Beware of Mother Hen

Luke 13:31-35

A Sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church 3-16-25

In the devotional book "Daily Prayers for All Seasons," the prayer for mid-day during the season of Lent goes like this:

Come, heavenly comforter.

Come, heavenly comforter

and spirit of truth,

Blowing everywhere

and filling all things,

Treasury of blessings

and giver of life;

Come and abide in us;

cleanse us from every impurity,

And in your great goodness, save us.

It's a beautiful prayer, especially the beginning petition, spoken twice, "Come, heavenly *comforter…*Come, heavenly *comforter*," with its assurance that when we invite God to be with us in times of grief and uncertainty, God is with us to offer comfort…

The word “comfort” bringing with it a feeling of tranquility and calm… a sense of peace and belonging… Like the friend who comes to be with you in the midst of loss or tragedy without expecting anything from you in return…

But as helpful as this prayer can be in a time of trouble, I also think of this prayer as one of those “paradoxical prayers,” in that while it begins with this call for God’s comforting presence, it ends with a petition asking God to “cleanse us from every impurity” and in God’s great goodness, to “save us.”

I don’t know about you, but I am quite aware of the fact that for me to be cleansed from every impurity, and for me to be “saved” from all that keeps me from being the full human being God calls me to be, would require a complete make-over… a dismantling of many of the structures upon which I stand and to which I cling for a sense of meaning, security and identity… a dismantling that would not be all that “comfortable”…

Suggesting that while this prayer may begin with a petition asking for God’s comfort, it ends with a petition asking for God’s “discomfort”… at least in the sense of what it would take to “cleanse me from impurity” and “save me from myself.” Leaving me, at the end of the prayer, holding an image of God both as a “comforter” and as “dis-comforter” and with questions perhaps about how to harmonize the two…

(Rather like the little old Swedish woman named Gertrude Lundholm in the church of my childhood, who, at the passing of the peace used to take people’s hands in hers, look up at them with her

beatific countenance shining like the sun, and say in her equally beautiful, comforting voice, “May the peace of Christ disturb you.”)

So too the image that comes to us in our Gospel text for this morning as Jesus cries out with passionate desire to the wayward people of Israel, “How often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing”…

Certainly at first reading, as Jesus uses the metaphor of a mother hen to speak of himself and by extension to speak of God, this text invites its readers to imagine the feeling of being under the comforting and sheltering wing of Divine love…

Bringing to mind other places in Scripture where that same sense of God’s providential care is expressed in comforting avian terms … Like in the very first verses in the Bible, where some translations read, “*In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God* ***brooded*** *over the waters… the Spirit of God* ***brooded*** *over the waters…”*

As well as in any number of Psalms in which the Psalmist speaks of taking refuge under the shelter or in the shadow of God’s wings… All of these references offering an “under the Divine wing” sense of security and comfort…

Which is the gift that lives and moves and has its being at the **heart** of our faith…

As it was the very gift offered to the clergy of the Maine Diocese in an all-day retreat this past Thursday led by a spiritual director named David Hoover who, centering us on our Gospel text for this morning, encouraged us all at one point in the day to imagine ourselves under the wing of our "loving Mother Hen God"…

And once we had taken a moment to settle ourselves imaginatively under that wing, he asked us to hum together, "Jesus Loves Me." (And let me just say that as odd as it may sound, there is something quite moving about thirty or so weary clergy imagining themselves under Jesus' wing while humming "Jesus Loves Me" together over Zoom, even as they are all muted)…

We have a very wise bishop and clergy formation team. They know the stresses pastors and deacons are under these days as we try to figure out how to lead our congregations in the way of Jesus as all hell is breaking loose around us… And so asking David Hoover to lead us to the Mother Hen Jesus, and there to invite us to rest in the comfort and security of her expansive wing, was just the right thing to do…

But even as the retreat was drawing to a close… even before we shared a closing prayer and went on our way, I wanted to say, "Wait! Have you ever had a relationship with a mother hen?

"Can I tell you about the day when I was four years old, and I decided for some unknown reason to go out of my family's house, walk down the sidewalk and out into the middle of Springfield Avenue, where I say myself down on the pavement, in the middle of the street… Only to be swooped up a minute later by my mother, who in her

mother-hen state of heart was both wild with rage for so stupid a daughter and wild with joy for the harm that did not come to her…

"I am quite certain I still bear the mark of the buttons on my mother's dress as she pressed me to herself with all the strength she had in her tiny body, just before she plunked me on the Swedish stool in the corner of the living room where I was to sit until I understood the error of my ways…"

"And," I wanted to say before the retreat ended, "Can you sense the same rage and grief in Jesus' impassioned plea in our Gospel text as he lamented his people's total unwillingness to live in Covenantal relationship with the God of creation, liberation, justice and love, choosing instead, as they so often did, to find their meaning and identity in the false gods of the culture around them?

"Can you sense how Jesus grieved deeply for the hardness of their hearts, the narrowness of their vision and the smallness of their lives, the whole time he was inviting them into a life expansive in reach, deep in relationship and wild with love?

