by hearing it again and again, either.

In addition to these sayings, the so-called appropriate male behavior was modeled by the men and other boys in my life. Men were supposed to be self-reliant and able to hunt down and subdue everything they wanted for themselves without a moment’s hesitation. In many ways, we were taught to be like lone wolves, or foxes.

It wasn’t just men and boys who taught me how to become a man. Everyone was in on it—parents and grandparents, teachers, siblings, friends; and even complete strangers. Somehow the whole culture around me knew what appropriate male behavior was, and collaborated to teach my generation.

Of course, boys were not the only ones learning such lessons growing up. Girls were taught how to be proper women, too. I am sure you all had just as many models, and were taught through subliminal levels, straightforward sayings, and periodic lectures. I remember hearing culturally supported humor around being a “butch” woman and all the supposed trouble it brings. And I remember that when girls climbed trees past a certain age they could be teased as “tom-boys.” I am sure I did so myself on a few occasions.

¹ Many thanks to my Tuesday Bible Study group for all the excellent ideas which permeate this sermon. My apologies for not more specifically naming your individual contributions, which have informed me so profoundly—they just got in deeply and quickly!

It was taught—back in 1970s rural Vermont anyhow—that women were supposed to be supportive of their husbands, and to actively nurture the young and manage the family. I remember that younger women were often called “chicks,” and the term “mother hen” was applied to many women who did all the things women were supposed to do. So, on some symbolic level men *were* foxes and women *were* hens. This juxtaposition of men as hunters and women as the potentially hunted reveals something about the gender roles that many of us grew up with. At their base, they are really about *power*. Men are placed in the position of power, and ridiculed if they do not attain it. Women are placed in the position of the powerless, and feared if they step outside of it.

Now, as I hope is already abundantly clear, I am completely opposed to any perspective on women and men which limits human self expression to one of only two options. It is just too small a view for all people everywhere to fit inside. I believe that God made us to be diverse across genders and between them, and that when humans embrace a variety of possible expressions in gender, sexuality and elsewhere, that this bears witness to the glory of God’s creativity and love of possibility. So, first and foremost, I want to be clear that I think a two sided model of human genders is wrong. However, there *is* something implicit in this ancient model which is at the heart of the Gospel story this morning. And that is what it reveals about *power*, and ultimately how *God’s power through Jesus* works in the world.

Like the gender model I was just exploring, this morning’s story centers on a fox and a hen. A group of Pharisees are looking for Jesus. Instead of coming to trouble him, as they usually do, they come with a warning. They tell him: “Get away from here”—meaning out of *Herod’s territory*—“Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.”² Now, I don’t know about you... but that would scare me silly. But, Jesus had no apparent concern for Herod’s dire intentions. Instead, he responds:

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. 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.’”³

Christ’s response to the threat of his own impending death is to continue his work to bring order and healing into a chaotic and ailing world. Whereas *that fox* Herod seeks to use his power over and against the life of Christ by trying to end it, Jesus demonstrates his power *with* others through continuing to heal them even in the face of his death. And this is *the way* that Jesus travels, and to which he refers: healing and restoring others to wholeness even as he walks out

² Luke 13:31b-c.

³ Luke 13:32b-33.

the path toward Jerusalem, where *like other prophets* he will be killed. *That's* the power of God at work in Jesus Christ. Even in the face of the *worst* we can do—even as we seek to *kill God's prophets*; and *even God* through killing Jesus—even *then* God continues to bless us and heal us.

And this demonstration of God's power and love for us deepens as Jesus turns to lament Jerusalem, which is doomed to be destroyed by Romans soon. Now, many of us here are lifelong Christians, and we may take this part of the text for granted. As a relative newcomer to the faith I need to lift up for you how truly *odd* this moment is, for two reasons. First of all, with Herod breathing threats of murder against him —Jesus *laments* Jerusalem! *Jerusalem*—that place that misunderstands the prophets; the very same place that beats and kills the prophets—and *will do the same to Jesus* soon enough—and *this* is the place which Jesus laments. That is remarkable in itself. The second reason is more so. Jesus says: “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings...”⁴ Jesus makes it plain that unlike Herod, he is *no fox*. Instead he is a hen.

Have you seen a mother hen protecting her young? She completely covers them with her wings and places herself between them and any potential threat. Noted author, Biblical scholar, and minister Barbara Brown Taylor calls it “the most vulnerable posture in the world --wings spread, breast exposed.”⁵ It is vulnerable also because ultimately, the hen is no match for most predators, and perhaps especially not so for foxes. After all, Jesus *is* killed when those Roman foxes crucify him.

But in the meantime, Jesus continues on *his way*. He heals the sick, casts out demons, and invites us into the shelter of his outstretched wings and amazing love. And he demonstrates through all of these things that God's love reveals power-with-humanity instead of the power-over-humanity which we so often seek for ourselves, whether we are kings or peasants. And here's the roughest part of the passage. In the face of Christ's offer to shelter us beneath his wings, we are *not* willing to go! }{ Why is that? }{ What is so terrifying about the sheltering love God offers and the power God demonstrates through Jesus Christ?

I think it is the *vulnerability* of it. As Barbara Brown Taylor noted, when God's *wings* are spread, God's *breast* is exposed. It is not the threatening posture of foxes and wolves. It is not the heroic posture of some lone cowboy. There is no conquering hero here; only a merciful and loving God who is tender, even while protecting us.

⁴ Luke 13:34d.

⁵ From *As a Hen Gathers Her Brood*, by Barbara Brown Taylor, in *The Christian Century*, February 25, 1986, page 201; copyright by the Christian Century Foundation.

And this is the posture we are called to as Christians: to spread our arms and open our hearts...and to welcome and invite others into the shelter of God's wings. Willingness to embrace this way of life is a willingness to admit that we, too are vulnerable, and that we, too, have needs. We have to admit that we need God's shelter. We have to admit that each one of us alone is not enough. We have to admit that we need others with whom to form community; with whom to find meaning; and with whom to follow the way of Christ, even when it leads us into Jerusalem.

We are called to become more like hens, and less like foxes. This is what it means to realize that we are dependent children of God seeking shelter in Holy grace and self giving love. This is what it means to journey to Jerusalem, and to love even those who would strike us down. This is what to means to embrace discipleship.

Friends, I implore us all to take our faith seriously. Let us walk together through the fear and trepidation of Jerusalem confident that we will emerge into something greater—a place of deeper grace, purer love, and ongoing relationship having the last word over the grave. Not just in Lent; not just on Sundays; but *always*. May God bless us to truly follow *the way* of Christ.

Amen.

Luke 13:31-35

31At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” 32He 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. 33Yet 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.’ 34Jerusalem, 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! 35See, 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.’”