

Gathered Under Wings of Love



Motherhood by Ben Austrian, 1897
Reading Public Museum, PA

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Luke 13:31-35

Russell Eidmann-Hicks

Pat McMahon, a Phoenix talk-show host, once interviewed Mother Teresa. He was so impressed with the tiny Albanian nun that he told her he wanted to do something for her. "I'd just like to help you in some way," he said, earnestly. Mother Teresa was quick with an answer: "Tomorrow morning, get up at 4:00 a.m. and go out onto the streets of Phoenix. Find someone who lives there and believes he's alone, and convince him he's not." Mother Teresa's first impulse was to gather the lost and the lonely under God's wings.

That was Jesus' impulse as well. Even when he faced Jerusalem, the city of his death, his heart went out to those who lived within its walls. *"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."* (Luke 13:34) Jesus' heart is so big, so strong, and so open

that he wants to save even those who would later turn on him, and nail him to a cross. Like a mother hen, he wishes to open his wings wide – even with vicious foxes on the hunt – and usher those in need into safety.

Two weeks ago, I was looking after my neighbor's chickens. He's got about a dozen, with two roosters – and it was my job to care for them while they're away in Florida. So, I go early and trudge through the rain to open up their run and sprinkle corn and feed into their tray – and outside as 'scratch' on the ground; get them water, and make sure they're safe. Then at night I grab my flashlight and shut the outside opening, gather eggs and give them a bit of feed. My neighbor also has an old, sick rooster in a separate shed, because he doesn't have the heart to kill it.

Chickens have to be protected, because foxes and hawks stalk them, and can ravage a whole coop full of chickens in a heartbeat. A hawk killed one of their chickens a few weeks ago. Several years ago I had the bad luck to be watching this same coop, when one evening I returned too late from a church meeting. I wasn't able to get them all back into their shed in the pitch dark. Early the next morning I hurried up the hill, only to see the red streak of a big fox bounding across the yard and three feathery clumps strewn across the grass – lifeless, with their throats slashed open. I was amazed at the way the fox killed as many as it could, as quickly as it could.

Jesus calls King Herod a fox. Herod was a ruthless killer – willing to ravage the population of his day to get his way. Herod was a Roman collaborator, hand-in-hand with the brutal occupying Roman army, and forcing the impoverished nation to funnel resources to Rome through high taxes and heartless repression. He rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem with an enormous courtyard and edifice, to turn it into a tourist attraction for Roman citizens. He killed John the Baptist. Now that fox was striving to kill Jesus.

If a fox is prowling, a hen doesn't have much of a chance, especially if she opens up her wings to usher her chicks in for shelter. Her vital organs and belly are exposed. Jesus didn't have much of a chance, once Herod and the Romans chose to come after him; he was that much more vulnerable once he was in Jerusalem, the place of Herod's rule, a place where prophets were arrested and killed.

So here we have two visions of leadership: a fox or a mother hen, callous selfishness or compassionate community. Which do you prefer? This is as true today as it was then. We have those who are willing to be sharp and harsh and wily – like a fox. We have seen

recently what a ruthless desire for wealth and control can do. Or we have those who are open-hearted, caring, and who seek the common good, like a mother hen.

In so many parts of our world the foxes rule the roost – shooting missiles at civilians, causing food shortages, lying about critical issues, or cutting off medical access. People live in fear of foxes, bolting their doors, buying guns and weapons, doing all they can to shore up the coops in which they live. Living where the King Herod's of this world rule can be deadly – and can damage our souls. Jesus said that Herod's house – the Temple in Jerusalem – was desolate, without God's blessing or protection. Without compassion or concern for the common good, then societies become empty, lifeless and cruel, dens of thieves, a place of the cross and not of the open tomb.

That is why faith communities are so essential. Churches and faith communities are sanctuaries for children and families that are safe and caring, alternatives to the competitive and dog-eat-dog ways in so much of the world. We all need a place where we are welcomed with open arms, with wings spread wide – where people are genuinely concerned for our well-being, where they know our names, and value our gifts and our contributions. We welcome people from all backgrounds, races, ethnicities, beliefs and sexual orientations. We listen and appreciate diverse opinions and ideas; and strive to work together to create uplifting and growth-producing events. We protect children and seek their good. We spread our wings wide to gather those in need of nurture and shelter, offering love and understanding and not selfishness and violence.