"And can you imagine what Jesus the mother hen might have been intending to do to his wayward people once they had been gathered under his wing? Do you see how there might have been something both comforting and uncomfortable about Jesus' interaction with them as he sought to '*cleanse them from every impurity, and in God's great goodness, to save them from themselves?*'

"Shouldn't we maybe talk about that too?"

I didn't say any of the above at the clergy retreat of course. We were almost out of time. And plus, it's so hard to speak about how the love we come to know under the expansive wing of our "Mother Hen God," with its compassion and comfort could also be the very love that threatens to "dis-comfort" us of the structures upon which we stand and to which we cling for our sense of meaning, security and identity… So, as it was just easier, and as I was a Lutheran amidst all those Episcopalians, I remained silent… and grateful… truly grateful for the gifts of the day… Because I was, truly grateful…

But, it's important, I think, to honor our Gospel text, with Jesus' impassioned plea to take the wayward people of Jerusalem under his wings, by considering seriously how it is that being under that wing can be comforting and dis-comforting at the very same time…

And really, while admitting that I don't have a clear and simple way to speak of this paradox, I do have a memory of a time when I, and about 20,000 other Lutherans, most of them teenagers, caught a glimpse of what living under the wing of Jesus' love means in both its comfort and its discomfort…

It was 1999, and a group of teenagers and I, along with two youth leaders from Redeemer Lutheran Church were in St. Louis for the youth convention that takes place across the ELCA every three years… Like most youth conventions, it's three days of non-stop activity including service in the community, small group Bible study, sporting events, speeches from church dignitaries, and events in the big hall (which is always a sports coliseum of sorts), complete with loud music, strobe

lights, and all the bells and whistles grown-ups think teenagers will appreciate.

So it was the last day of the convention. We were all both jazzed up and dead tired, and in the big hall for the final speech of the gathering… As usual, there was a rock band playing at a deafening decibel, and 20,000 kids shouting over the music in order to be heard. The room was dark except for the strobe lights undulating through the room…

And then, the music stopped. The room went dark except for a spotlight that accompanied a very small black man with white hair across the stage to where he stood in the middle, looking out on all of us with a glorious smile…and I kid you not; it was like light was shining from inside him…

It was Archbishop Desmund Tutu. We knew he was to be our last speaker, and so we had studied up on in him in our local congregations so the kids would know the immense role he had played in helping to dismantle the injustices of Apartheid in South Africa, in teaching people how to make change using non-violent civil disobedience, and in leading the Truth and Reconciliation Commission…

And we thought maybe he'd talk about his work in his address to us… But instead, he talked about how much Jesus loved us… each of us… somehow making it seem like he was addressing each of us individually… He talked about how we are invited to rest in that love, to know its depth, its width… its givenness, without condition… and then to live from that love, in love and for the sake of love for the sake of the world…

And then he told us an old African folk tale about a baby eagle that was blown from its nest after a storm and raised by a farmer in his flock of chickens. The eagle, raised as a chicken, learned to peck for grain and cluck like the other birds, thinking it was a chicken… Every once in a while a friend of the farmer's would stop by, and, recognizing that the bird was an eagle and not a chicken, would try to get the bird to fly… but to no avail, as the eagle, thinking he was a chicken, had gotten accustomed to his chicken ways…

So, one day, as Archbishop Desmund Tutu told the story, the farmer's friend took the bird to the top of a hill and placed it on a rocky ledge, where the eagle lifted up from the ground and soared into the sky…

"So too each of us," said Archbishop Desmund Tutu, "are destined, by our identity as beloved children of God, to soar to sublime heights… to become what we have in us to become."

Twenty-five years later Archbishop Desmund Tutu's words to us that day still remain for me the words to which I return when I need to remember that Jesus loves me and what that love longs for me to be…

I'm sorry to be mixing metaphors and birds here… But what I'm trying to say is that in a sense, Archbishop Desmund Tutu began his address by inviting us… each of us, to come under the wing of Jesus… under the wing of God's expansive love, made particular and intimate for each of us…

And there, to allow that love to shape our sense of identity, our sense of meaning and purpose, letting go of the identity markers and the values the world would have us live by, and instead rising into the

fullness of the creative, healing, liberating, servant kind of life to which God calls us…

Which, as any of us who has tried it knows, is not easy… Because once we've gotten used to living according to the pecking order of the world, it's really hard to do otherwise…

No wonder Gertude Lundholm, speaking from a heart of love when she passed the peace in worship, used to say, "May the peace of Christ disturb you." No wonder one of my pastor friends likes to say, "Whenever we sing 'Blessed Assurance, Jesus is Mine,' we should follow it up by singing, 'Blessed Disturbance, Jesus is Mine'…

"To remind ourselves," as she says, "that this 'disturbance', as uncomfortable as it might seem, is for the sake of helping us die to the things that hold us in bondage and to rise into the fulness of life to which God calls us… a life rich in mercy, insistent on justice, and wild will love…

Even now our Mother Hen God is inviting us to come under the shelter of her wing… And I guess the question each of us has to ask ourselves is, "Do we dare?"