

*St. John Lutheran Church*

*The Sermon*

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March 13, 2022

Luke 13:31-35

Several years ago, a commercial came out for a business software company. It opens with these people riding horses in the arid west, like cowboys. But instead of herding cows, they herd cats. It's crazy. They get one cat into the right place and all the others scatter. They get a couple of the other cats closer to where they need to be and the first cat has disappeared. "Mew, Mew" they go.

I think that's like what Jesus talks about in the gospel lesson for today. Jesus cries over Jerusalem, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who have been sent to you. How often have I wanted to gather your children together like a mother hen gathers her chicks beneath her wings, but you didn't want to."

So Jesus talks about himself as a mother hen, who runs back and forth with her wings stretched out, trying to herd her chicks into a safe place. She gets one chick in the right place, and the others scatter. She gets a couple of the others closer to where they need to be, and the first chick has disappeared.

This is what we are like. We are like those chicks. Remember, we said last week that when we are baptized, the God says, "You are my child, I love you." That's who we are.

So we are the chicks of the mother hen. We are Jesus's children. And we run in all directions. We love to run off into those bright green fields over there. We run off without our mother hen, and we go after all kinds of wonderful things. We go after independence and romance, and wealth, and power, and beauty, and popularity, and discovery. All of those great things out there in those bright green fields.

But if we go there without our mother hen, if we go there without Jesus, then we will fall to the illusion that our independence makes us who we are, romance will make us happy, wealth will make us valuable, power will keep us safe, beauty will make us good, popularity will bring us community and discovery of new ideas and new perspectives will make us smart.

This is dangerous, because, even though all of those things are good. Independence is good, romance is good, wealth is a good tool, power is a good tool, beauty is a celebration of life, popularity is fun and discovery really does make us smart, they do not make us who we are. They do not make us valuable, human, holy.

What makes us valuable, human, holy? The love of God. The fact that we are God's children.

Without that fact, all those other things will fail us. There are also snakes out in that field, despair that will swallow us whole when we find out we don't have enough money, don't have enough friends, aren't pretty enough. There are wolves out there in that field, which will devour us when we find out that our power doesn't really keep us safe, so we are willing to do anything to anyone to make ourselves feel strong.

That field is dangerous without our mother hen.

What does the mother hen do, then, with her chicks who run away? Does she build a wall around us, so that we never think about new ideas, never hear new perspectives other than the ones we have grown up with? Does she keep us out of that bright field, and safe behind the walls of our church or our home? Is that what Jesus does?

Does Jesus let us do whatever we want? Does Jesus let us run off into the bright fields without her, does the mother hen say, "Well, I don't care what you do. Go on off. You deal with the consequences of your own choices, if you get eaten up by a snake it's your own fault."

Is that what Jesus does when we sin?

What does Jesus, our mother hen do? Our other hen goes to the cross, as so many mothers so often do for their children. Jesus, our mother hen goes to the cross, to the

places in our world and the places in our souls that have been devoured by the wolf, possessed by the impulse to gain power by any means. Jesus goes to the maw of the snake, the maw of despair, and Jesus brings the love of God to us there, right there. That's what Jesus does.

So, what do we do? We are the chicks of the mother hen. We are the children of God, the followers of Jesus. So we do the same thing Jesus does. We bring the love of God into our world. We go to the places in our world and in our own souls where God seems to be absent, and we bring God's love there.

Here is just one example of what I mean. Many years ago, I spent some time as a chaplain for Hospice of the Bluegrass in Lexington. Hospice is a group of people that will take care of you when you are dying. If you are dying of cancer or COPD or just old age, Hospice is expert in making you hurt less, making you less confused and less scared, so that you can have your family around you if you want, and so on.

One night I was working on the Hospice floor at University of Kentucky Hospital, and I walked into a room on my normal rounds. Grandpa was laying in the back, dying. He had that rumble deep down in his lungs that meant that he had a day or two to live, maybe three. Not a week. There were like, ten people in the room, none of which, I am sure, had crossed the threshold of a church in thirty years. Some had tattoos crawling up their necks onto their faces. A couple were sitting on the floor, their backs against the wall over there, high as a kite.

You could cut the numbness with a knife. It clamped down on everybody's brainstem, everybody's souls like a jawed vice. The pain was too much to feel. It had got all jammed up inside.

I put on my biggest shiniest grin, and I said, "Anybody want to pray?" They said, "Yeah!"

So, I sat down and started listening. I heard their stories, about how grandpa had taken me fishing once and showed me how to bait a hook. Grandpa had taken me in his car and showed me a beautiful overview by the side of the road. But grandpa also sometimes forgot people's birthdays because he drank too much. Grandpa worked like a dog in the day but drank like a fish at night.

There were happy moments, times of pain, sins to be forgiven, love to be honored. I just sat there and listened to their human, holy stories.

And mind you, I would not have been able to do that, if I had not walked into that room with Jesus, the mother hen's protecting wings around me. If I was walking into that room without a sense of something bigger than myself, bigger than death, then one of two things would have happened. Either I would have been swept away by the compacted, stuck grief that filled the room, or I would have run away from the pain. But I had a sense of Jesus's presence. I had those wings around me, so I could listen to the pain. I knew there was something beyond the pain.

I listened. And I need to make clear, this was not about me. Anyone willing to believe in God, at least for a while, and who has a good memory, can listen and pray. I prayed thanksgiving for Grandpa's fishing trips and his showing of beautiful views. I asked forgiveness for all the times he forgot because he was drunk. I asked Jesus to carry him through death into eternal life. All the holy stories, which they had already prayed without knowing, by sharing them with me.

And then the room was different Grandpa was still on the bed in the back, dying. Everyone was still grieving. But the room had changed. Now, they could sense God in the room. Now there was hope.

This is what we are, chicks of the mother hen, children of God, a people of hope.