

## **The Fox and the Hen**

A sermon preached by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on the Second Sunday in Lent, February 28, 2010.

*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

Because Jesus is a threat to Herod's power, Herod schemes to eliminate his influence. Ironically, Jesus' most vigorous detractors, the Pharisees, warn Jesus about Herod. While there are many Pharisees who look with disdain on Jesus' revolutionary ideas regarding the law, there are others who believe that he is sincere in his love for God. Jesus regards Herod as a crafty, cunning fox and a tool of the Roman government. Jesus uses the imagery of the prowling fox seeking to devour God's people in warning the people of the threat of Herod's tyranny. Jesus uses the imagery of God as a protective hen gathering her children under her wing in the time of danger to signify God's sacrificial love for us. Jesus warns us to be as "wise as serpents and as innocent as doves."

To understand the significance and extent of Jesus' self-sacrifice requires more than a nodding acquaintance with him. His death is the ultimate of self-giving, sacrificial love. Because God knows and loves each of us personally, Jesus is willing to give his life for us as the ultimate example of his sacrificial love.

Jesus' ministry and mission will be accomplished when he reaches Jerusalem. His own destiny and the destiny of the Holy City of Jerusalem are bound together. He tells us that the prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah were persecuted in Jerusalem before him and he knows that the time will come when he will have to face his own persecution. His rejection, like that of the prophets, is necessary to the salvation of God's people. Jerusalem's destiny as the City of God is to gather the children of Israel as a hen gathers her brood under her protective wing. When we take someone "under our wing" we are not only their mentor, but their protector as well. Jerusalem's destiny is to be the place of unity for all God's people. Ironically, this is where they will welcome Jesus as hero one day only to demand his crucifixion a few days later. The Holy City of Jerusalem remains as a symbol of unity for all the people of God. It is an intensely spiritual city where Christians, Jews and Moslems come from all over the world to honor their sacred places.

If it seems that Christianity is for losers, in a very real way we are. We gain by losing. When we are willing to lose our selves in service to others, we gain a greater sense of meaning and purpose. When we lose our guilt we gain forgiveness and reconciliation. By dying to self and being reborn in him, we gain a closer relationship with Christ. If this seems like a demanding faith, it is. The demands of our Christian faith are serious and far more complex than merely following rules of good conduct.

One of the complaints about the Episcopal Church was that we were thought of as an elitist church with much of our membership from among the upper classes, the enlightened and the rich and powerful. I am glad that we have shed that image as we stand with those who live on the margins; the poor, the homeless, and the voiceless. Predictably, the complaint became that we were too inclusive. It disturbed people when it was proclaimed that there would be no

outcasts. As long as bigotry, prejudice and racism continue among the people of God, we need to make clear that our welcome has no exceptions.

Deepening our commitment to Christ requires placing God's demands above all others because God's people are always more important than things. It means not blaming God when things go wrong. It means gathering here for worship each week is a priority rather than an option. It means working out a healthy relationship with our parents, living or dead. It means not killing anyone's spirit or reputation by anger and gossip. It means being faithful and maintaining trust in all relationships, particularly in marriage. It is being honest and fair in our dealings and not claiming for ourselves what belongs to others. It is having the integrity to tell the truth and not mislead others by our silence. It means being content with what we have and not being jealous or envious of the good fortune of others. If this sounds like the Ten Commandments, it is.

I recently attended a celebration for a friend who became an American citizen. Those who apply for citizenship are examined in some basic knowledge of American principles as well as our nation's history and the Constitution. In the same way, training for citizenship in the kingdom of God requires more than just belonging to a church. It means being called from the comfortable pew to a life of work and sacrifice for the sake of others. What we do may go without recognition or reward, but God always knows and God is the only one who needs to know. Taking our faith seriously means demonstrating better behavior than those who are passive aggressive, rude, overbearing and abusive. It means doing the right thing for the right reason. It means standing for what is right and being willing to endure the consequences. It means not trying to please everyone because we can't and shouldn't. We must please God first, and if others understand and are pleased, then all the better. Taking our faith seriously sometimes means that we have to be willing to be reviled and rejected for taking an unpopular stand. It means being unafraid to risk doing the right thing.

If you are looking for a faith that is soothing, painless and convenient, you're in the wrong place. But if you're looking for a working faith that demands the truth about yourself and are willing to commit to the work of transforming your life, this is the place for you. Do not grieve the heart of God by asking for shortcuts or by thinking that you can get by with a casual relationship. Do not think that it isn't important to be part of the church in order to be a Christian. With all our faults and shortcomings, the church is still the best place to learn how to be a Christ to our neighbor. It is the best way to grow in our understanding of Christ. Be assured, we're in good hands.