

**Circle of Mercy Sermon**  
**Luke 13:31-35 (Lament Over Jerusalem)**  
**“Unimaginable Love”**  
**February 7, 2016**

**Luke 13:31-35**

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, ‘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 away from 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.” ’

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Have you ever known anyone who loved to deliver bad news or warnings about danger and risk?

I don’t know that she necessarily ‘loved it’ as much as she just ‘lived it,’ but my maternal grandmother (we called her Mammaw) lived in a constant state of hyper-vigilance. I remember her constant warnings throughout my childhood and well into my adulthood – really up until her death four years ago:

- Don’t get too close to the edge of the porch. You’ll fall off.
- When it was storming: Don’t turn on the water. Don’t flush the toilet. Don’t open the refrigerator. You’ll get electrocuted.

- Don't get too close to the edge of the branch (which was about this deep). If you fall in, you'll drown.
- Will you come spend the night with me? I am afraid to stay here by myself.
- You aren't driving back to Asheville by yourself, are you? Please be careful out there, honey. The roads are not safe.
- God help us all when she found out I was going to places like Cuba, Guatemala, Germany or the Middle East.

I only know a little about her early life, but from the parts I do know, it is understandable why she lived in this constant state of anxiety. I remember, as a young child, occasionally trying to reason with her about all of the warnings she offered that did not make sense to me. But it never seemed to work. No matter what excellent points I had, my reasoning did not compute for her. She could not see beyond the world as she knew and experienced it. She couldn't allow herself even to consider the possibility of safety in a world so defined by fear and anxiety.

I tried to reason with her from time to time, partly because I knew from my own life experience that the things she told me not to do were not inherently dangerous. But I also did this because I sensed, even at a young age, how her fixation on these potential risks kept her living in a perpetual state of stress and anxiety.

I didn't think of it in these terms when I was younger, but now I see that, in many ways, she experienced most of her life through a lens of threat, danger and risk – a 'living hell' of sorts. Those were the places where she resided and was content to firmly plant her feet.

Our text today opens with unlikely messengers – some Pharisees – delivering a warning message to Jesus. They came to him and told him to “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.”

The Pharisees, up until this point, had not been known for keeping an eye out for Jesus or for warning him about possible dangers or traps. They were part of the religious establishment. More often than not, we find the Pharisees testing Jesus, trying to trip him up and confronting him when he did things that seemed counter to the Law of Moses and tradition.

The gospel of Luke, generally, does not paint an endearing picture of the Pharisees. The image that we get is mostly a disparaging one. They had not impressed by John's message of repentance and baptism. They were openly hostile to Jesus for associating with tax collectors, for claiming to forgive sins, for healing on the Sabbath. It's safe to say that they didn't see Jesus as a friend or colleague.

Jesus' response to the Pharisees was usually one of criticism – for their hypocrisy, for their lack of compassion for those in need and for their pretentious behavior.

Understandably, the Pharisees were threatened by the message that Jesus was proclaiming.

So what do we make of this warning, coming from people who had, by and large, been in opposition to Jesus? Were the Pharisees trying to protect him? Were they trying to protect themselves? Were they trying to win favor among the political establishment of Jerusalem? Any of these things were possible. We really don't know.

Did you notice in the reading of this text, that Jesus didn't get 'hooked' by the death warning that the Pharisees delivered?

Jesus didn't get sidetracked trying to figure out what their intentions were. He didn't get caught up in the endless cycle of weighing out this particular warning against all that had transpired in his relationship with the Pharisees prior to this moment – trying to interpret their intentions based on their past responses and behaviors.

He certainly could have. He had plenty of material do so, but he didn't.

First, there is Herod, who was no stranger to Jesus. We encountered Herod recently, back in Luke 9, when he started inquiring about this person who was going around performing exorcisms and offering healing. Initially, Herod thought John the Baptist was back, but Herod was confused because he was sure that he had killed John already. Herod had been wondering and trying to figure out who this man was who was continuing the message and work that John had begun.

Through this death threat, the Pharisees and Herod might have been trying to interrupt and distract Jesus from his mission – to get rid of him – to make him move on and be someone else's problem. Herod seemed to be sniffing around, slyly looking for the right moment to pounce and get rid of Jesus.

Instead of taking the bait, Jesus replied to the Pharisees matter-of-factly to go back and tell Herod that he was busy, that he was in the middle of some important work – his primary work – teaching, casting out demons and performing cures. Herod's threats were not going to deter him. Jesus intended to keep moving forward, making his way toward Jerusalem, rather than away from the city.

In true Jesus fashion, his simple response to the Pharisees “go tell that fox” indicated that Jesus was well aware that his presence and work created tension and posed a threat to those in power. Jesus was calling into question the power and authority of the political and religious establishment of Jerusalem. He was questioning the power and authority of them all, simply by his actions.

