

## God Always Welcomes Us

### [Luke 13:31-35](#)

Today's Gospel is a rather odd passage. Some commentators have suggested that it's two separate sayings of Jesus put together to make one. I don't know if that's true, but it certainly comes at a time when the pressure is on Jesus.

He is making his way toward Jerusalem when he's told that Herod is out to get him. You will remember that after Herod the Great died, the country was divided between his sons. Herod Antipas ruled Galilee and Perea, the land on the east bank of the Jordan, as a client state of the Roman Empire. He was responsible for major building projects, most importantly the construction of his capital Tiberias on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. In the Biblical story, Herod is the one who imprisoned John the Baptizer for his criticism of Herod's corruption and subsequently beheaded him. Later, when Jesus came before Pilate, Pilate sent for Herod and he was glad to come because he had long heard of Jesus and wanted to see him do a miracle.

So Herod and Jesus knew of each other, and it *is* possible that Herod was planning to kill Jesus. On the other hand, the warning may have been an attempt to undermine Jesus rather than a credible threat. But Jesus is already on his way to Jerusalem. This will be the culmination of his - it is in Jerusalem that Jesus' work will be finished or completed.

Jesus refers to Herod as a fox and then shortly after, to himself as a chicken. Maybe stories about foxes and chickens were as much part of the culture of Jesus' day as they are of ours. Perhaps Jesus is intentionally contrasting Herod the fox with Jesus the chicken. Foxes are predators who we see as tricksters, always trying to trick innocent and naïve chickens or ducks. This is not the kind of leadership that Jesus offers. This is not the way of God.

Instead, Jesus is like a chicken who longs to gather her chicks together but they are not willing. I don't think I've ever seen a hen gathering her chicks so I looked on YouTube and found several videos. Here's just a short one...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GIkPANITZcg>

Those were happy chicks weren't they? There wasn't any coercion involved – they just stayed safe with Mama and peeked out whenever they got curious – then slipped back under her wings.

Jesus said “Jerusalem, Jerusalem...How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

Please close your eyes for just a moment and think what it must be like to be one of those chicks, safe and warm under your mother's wings... and then imagine what it might be like to be the chicken... how fiercely loving and protective she feels toward her brood... and now remember a

time when you have felt deeply loving toward another being, perhaps a child, a pet, or a sweetheart... that's what God feels about you.

Stay with that feeling but bring yourself back here to this time and this place.

Jesus says, "How often have I desired to gather you under my wings, and you were not willing!" God longs to gather us under her wings – God is like a mother hen who is always willing to offer us love. Yet, like the people of Jerusalem we are often not willing. Like one of the bolder chicks, we think we don't need it and so we get up and wander off. Or maybe we don't think we deserve God's love and so we turn away.

And there's the rub.

The more we turn away, the more difficult it is for us to turn back to God. Which is, it seems, one way to understand Jesus' message of love AND his message of judgment. God's unconditional love is always available to us but we have free will. Those chicks were not coerced or forced to go under the hen's wings. We are not coerced or forced into loving relationship with God. It's our choice.

But if we choose not to follow Jesus, if we choose to ignore or to subvert the two great commandments, to love God and love our neighbor then we are separating ourselves from God. Separation from God is the judgment that we bring upon ourselves.

Jerusalem, although the subject of many hymns and longings, and the place of pilgrimage, was not friendly to those who disturbed her complacent ways. Jerusalem, the capital city of Judah, was the center of political and religious power in the Jewish world. We've all watched enough House of Cards, West Wing and other TV series to know something of the machinations of those who live and work in Washington DC. Jerusalem was like that. The establishment was not kind to prophets who came speaking truth to power. Jesus is on his way there, expecting to meet the same end as those who went before, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem," he says, "the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!... See your house is left to you."

The verb translated here as "left" – your house is left to you – is the same as you might use for divorce. Perhaps this is a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem, or perhaps it is a picture of what happens when we decide not to accept God's offer of loving relationship – our house, our place of being and safety becomes divorced from God and left entirely to us without the sustaining presence of God.

It is only when religion becomes divorced from God's love that it leads to violence. The extreme right-wing violence which is coached in the language of religion does not stem from the love of God and neighbor. It stems from human ego and hatred dressed up in the language of religion to make it seem somehow respectable. This is the fox not the chicken. Our hearts go out to all those

who are massacred or injured in the name of false religion, and to their loved ones and communities, especially this week to the people of Christchurch.

But God always welcomes us back. When we are ready to turn to God's love God is waiting for us.

Jesus says, "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.'" Maybe this is a reference to the Triumphal Procession into Jerusalem which was coming up quite soon. But maybe it is also a description of the return to God.

Instead of killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to it, Jerusalem will welcome the Christ saying, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.' Instead of attacking those who bring the word of God, when we are ready to hear it then we will also say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'

You will remember that the Prodigal Son left home because he wanted to be independent and have a good life away from the constraints of his family. But at some point he realized that he had made poor decisions and so he made the effort to return, expecting to be punished. But instead he was welcomed.

That is how Jesus the mother hen will welcome us. It is never too late or too often to return to the brood of the good mother hen. It is never too late to return to the God who always welcomes us back.