

**Second Chances**  
**The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC**  
**Rev. Jennifer Gingras**  
**February 28, 2021**

*Luke 13:1-9, 31-35*

You know I can't resist preaching about chickens today, right?

In the almost four years we've been "Chicken Tenders" over at the parsonage, I like to think we've learned a few things.

That nifty chicken swing I bought for their entertainment? Total waste of money. In fact, if I were to monetize our eggs over time, I'd probably faint over how much each one really cost.

If you feed your chickens treats every day, but run out just that one time and skip it on your way to the office, they will complain to the manager... loudly!

One thing I learned is that baby chicks that come from a hatchery (the kind we hand-raised) are incredibly stupid, left to their own devices. Our chicks would crawl under things in the yard and get stuck, needing to be rescued. One day I found one that walked into its own water dish and drowned, not realizing it could not swim or was too small to stand up in it.

Grown chickens are almost helpless against predators, so we have to be vigilant. We're not zoned for a rooster, who might sound an alarm and give them a fighting chance. If there is any hole in our fence, even the tiniest spot for a predator to crawl through, our girls will be a fast food buffet.

A friend (who is an actual farmer, not a hobbieist like me!) told me about a time when his baby chicks were not so helpless. Late one summer, one of his hens went to hide out under the shed he used as a barn. This girl refused to come out, for days. Nothing he did – calling her, putting out snacks, sticking his head beneath the barn to prod her -- would coax her out.

This was alright with routine summer weather, until of course a hurricane blew through. In preparation, my friend did all he could to get his chickens into the barn. Every one but that one stubborn hen under the shed came in.

When the sky cleared, he went out to check his animals. Before he could open his barn door, he heard a barrage of cheeps. Out from under the shed

popped the missing hen, with a fierce look on her face and a half dozen puffball sized chicks, all engulfed in her soaking wet wings.

It turns out, my friend's chicks were not as helpless as the ones we raised by hand, at least as long as they stayed under their momma's wings. She did not take them places they would not survive. And if a predator came nearby - like a snake, weasel, or fox -- she would go into fierce attack mode, beak and claws flailing. Momma hens don't play.

One commentator on today's text described it this way:

*"I've heard farmers say that usually (though not always) when a fox invades a hen house, it avoids the hen with her chicks. It will take down a horse, or a cow or a pig or a goat, or a sheep, but not a hen protecting her chicks. One of the most powerful forces in the universe is a mother protecting her children. And if you've ever tried to take a woman's kids away from her, you'd know that the image is just about right. The fox may be powerful enough to get away with it, but he'd also have a real nasty limp for the rest of his life."*

In today's reading, Jesus contrasts this "mother hen" image of himself with the image of Herod as a fox sneaking around the hen house, ready to pounce and devour that mother hen's babies. Just as God's motherly love is embodied in Jesus' work and ministry, the power of oppression is centered in the person of Herod Antipas, Rome's appointed governor of the region.

Jesus draws this contrast in response to those warning him to tone it down. Herod Antipas's family are puppet-kings, set up by the Roman imperial government which seized Judea as a colonial power. Rome treats the people of Judea, Jesus' people, not as blessed children of God but as means to an end: the expansion of wealth and power for those favored by the Empire.

Matthew's Gospel tells us that as a child, Jesus' parents had to flee with him to Egypt because Herod Antipas's father, Herod the Great, chose to kill all the male children born below a certain age, all because he felt threatened by rumors of a child that might, one day, threaten his wealth and power.

Herod Antipas was also the man who executed Jesus' cousin and mentor, John the Baptizer, at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, when John spoke up against Herod's corruption.

The empire's heartlessness for the least of these is further seen in the events at the beginning of our reading: when Pilate, the Roman to whom Herod owes his power, slaughtered a group of Jews in their act of worshipping at the temple. Jesus' challenging words will put him on a collision course with the powers that be.

It's easy for us to try to find a way out when we hear about injustices faced by others, or consider the unfair systems that benefit us but crush those our world discounts as disposable.

On Feb. 1, 1960, four college students went to the local Woolworth store, purchased some items, then sat down at the lunch counter to order coffee. They were denied service because of the color of their skin. The manager asked them to leave. The students decided to stay, seated, politely waiting for their coffee, until closing time.

The next day, the four students (their names are Joseph McNeil, Franklin McCain, Ezell Blair Jr., and David Richmond) returned, ordered coffee again, and were refused again.

*"I certainly wasn't afraid," said Franklin McCain. "And I wasn't afraid because I was too angry to be afraid. If I were lucky I would be carted off to jail for a long, long time. And if I were not so lucky, then I would be going back to my campus, in a pine box."*

McCain also remembered an older white woman approaching them, thinking she would say or do something to them, like the other hecklers who had been baiting the students.

She walked up behind them, and she whispered in a calm voice, *"Boys, I'm so proud of you."*

McCain would say, *"What I learned from that little incident was don't you ever, ever stereotype anybody in this life until you at least experience them and have the opportunity to talk to them."*

The four students, who would eventually be called the Greensboro Four, would be joined by 20 other black students the next day, just sitting there, reading books and studying while White customers continued to heckle them.

On Day 3, more than 60 students joined in. On Day 4, there were 300 people at the lunch counter. After one week, students were staging their own sit-ins throughout North Carolina. Soon, the movement spread to other Southern cities, then states.

On July 25, 1960, Woolworth finally relented and black employees of the Greensboro store were the first to be served at the lunch counter.

The next day, the entire Woolworth's chain was desegregated, serving blacks and whites alike. The sit-ins would eventually spread to other forms of public accommodation, and in 1964, The Civil Rights Act was passed, mandating desegregation.

The Greensboro, North Carolina Woolworth's store is now the International Civil Rights Center & Museum, and a section of the lunch counter on which the four students once sat is preserved in the Smithsonian Institution National Museum of American History, a reminder of our past when the color of your skin prohibited you from just sitting down at a lunch counter and ordering a cup of coffee.<sup>1</sup>

Confronting injustice can feel dangerous. Jesus is letting us know that facing it head-on, confronting it, seeking to dethrone it, is always the way forward. That is one way we take shelter under Jesus's wings, walking in his steps, rather than opening the gate for the foxes, snakes, and weasels of this world.

Learning to get outside of ourselves and see the world through another's eyes, to stand in solidarity with those facing discrimination and oppression is hard work. And that's why it is so important to remember Jesus' promise that he goes with us, through the Spirit. God is like a mother bird, sheltering us under her wing. We are not alone.

Sometimes we'll get it right, and sometimes we'll fall flat on our face and need a second chance. That's what I believe the little story about the fig tree is trying to tell us. God knows it takes time to bear fruit. We need to be willing to do our part to water and fertilize the tree as it grows.

We give each other grace to bear fruit of what can be transformed, if we would only let God work in us. God is with us, and we have each other. Hand in hand, sheltered under God's loving wings, we can make it there, together, no matter what obstacles lay ahead. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Jon S. Randal, 2016