You might recall that Jesus had already set his face toward Jerusalem earlier in the gospel of Luke. Jesus was well aware of the fact that moving toward Jerusalem would likely mean his death. Herod, by way of the Pharisees, was not delivering new news to Jesus. Jerusalem was the center of power for both the religious and the political establishments – both of which were in danger of being turned upside down in the message Jesus was teaching – where the first would be last and the last would be first.

Jesus confronted Herod’s message delivered by the Pharisees, but he also shifted his attention from that specific message to Jerusalem as a whole. Jerusalem had a propensity toward killing prophets who were sent by God.

Jesus was focused. He knew where he was going – toward Jerusalem, and he was moving in that direction with clear intention and purpose – to be true to the Spirit at work within him. Death threats and danger were not going to slow him down.

The interesting, and unsurprising thing is, that Jesus was able to leave his message at that – simple, direct, clear and strong. “I’m busy. I’m focused on the work I am called to do. I am not willing to play by your rules – Herod’s or the Pharisees. I already have a pretty good idea about what will happen to me in Jerusalem.”

He didn’t go into all the reasons why they needed to value his work. He didn’t try to convince them to come over to his way of thinking. He didn’t berate them for their unjust and immoral behaviors and practices. He didn’t even send word, asking Herod not to take his life.

Instead, he returned to the source of his power and strength - his work, grounded in love.

The image that Jesus painted next is both beautiful – and heartbreaking at the same time. He said to the messengers of death, “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings...”

To a message of death Jesus responded with tender, gentle words of unimaginable love. All I have wanted to do was gather each of you and your children – all of you – under my wing, just like a hen gathers her brood under her wings. I wanted to surround and enfold you, to draw you in as close as possible. I wanted to protect you.

Jesus' response in this particular part of the story should come as no surprise to us. The gospel of Luke has been preparing us for this. From the time of Jesus' birth, Luke has been painting a picture of this scene of God's tender but strong, unimaginable love for us – a love that embraces ALL, without consideration of political, social or economic status – a love that challenges the established religious and political seats of power and authority:

- In the Magificat, the peasant girl, Mary sang: “My soul magnifies... my spirit rejoices ... God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” (Luke 1)
- The shepherds, ones living on the margins, were the first to receive the good news of Immanuel, God with us. “I am bringing you good news of great joy for ALL the people.” (Luke 2:10)

- Jesus began his ministry with words from Isaiah “The Spirit of God is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of God’s favor.” (Luke 4:18-19)
- Jesus tells the story of the prodigal son and the extravagant and reckless love of a parent.
- Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan, the least likely one to offer care for the person left on the side of the road to die.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus’ desire to draw all of the people to himself as a mother hen would do for her baby chicks engages in a different narrative – one not animated by fear but one animated by compassion and love – EVEN for those who want to kill him and those who opposed his message of Good News: release for the captives, abundance for the poor, sight for the blind and full bellies for the hungry.

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<sup>1</sup> Bartlett, David L. and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year C, Volume 2*, Westminster/John Knox Press (Louisville, KY), p. 130.

I hear in Jesus' words, "How often I have desired to gather your children together," a steadfast longing for goodness and life to be known, as well as a deep sorrow for the people who were not willing to come into the shelter of his wings of love and compassion.

In their fixation on what Jesus had been doing in the past and on what Jesus might be about to do in the days ahead, the people around him could not even see what was being offered to them in the present moment.

Jesus' longing for the people of Jerusalem "as a hen gathers her brood under her wings" brings to mind the image of the story of creation when the Spirit hovered over the face of the deep. (Genesis 1:2)

The Spirit is constantly hovering over us. Luke tells us that the kingdom is all around us, working her way into our lives in every single moment – like the mustard seed, sprouting forth into a strong, sturdy tree; like the yeast doing its work in the water and flour and salt – expanding and growing and nourishing. The Spirit is constantly hovering over us.

This is the second Sunday of Lent – a season that invites us to engage with difficult questions; a season that invites us to look at uncomfortable truths; a season to open ourselves to God in ways we haven't even imagined.

It is a season in which we (hopefully) slow down or at least pause with intention to pay closer attention to the habits, choices and circumstances that create distance between us and God; to pay closer attention to the habits choices and circumstances that keep us from been embraced as closely as possible by the wings of this mothering God who wants nothing more than to hold us close and never let us go.

If I could go back in time, instead of trying to reason with and convince my Mamma how irrational all of her fears were, more often than not, I think I'd choose to sit as close as possible to her, hold her hand, and tell her she was loved.

May we find time to pause this week, to slow down even for a few moments to consider the unimaginable love that surrounds us, the unimaginable love that encourages us, the unimaginable love that invites us to move toward the shelter and tenderness of God's wings, the wings that enfold us and enable us to live fully in the fullness of God's mercy and love. Amen.