

Luke 13:34-35
Consider the Birds: the Hen
July 7, 2024
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***On Screen: Porter pic**

You may be wondering why you are looking at a picture of my dog, Porter, amid a sermon series on birds. You may be wondering what this handsome fella has to do with a sermon on hens. To be clear, any time I can show y'all a picture of Porter and tie it into the sermon even remotely, I will do so. But really, dogs and chickens do have something in common. They have both been thoroughly domesticated.

Porter's ancestors, like the ancestors of all dogs, lived a very different life than Porter is living with his Saturday pup cups and daily brushings. I love this meme I've seen on social media.

***On Screen: Wolf and dog meme**

20,000 years ago, the wolf thinks: I'm cold, hungry, tired of hunting. Maybe I'll ask the humans for some scraps. What's the worst that can happen?

And 20,000 years later, the wolf's ancestor is fancy.

In Porter's defense, he would gladly hunt squirrels and bunnies for food and fun. But he has gotten really accustomed to sleeping in a king-size bed and resting on the cool tile floors when he's hot.

***On Screen: Porter pic**

This is his favorite place to lie because he can rest his sweet head on the carpet while his body remains on the cool tile. Domestication has worked out nicely for dogs like Porter.

Chickens, though, haven't fared as well. I learned this week that hens raised as meat have been genetically altered to get fat. In fact, they will get fat regardless of what they are fed. They are born to gain weight and a few weeks later they are so fat that they can hardly walk. Then they are slaughtered for our use. Most laying hens live longer, but their quality of life isn't any better. They live in cages that are so small they can barely move. That is where they are fed and where they lay eggs. Their eggs drop below them and are carried off on a conveyor belt.

It is true that some chickens are allowed to roam freely in yards or small farms, but still, we expect them to lay eggs and then give up their eggs to earn their keep. If a hen does what hens do naturally and starts to sit on her eggs to incubate them, she is said to have gone broody and is broken of the habit right away before she disrupts all the hens. My point is not that everyone should stop eating chicken and eggs. My point is that we need to do better when it comes to caring for animals.

In the bird world, chickens are not the most beautiful or the smartest. They don't sing a pretty song or have a huge, impressive wingspan. Most aren't particularly colorful

and nobody gasps in awe when they see one. We have domesticated them, not for companionship or protection or because we are particularly fond of them, but because we like to eat them and their eggs. And yet, the hen has found its way into the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

This is Luke's version in chapter 13: 34-35.

³⁴ 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! ³⁵ 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.' "

The authors of Matthew and Luke wrote relatively the same thing, and in both gospels, these verses are placed amid Jesus' cautions against hypocrisy. In Luke, the Pharisees came to Jesus, encouraging him to leave town because Herod wanted to kill him. Jesus responded by highlighting what was happening in Jerusalem. You see, Jerusalem was the center of the Jewish faith. That is where the temple was and the people believed if you wanted to be close to God, you needed to be in the temple. Jerusalem was also the center of power, both religious and political. And, in many respects, that power was unchecked and corrupt. Rather than using power for good, to care for the people, it was used to acquire wealth and even more power.

Into this power-hungry world, it seems odd that the gospel authors would want to compare Jesus to a hen, especially if they were trying to keep people focused on following Jesus. Who wants to follow a hen-like leader?

***On Screen: Hen artwork**

Thank you to Rose Dorris for providing the artwork for our bulletin cover and the picture on the screen. We are so lucky you are willing to share your talent with us! Our reading today emphasizes the specific qualities of hens that the authors assign to Jesus, "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings..."

"as a hen gathers her brood under her wings..." Based on these verses, we get the idea that Luke's Jesus is not a man who comes seeking power, desiring domination, and asserting his masculinity. He comes to gather and protect. In the Roman Empire, gathering and protecting was not something people in power did. Jesus' followers, both while he was alive, and the ones Luke was writing for more than a generation later, knew what it was like to be on the receiving end of unchecked power. I am sure there was a part of them that wished Jesus was more like a grizzly bear or great white shark.

But Jesus came to reveal the ways of God. His story began with him as a vulnerable baby to parents who lived under the thumb of Rome's power. So I think it is safe to assume that the god the stories of Jesus were meant to teach us about was and is a god that isn't a power-hungry sociopath.

In her book, *Consider the Birds*, Debbie Blue writes, “However much we might want an ALMIGHTY, I don’t think that’s what we get in God. Indeed, to be a creator involves some sort of power, but creative power seems very different to me than might.”¹

That sentiment sounds great, but the world has taught us that people without power don’t fare very well. Sharks and bears provide safety in ways that hens do not. We, like our ancestors 2000 years ago, desire power or at the very least, we want to align ourselves with power, not because we are awful humans, but because we instinctually want to survive. We want our God to be powerful, powerful enough to protect us against all that life throws our way. Have we domesticated God like we have domesticated chickens?

In the animal world, domestication is a multi-generational mutualistic relationship in which an animal species, such as humans, takes over control and care of another species, such as chickens, to obtain from them a steady supply of resources, such as meat, milk, or labor. Have we taken control of the story of God and created a narrative in which God is as power-hungry and insecure as we are? The Bible tells us the revelation of God came as a hen, a baby, the Prince of Peace, and a shepherd, yet, we so often, especially this time of year, see Jesus depicted like this.

