

Cities, Lions, Foxes and Hens

A sermon based on Luke 13:31-35

Don Friesen
Ottawa Mennonite Church
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In 1946 Eric Arthur Blair (1903-50) wrote a story about animals which listed the following seven rules:

1. Whatever goes upon two legs is an enemy.
2. Whatever goes upon four legs, or has wings, is a friend.
3. No animal shall wear clothes.
4. No animal shall sleep in a bed with sheets.
5. No animal shall drink alcohol in excess.
6. No animal shall kill any other animal without cause.
7. All animals are equal.

Some of you may recognize the rules from "Animal Farm," written by Blair under the pseudonym, George Orwell and intended to expose the perils of tyranny and the hypocrisies of the Russian Communist experiment, in particular. In the story the farm animals wrest control of the farm from Mr. Jones, but the newly founded community based on the principals of Animalism starts to go drastically wrong when some members of the farm become more equal than others! There is a wonderful line in Animal Farm when it says, "The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which." (chapter 10)

Orwell's animal story populated the human city with farm animals, but the excitement of the story could only increase if you threw in a few wild animals, like lions and foxes! Then some of the animals would not only be more equal, but more dangerous, more sinister, more deceptive.

It is fairly reasonable to conclude that a hierarchy of animals exists, and human beings have not hesitated to use that hierarchy to symbolize their own attempts to be more equal than other human beings. Though the lion is viewed as a dangerous beast, we have been quick to glorify it and give it prominence on national coats-of-arms! We have proclaimed it King! The Lord of the Jungle! The fox is much farther down the food chain, and thanks in no small part to Aesop's Fables we see the fox as a cunning and wily animal. Our Gospel reading throws a hen into the mix, and next to the other two it looks ridiculous! Rarely glorified and hardly cunning, the hen waddles about in its plump, slow, and clumsy way—and—is a natural victim of the predatory fox! In fact, our Gospel also reading makes reference to chicks, those fluffy little creatures even more vulnerable than hens.

Foxes, Hens, and Chicks

Jesus had been going through towns and villages, teaching people while en route to Jerusalem (Luke 13:22), when one day he received a death threat. Some Pharisees came to him and said, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." (13:31) Nervous paranoia came easily to Herod, and so it's not hard to imagine him doing this. He already had the blood of John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin, on his hands, and if he could intimidate Jesus before Jesus even arrived in Jerusalem air space, his pre-emptive strike could save him a lot of grief!

Herod's action is not surprising, but Jesus' reaction may be. Jesus told the Pharisee messenger-boys, "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.'" (Luke 13:32)

We may be shocked by Jesus' language, for calling the reigning king a fox is either foolishness, bravery, or both! Hugh Latimer (1485?-1555), the English Protestant Bishop of Worcester during Henry VIII's reign, was once preaching in Westminster Abbey when the king was in the congregation, and he said in his sermon, "Latimer! Latimer! Latimer! Be careful what you say. The king of England is here!" Then he went on, "Latimer! Latimer! Latimer! Be careful what you say. The King of Kings is here." Henry the VIII indulged Latimer's higher loyalty, but his successor, Mary I, did not, and Latimer was burned at the stake!

The "Keepers of the Empire", Herod included, like to bully their way, but Jesus was having none of it. Essentially Jesus told Herod, "Look! I've got work to do. Shove off!" Of course, calling Herod a fox was not a compliment, and, in fact, it's worse than it sounds, for in Jesus' day, the fox was not thought of as sly and cunning, but rather as cowardly and thieving! When Jesus called Herod a fox, he was commenting, not on Herod's craftiness, but rather, on his ineptitude—his inability to carry out his threat. Herod may have considered himself a lion, but Jesus pointed out that he was the opposite! He cut Herod down to size, and Jesus' audience may well have smiled inwardly at his turn of phrase.

Lions and Foxes

Jesus' reply is essentially a scornful rebuke. The Mishnah, the part of the Talmud that contains interpretations of the legal portions of the Old Testament, contained the following saying, "Be a tail to lions rather than a head to foxes." (Avot 4:15). Paraphrased, it means it is better to be someone of low rank among those who are morally and spiritually your superiors than someone of high rank among scoundrels.

Jesus was quick on the uptake, but rarely do we witness something this close to contempt for someone. To call Herod a fox was to name him a weakling; to consider him small-fry, a usurper, a poser, a clown, an insignificant person. Both the Greek and Hebrew words for "fox" can also be translated "jackal". Referring to the local ruler as a "fox" was a humiliating slap in the face. In fact, there are nuances to the word that suggest that Herod wasn't even the real thing! He was more like a son of a fox, derivative of insignificance. One New Testament scholar says, "The answer of Jesus is defiant ... 'fox' ... describes an insignificant third-rate person as opposed to a person of real power and greatness. To call Herod 'that fox' is as much as to say he is neither a

great man nor a straight man; he has neither majesty nor honour." (T. W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus*, 1974 [1949])

Herod saw himself as a lion, but Jesus knew that for all the king's political power he was a superstitious coward! Ever since he had John the Baptist's head cut off, he feared John's ghost would come back to haunt him. Jesus was not awed by the ruler's power and his remark not only questioned the tetrarch's pedigree, moral stature, and leadership, it put the tetrarch solidly in his place.

