

The 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany (C)  
March 17, 2019  
Text: Luke 13:31-35

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The chicken is not, in the minds of most people, a symbol of intelligence, bravery, effectiveness, or grace. Yet Jesus presents us with the chicken as an image for himself and for the work he does in God's name. Picture the chicken: pecking and scratching, clucking and cackling around the barnyard. Does this seem like a noble image to you? Not... really. But Jesus has something very specific in mind. He thinks of the way the hen cares for her chicks, how she gathers her brood into the nest, keeping them safe and warm. Whenever there is danger, she gathers the chicks in close, spreading her wings over them to enfold them, shelter them. The hen makes herself a shield between them and whatever danger is threatening.

Suddenly, to our surprise, the chicken becomes a powerful image for Jesus and for his work—powerful because of all the ways our lives are scattered and threatened, powerful because of the ways the human family is broken and fragmented, the ways we are set against each other, the ways it seems everything is falling apart. We need Jesus to gather us in, to provide for us a safe place of shelter and belong.

How often do you hear the lament that it just seems impossible to pull it all together? Different concerns and commitments pull us in a dozen different directions at once. We face demands on our energy and time at work, at home, with friends, from our children, in our community, in our church. And what do we become when we're subjected to all these pressures? Scatter-brained!

A friend was telling me about a conversation she had with a mutual acquaintance of ours who's a new father. This man has been having a tough time. He said that anxiety has been keeping him awake at night. Parenting, career, and some special circumstances have all come together to make life very rough for him right now. He said that he had always understood his role in the family to be the rock—sturdy, strong, reliable. Lately, though, he's been feeling more like gravel—broken, and scattered. I imagine most all of us have endured, or are in the middle of, times like that. We know what it's like to feel more like gravel than a rock.

And as the human family, how scattered we are. It seems that, in our polarized political climate, people who disagree with each other have stopped talking, all too frequently stopped making any effort to understand each other. Instead, they label the other as "evil." They believe the world would be better off without "those people." Just this week I read a truly disturbing article about research on people who strongly identify as politically conservative or liberal—between 20 and 30 percent on both sides indicated that they believed the world would be a better place if those they disagree with simply died. It seems that denying the basic humanity of others has become too easy an option. It's only

short step from there to the kind of violence we saw this week in Christchurch, New Zealand, where a terrorist killed 49 people at two mosques.

Who can mend us and heal us? Who can gather us together? Only the God who has confronted the forces that tear us apart—confronted them with compassion and forgiveness. Only Christ, whose arms were stretched out wide on the cross. His arms are spread so wide like that because it is the only way to gather us all in. Jesus comes to mend our broken lives and broken communities and broken world, opening our eyes to see each other as all beloved children of God. Jesus spreads his arms wide to embrace us with love and forgiveness that have no end—not limited to the deserving or the exceptional, but for every child of earth.

Our Gospel story today is about Jesus' fearlessness and resolute determination, even in the face of opposition, even in the face of threats that King Herod wanted to kill him, to bring his work to completion. Jesus knew that the religious authorities in Jerusalem saw him as a threat. He had called them out for their greed. He had called them out for their faithlessness. Jesus also knew that the political authorities would take action against anyone they believed threatened the status quo. Jesus was under no illusions about the suspicion and hostility that waited for him in Jerusalem. But he would not be scared off by threats. He would bring his message of forgiveness and reconciliation, of love for enemies and healing for the nation, to the center of power—to the belly of the beast—to gather his people together.

The tragedy in our gospel story is that the people would not be gathered, would not allow Jesus' way of compassion and forgiveness to open their eyes and their hearts to see their neighbors, and even their enemies, in a new way. They would not unclench their fists to receive Jesus' way of generosity and peace-making and reconciliation. They would not. And Jesus knew it. He also knew that crucifixion was how Rome dealt with anyone they saw as a danger. But to turn and run from danger was not an option. To adopt the same antagonistic posture and violent means as his opponents was not an option. The only way ahead was to continue loving and forgiving, and to trust that, in the long run, God's desire for blessing, and peace, and reconciliation would not be frustrated. So Jesus entrusted himself to God, and set his face toward Jerusalem.

We know how the story ended. Jesus' enemies arrested him in the middle of the night, they condemned him as a blasphemer and sought the assistance of the Roman governor to have Jesus put to death. Pilate was happy enough to comply. But that's not the end of the story. God raised Jesus from death as a rebuke to the judgment of the religious authorities and rejection of the sentence handed down by the Roman governor—because God's desire for blessing, and peace, and reconciliation would not be frustrated. Raising Jesus from the dead, God ripped away the pretense of human justice to expose the sad, stupid dead-end that was the path the human family has been choosing for millennia now—a path of greed and violence and retaliation. Raising Jesus from the dead, God also revealed the one path of life, the one path of hope—Jesus' path of compassion and forgiveness, of

generosity and love of enemies. The call that we hear throughout Lent is the call to return to that path, return to the Lord our God, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

A friend of mine who was a pastor in Montana told me about a parishioner of his who's a farmer. One summer his farm was almost completely destroyed by fire. After the embers had cooled, the farmer went walking around to survey the damage. As he walked over the ground where the barn had been, he saw a blackened lump on the ground. He poked at it with his boot. The lump turned out to be a hen, which had been burned to death. But to the farmer's surprise, when he poked at the hen's body, out from underneath it ran three baby chicks, terrified and chirping like crazy. The hen had died in the flames, but her sheltering wings had saved her brood of chicks.

Our Savior is like a mothering hen, gathering us together, scattered though we are. Gathering us, even at great cost. Gathering us, even though it means going to Jerusalem to finish his work on the cross, with his arms spread wide, to gather us all together. Amen.