***On Screen: Jesus with flag and gun art**

If Jesus came to reveal God, he must be American and he must love assault weapons or at least feel very powerful when fondling one. While searching for a picture of Jesus with a flag and gun (it was an easy search), I ran across a quote from a politician who said, “Jesus wouldn’t have been crucified if he had an AR-15.” Statements like this remind me of the Schitt’s Creek line, “I’ve never heard anyone say so many wrong things, one after the other, consecutively, in a row.” There are so many things wrong with depicting Jesus as a light-skinned, gun-toting, muscle-bound, American man and one of them is that people with lots of power often distance themselves from the ones they have power over. Think about it. If you work in the corporate world, how often do you have lunch with the CEO? How easy would it be to access President Biden or a Supreme Court justice? Think about how kings and queens are kept at a distance from the people they rule. What about the Pope?

***On Screen: Pope washing feet**

We are surprised when people with power hang out with the ones without power. In March, the whole world gasped when they saw the pictures of Pope Francis washing and kissing the feet of 12 women who are imprisoned.

I guess the question is, do we want a God who is distant? When Jesus is presented inauthentically, as someone who embraced the kind of power Rome wielded, we imagine God the same way. We imagine God is distant, in some far-off place judging us or maybe ignoring us altogether. Of course, sometimes we are glad God isn’t paying attention because we aren’t behaving very well anyway. God has to be distant because

¹ Blue, Debbie, *Consider the Birds: A Provocative Guide to Birds of the Bible*, (Abingdon Press: Minneapolis MN, 2013), 185.

we are so wretched and sinful that God can't stand to be near us, right? That's the narrative some of us were taught. That's a lie, by the way.

Blue writes that this power-hungry image of God is not the God we read about in the Hebrew Bible who expresses deep love and commitment to the Israelites and is even chatty at times or the God of the New Testament that Jesus talked about, but it does seem to be the God we long for and imagine.²

The God Jesus came to reveal, the God Pope Francis and leaders like him reflect, is a God we can put our hands on. It is a God who chooses to be with us. And here is the thing, this God is more like immigrants and people who are houseless and people of color and drag queens and women and children and elderly folks than like a king or CEO or Army General or whoever is wielding unchecked power at the moment. And that makes us uncomfortable because we are deeply afraid. Sometimes it is so much easier to go along with power from a place of fear than to speak truth to power from a place of courage. What if God is really here and what if God is really on the side of the vulnerable and oppressed? If that is true, then clinging to power puts us at odds with the ways of God.

I heard a joke that really isn't a joke about a preacher who was trying to find something in the Bible to preach on that wouldn't get her in trouble for talking about current political events. So, she goes to the Bible and opens it at the beginning:

In Genesis God gets mad over and over at humanity for war, for being cruel to foreigners, and for their callousness to the poor.

In Exodus God frees captives and guides caravans of refugees to new lands.

In Leviticus God mandates that wealth be redistributed every 49 years.

In Numbers and Deuteronomy God instructs the Israelites to take care of widows and orphans and not to oppress foreigners.

In Ruth we are reminded that, according to the New Testament family tree, Jesus descended from a poor immigrant who worked in the fields.

In Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles rulers who love their armies and their trade wars more than they love the poor doom themselves and all the people.

In Esther we learn that we are to use whatever trickery we can to stop genocidal plots.

² Blue, 185.

And the Prophets tell us to stop being jerks to poor people or there will be serious consequences.

And then in the New Testament, this refugee peasant community organizer dude gets wrongfully killed by the state which starts a whole movement to bring down power structures and redistribute wealth for everyone forever.

What this says to me is that when it comes to the ones who are vulnerable, God is a pretty involved parent. My husband likes to call a certain very involved parent a helicopter mom. We helicopter parents tend to hover...like a helicopter...and like hens. "If you [we] look at Jesus with the idea that looking at him will tell us what God is like, God isn't about showing us how great God is, God's thing isn't power. Like, really it isn't, not just like it could be but isn't. God's thing is not anything like what we know of power; or the kind of power we crave, or believe in, or follow, or try to have,"³ [or vote for]. The stories of Jesus show us what God is like. God sets tables and invites people to sit down. God also turns over tables to disrupt our tendency to center the wrong things in our lives. God shows compassion to the ones who feel alone and the ones who have been marginalized. God insists that love be the lord of our lives, not power or guns or money or any of the rest of the stuff we humans tend to revere.

Maybe God is like a hen. Maybe we need to be a little more like hens were meant to be before we got a hold of them. We are not kings and queens and military officers, but we have power. Our power is not in a distant God who keeps us at arms' length and smites our enemies. Our power is in the God who dwells with us, in the divine spark that lives within each of us. And that spark is a lot more like a hen, gathering and protecting, than it is a lion or warrior or dictator.

We are to gather our neighbors, especially the ones who are vulnerable. And when we have gathered them, we are to both protect them from injustice, from the elements, from hunger, from legislation that hurts them, and from cruelty, but also we are to be part of creating systems that people don't need to be protected from. We are to create healthcare systems that give the same healthcare to the ones who have insurance and money and the ones who don't. We are to create an immigration system that honors the humanity of all people and provides a pathway to citizenship that is accessible to people who are here and people will be here. We are to protect the planet and gather people who want the same things for the earth and all its creatures. We are to look upon the faces of the most vulnerable with compassion and then vote with them in mind. We are to be peacemakers not war mongers. Our power, dear ones, is found in love, not fear.

I will leave you with these words from guitarist and songwriter, Jimi Hendrix:
When the power of love overcomes the love of power, the world will know peace.
Amen.

³ Blue, 186.