It's a little like the story of Christian Herter, the governor of Massachusetts, who ran hard for a second term in office, and one day, after a busy morning chasing votes, he arrived at a church barbecue. It was late afternoon, Herter was famished, and as he moved down the serving line he held out his plate to the woman serving chicken. She put a piece on his plate and turned to the next person in line.

"Excuse me," said Herter, "do you mind if I have a second piece of chicken?"

"Sorry," the woman told him. "I'm supposed to give only one piece of chicken to each person."

"But I'm starved," said Herter.

"Sorry," said the woman. "Only one to a customer."

"Do you know who I am?" said Herter. "I'm the governor of this state."

"Do you know who I am?" replied the woman. "I'm the lady in charge of the chicken. Move along, mister." (Bits & Pieces)

The tone of Jesus' rebuke is similar. He shows no fear of Herod, and he may be taking the matter even further when he goes on to talk about a hen, for perhaps that's how Herod saw Jesus. Jesus uses the implied label without hesitation, saying, "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!" (Luke 13:34)

Hen as Hero?

There may very well be an implicit criticism in his hen-picked statement, for the hen, while it may not have the majestic mane of the lion or the wily ways of the fox, cares for her flock, and unlike the cowardly fox will go to great lengths to protect her flock. Farmers have watched hens go into action when a chicken hawk approaches. With a furious fuss the mother hen squawks till her brood is safe by her side, fluffs out her wings and holds them over the chicks as the hawk dives. Cocking a wary eye at the hawk, the hen will not move from her children. If the predator comes in again for the kill, the mother spreads her wings even wider.

In fact, Richard Fairchild, a United Church minister in Mission, British Columbia, tells the story of a hen house which burned to the ground, and when the owner sorted through the smouldering remains he came upon one hen lying near what had been the door of the hen house. Her top feathers were singed brown by the fire's heat, her neck limp, but as he bent down to pick up the dead hen, four chicks came scurrying out from beneath her burnt body. The chicks survived because they were insulated by the shelter and protection of their mother's wings.

We may not expect a hen to fare too well in the animal kingdom, but Jesus adopted the analogy without hesitation, and like many other things, turned it upside down, using it, not as a negative image, but to invoke images of compassion and a tough, committed and protective love. His words evoke images of God's protective love, words like those penned by the prophet Isaiah when he wrote:

"He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep." (Isaiah 40:11)

The tender love of God conveyed by this classic Old Testament image was much more popular with Jesus' contemporaries than the hijinks of the cowardly Herod, who was like the shepherds described by the prophet Ezekiel—shepherds who were looking after themselves rather than their flock! Ezekiel wrote, "...you shepherds of Israel...have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for ... wild animals." (Ezekiel 34:2-5)

Jesus had shepherd-like, hen-like qualities that his contemporaries found far more compelling than the political tinkering of Herod. Jesus had their welfare at heart. He had the welfare of the human city at heart. In fact, Luke, later on, mentions that Jesus "wept" (Luke 19:41) over the city of Jerusalem. There is, in fact, a small chapel on the western slope of the Mount of Olives called "Dominus Flevit," Latin for "Jesus wept". Inside the chapel, the altar is centered before a high arched window that looks out over the city, and on the front of the altar is a mosaic medallion of a white hen with a golden halo around her head, a red comb resembling a crown, and wings spread wide to shelter the pale yellow chicks crowding around her feet. They look happy to be there, and the hen looks ready to spit fire if anyone comes near her babies. ("As a Hen Gathers Her Brood," by Barbara Brown Taylor, *Christian Century*, February 25, 1986)

Weeping Over the City of Ottawa

Jesus identified with the lowly hen, and much like a hen, he was willing to go to great lengths to protect and save us. Are we willing to follow this weeping hen to Jerusalem? To follow in his steps and to be filled with his spirit is to be just as ready to weep, not only over Jerusalem—the "City of Peace" which is now a source of conflict and disharmony—but over our own city?

In George Orwell's "Animal Farm" the church is called Sugarcandy Mountain, a good Marxist description of the church, for it encourages the masses to believe that when they die they will go to a better place, and it keeps them from complaining against the current political order of things. That, however, is not the Christian ideal, for while we look for an eternal "city...whose architect and builder is God" (Hebrews 11:10; compare 13:14), the Scriptures also encourage us to "...seek the welfare of the city where (God has) sent (us)...." (Jeremiah 29:7)

I was mindful of that this week when I read once again of the housing situation in our city. With a vacancy rate of 0.2 percent, average rents 10 to 15 percent higher than last

year, it may well be time for tears. Those looking for subsidized housing must now wait seven years! And as for social assistance rates, not only were they cut by 21 percent in October, 1995, they have been frozen since then. ("A First Hand Glimpse of Poverty," Peace and Environment News, March, 2001)

Ezekiel would say that the shepherds of the human city, and of our city in particular, are not doing their job! In fact, Ezekiel wrote, "This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy." (Ezekiel 16:49)

If it is not enough to make us weep, it makes God weep. As poet Shirley Erena Murray expressed it:

God weeps
at love withheld,
at strength misused,
at children's innocence abused,
and until we change the way we love,
God weeps.

God bleeds
at anger's fist,
at trust betrayed,
at women battered and afraid,
and until we change the way we win,
God bleeds.

God cries
at hungry mouths,
at running sores,
at creatures dying without cause,
and until we change the way we care,
God cries.

God waits
for stones to melt,
for peace to seed,
for hearts to hold each other's need,
and until we understand the Christ,
God waits.

("God Weeps")

All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version