

Lent 2C 2019 Sermon

Luke 13:31-35

Some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." He 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. 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.' 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! See, 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.'"

In our Friday evening Lenten Study, we are learning of a different way of seeing the 4 Gospels. Unlike the way I learned to study Scripture, a very left-brained process of analyzing and picking apart the text, our Friday night study invites us to a far more right-brained, imaginative view of the 4 Gospels.

And I think it is because I was not trained to read the Bible in a right-brained way that I never noticed something in today's Gospel passage, despite the countless times I have read it. I have always seen in this passage Jesus' determination to go to Jerusalem, and his grief over the fact that his own people refuse to hear the message God has sent him to preach. But this past week, when I read this Gospel passage, what I saw was a story of a fox and a hen.

At the beginning of our reading, Jesus is warned that Herod wants to kill him; and Jesus tells the messengers to "Go and tell that *fox*..." Now I had always assumed that the descriptive term "fox" referred to Herod's cunning or trickiness. But just three sentences later, Jesus uses another animal image to refer to *himself*: **he** is like a mother hen wanting to gather her children together under her wings in loving protection. And I began to see that Herod the fox represents a cunning and predatory approach to life, and Jesus the mother hen represents a very vulnerable and compassionate approach to life.

Several times in the Gospels, Jesus tells his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, where he will be betrayed, rejected, made to suffer, and put to death. The first time Peter hears this prediction, he rebukes Jesus (Mark 8:32); other times, when the disciples hear the prediction of his necessary suffering and death, they are silent and dumbfounded (Mark 9:32); for it makes no sense. Why would *anyone willfully* make himself vulnerable to betrayal, great suffering, rejection by the leaders of his own religion, and, finally, being put to death – *especially this* man whom they have come to believe is the Messiah who will, in power and strength, overthrow the Caesars and the foxes of this world? It makes no sense, because this is **not** the way that the kingdoms of *this* world operate. But *Jesus* operates within the kingdom of **God**, and, as we saw in last week's story of Jesus'

temptation in the wilderness, the kingdom of God is very different from the kingdoms of this world, enthralled as they are with power and control and adulation.

Dr. David Lose points out that the kind of courage that Jesus displays by walking straight into certain betrayal, great suffering, rejection by the leaders of his own faith community, and death, is the kind of courage that arises from willingly making oneself vulnerable – like a mother hen who guards her brood against a fox.¹

Now, in the culture of Jesus' day, as well as in the culture of our own day, we don't often equate vulnerability with courage and strength. On the contrary: we most often see vulnerability as a sign of weakness, something to be avoided at all costs. No politician wanting to win an election will run on a platform of vulnerability; they wouldn't stand a *chance* of winning.

And yet we see this theme of vulnerability throughout the Gospel of Luke. Jesus is born a helpless infant and laid in a cow's feeding trough because there is no room in the inn. He rejects the temptations of the devil to exert his power in order to fill his own belly, or to work death-defying feats, or to control the world. Jesus sends 72 of his followers out into the surrounding towns, telling them, "I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves. Carry no moneybag, no knapsack, no sandals..." They are to be totally vulnerable, totally dependent on others; lambs in the midst of wolves! (Luke 10:3-9) Again, Jesus tells his disciples, "Whoever doesn't receive the kingdom of God as a little child receives it will never enter it." (Luke 18:17) And again, he tells them: "In this world the kings and great men lord it over their people... But among you it will be different. Those who are the greatest among you should take the lowest rank, and the leader should be like a servant." (Luke 22:25-26) When Jesus is brought before Pilate and Herod before his crucifixion, he does not defend himself. And on the cross, his first words are, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

To anticipate rejection and suffering and death and not look away, to make oneself vulnerable for the sake of others and for the sake of being one's true self, is not weakness; it is the height of courage.

Yesterday, I officiated at a memorial service for a man who died unexpectedly. Wilson's funeral home was packed with people – standing room only. People who were in pain and grief over this man who was loved by so many. And I reminded them that pain and suffering is the price one pays for loving; if one did not love, one would not grieve the loss.

"To love at all is to be vulnerable," wrote C.S. Lewis. "Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal."²

This, of course, is Jesus' dilemma: he loves all and everything; and to love is to be vulnerable. In John's First Letter, we are told that God IS love;³ and therefore, God is vulnerable. Richard Rohr has often said that instead of beginning our prayers with, "Almighty God," we should at times begin them with, "All-vulnerable God." Rohr writes: "We like control; God... loves vulnerability... On the cross, God is revealed as vulnerability itself."⁴

Dr. David Lose notes that in today's Gospel passage, "Jesus demonstrates that vulnerability is **essential** to courage, vulnerability stands at the core of the Christian life, and vulnerability invites us to discover the... strength of being open to the needs of those around us."⁵ And not only open to those around us, but open to God. Last week, on the First Sunday in Lent, we read that Jesus went into the wilderness for 40 days. "The desert took away all barriers between his soul and God's wide gaze," writes Episcopal priest Heidi Haverkamp. "There is a long tradition in scripture of faithful people going alone into the wilderness and encountering God, including Hagar, Moses, Elijah, [John the Baptist, and St. Paul]... "[H]e must have wrestled with his deepest questions about... what it was that God was calling him to do. Jesus goes to expose himself to God: intentionally vulnerable."⁶

My friends, our 40 days of Lent are patterned after Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness, and therefore, it is a time for us also, to become vulnerable before God. Time in silent prayer, open to God. Time spent vulnerably opening ourselves to others in their need, and acting, in what ways we can, to alleviate suffering. Time spent courageously examining our own hearts, seeing where they have become hardened or walled off, stripping away the veneer of our false selves so that our True Selves might emerge. "We like control," writes Fr. Rohr; "God, it seems, loves vulnerability..."⁷ "[W]hat we call 'vulnerability' might just be the key to ongoing growth. In my experience, healthily vulnerable people use every occasion to expand, change, and grow..."

"Yet it is a risky position to live undefended in a kind of constant openness to the other – because it means others could sometimes actually wound us. Indeed, [the word 'vulnerable'] comes from the Latin word 'to wound.' But only if we take this risk do we also allow the opposite possibility: the other might also gift us, free us, and even love us."⁸

Our Lenten wilderness is a time for us to be vulnerable to God; vulnerable to our own unconscious voices which call us to shed our false selves and become more genuine and open-hearted; and vulnerable to the pain and suffering of those in our world.

To be vulnerable is a courageous thing! After all, have we not come to know God best through the manger and the cross?⁹

AMEN

¹ David Lose, *In the Meantime* Blog, http://www.davidlose.net/2016/02/lent-2-courage-and-vulnerability/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+davidlose%2FIsqE+%28...In+the+Meantime%29

² C. S. Lewis (1898-1963), *The Four Loves*, London: Geoffrey Bles, 1960, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1960, p. 121

³ 1 John 4:8

⁴ “Absolute Vulnerability,” Richard Rohr’s Daily Email Meditation, Wednesday, March 8, 2017 <https://cac.org/absolute-vulnerability-2017-03-08/>

⁵ Lose, *ibid.*

⁶ “The Wilderness,” an excerpt from Heidi Haverkamp’s book, *Holy Solitude* <https://collegevilleinstitute.org/bearings/the-wilderness/>

⁷ “Absolute Vulnerability,” Richard Rohr’s Daily Email Meditation, Wednesday, March 8, 2017 <https://cac.org/absolute-vulnerability-2017-03-08/>

⁸ “Vulnerability,” Richard Rohr’s Daily Email Meditation, Tuesday, September 27, 2016 <https://cac.org/vulnerability-2016-09-27/>

⁹ Lose, *ibid.*