Here's a story to illustrate this: "Teacher Story" by Nancy Sullivan-Geng. She writes: A soft-spoken woman with a firm touch, Mrs. Lake taught sixth grade. She kept her long auburn hair up in a barrette, showing off the drop earrings she always wore. From my first moment in her class I loved her. Though I was a good student, I was shy about speaking up in front of my classmates and could easily be overlooked. Not with Mrs. Lake.

That year had been a hard one at home. My father's alcoholism had grown worse. At night as I lay in bed I listened with dread to the pop of cans opening or the clink of ice cubes in a glass as whiskey was poured. Then came the loud slurred voice from the kitchen, my mother's tears, the slamming of doors. Before falling asleep I prayed, Dear God, help me make him stop. Dad was an accountant and meticulous about polishing his wing tips every morning before work. So, for Christmas I took the babysitting money I had saved and

bought the best shoeshine kit I could find. I was so excited on Christmas Eve when he opened the heavy box. But I watched in stunned silence while Dad in an incomprehensible rage threw it across the living room, breaking it into pieces.

Somehow I thought I was to blame.

How much safer I felt in Mrs. Lake's class. This was my sanctuary, the place where I felt appreciated, my papers coming back with her distinctive scrawl, my tests decorated with stars and smiling faces. When I gave oral reports, standing in front of the class, my knees shaking, I looked into her encouraging blue eyes and my fears subsided.

At the end of the year came the day for parent-teacher conferences, each student meeting with her parents and Mrs. Lake for a final evaluation and progress report. On the blackboard was an alphabetical schedule with a twenty-minute slot for each family. I was puzzled that I had been put at the end of the list, even though my last name began with a B. It didn't matter. My parents would not be coming. When I brought home papers with Mrs. Lake's glowing remarks, they ended up in the trash, unnoticed. Letters about school conferences were ignored. All day I tried to stay busy with our assigned projects while the room mother escorted my classmates to the doorway at the back of the class. Every twenty minutes a different name was called, a student walked out, and through the closed doors I could hear the muffled voices of parents asking questions while Mrs. Lake offered suggestions. I couldn't even imagine having parents like that.

Finally, after everyone's name had been called, Mrs. Lake opened the door and motioned for me to join her. Three folding chairs were set up in the hallway in front of a desk covered with files, class projects and Mrs. Lake's grade book. I watched as she folded up two of the chairs. Then she gestured for me to sit down in the one remaining.

Moving her chair next to mine, Mrs. Lake lifted my chin. "First of all," she said, "I want you to know how much I love you." I saw all the warmth and compassion in those beautiful blue eyes that I had observed all year long. "Secondly," she continued, "you need to know it is not your fault that your parents are not here today." It was the first time someone had said such a thing to me. For a moment I was scared: she knows our secret. But then I realized she had understood all along. "You deserve a conference whether your parents are here or not," she said. "You deserve to know how well I think you're doing."

She took out a stack of my papers and congratulated me on the good grades, pointing out my strengths. She showed me my diagnostic test scores and explained how high I had ranked nationally. She had even saved a stack of my watercolors, those things my

mother usually consigned to the trash. During that meeting my perception changed. I was allowed to see myself objectively, and because I knew Mrs. Lake cared for me, I believed what she told me. My home situation was the same, but I was a different person.

For a long moment Mrs. Lake and I looked at each other in silence. Then she gave me a hug. Afterward she gathered her papers and we returned to class. None of my friends ever asked me what she said, and if they had I don't know what I would have told them. It was too precious, too private, too wonderful. The growing up years that followed were often difficult, but my teacher had given me an extraordinary gift. For the first time I knew I was worthy of being loved. That made all the difference.

This is how a mother hen acts, with protection and nurture. Too many of us face a world of foxes, filled with self-absorbed and cruel people. While this church goes through a transition to new leadership, this is a good time to consider what it means to live in a community of gentleness, honesty, and compassion. Where else can we find a place where we experience Jesus' vision: "to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings"? Amen.