

Playing Chicken

[Text - Luke 13:31-35]

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In this morning's New Testament reading, Jesus calls King Herod a sly "fox". Actually, Herod is more like a sleazy "wolf". He seduces and marries his own brother's wife, Herodias; and then arrests John the Baptist because John speaks-out against it. Shortly after that, at a birthday-bash he throws for himself, the drunken King is enthralled with the sensual dancing of his young stepdaughter, who is also his niece! [Dr. Phil would have a field day!] Herod says to the girl [traditionally named *Salome*] "I'll give you whatever you ask, up to half my kingdom!" So Salome, at her mother's prodding, asks for the head of John the Baptist on a platter! [What a lovely gift; and what lovely parenting skills!] King Herod, not wanting to appear weak in front of his guests, agrees. The order is give, and the dreadful deed is done.

Herod is a spiteful, suspicious, and superstitious individual. His deep lack of moral decency, is matched only by his deep fascination with the supernatural. When he first hears about Jesus, Herod fears that he could be John the Baptist, risen from the dead - which makes him extremely paranoid! And as Jesus heads toward Jerusalem for the Passover Festival, Herod - along with many other political and religious leaders - becomes even more afraid. Jesus has been inspiring and rallying the people throughout Israel with his powerful teaching, his remarkable healing, and his compassionate outreach to society's poor and powerless, suffering and oppressed. In fact, the excitement that Jesus is generating, is reminiscent of the energy that surrounded John the Baptist before his death. So now Herod has his sights set on Jesus; just as Jesus has *his* sights set on Jerusalem. And because a head-on collision between these two seems imminent, some Pharisees go to *warn* Jesus about Herod's deadly intentions.

It's not exactly clear whether these Pharisees' real concern is for Jesus' safety, or for simply protecting their own interests in the current religious and political balance of power. Regardless, Jesus refuses to be diverted from his mission and ministry. He says, "Go and tell that fox, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day, I must be on my way; because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.'" In other words, Jesus really doesn't care about Herod's threats, or any other threats! He will hold true to his mission, regardless of what it might cost him.

Herod may *be* a sly and dangerous old fox, but Jesus isn't impressed. His ministry is rooted and grounded in Divine Love and Grace; and he answers to a Power far greater than King Herod, or Pontius Pilate, or even Tiberius Caesar! Therefore, Jesus will not deviate from his chosen path. He will continue to heal the sick, cast-out evil, and raise-up the oppressed - one day after the next - as long as he has life and breath. And though it's becoming increasingly clear that his ministry may well cost him his life, Jesus is determined to proclaim the Good News of Divine Love, even with his dying breath!

Now, Jesus “sets his face toward *Jerusalem*”, not because of some misdirected martyr-complex; but so that he can make a direct appeal to people of Israel, in the very center of their religious and political life. He knows that this appeal for compassion, unity and justice will be undermined by King Herod, and by other political and religious power-brokers. Nevertheless, Jesus’ undying trust in the power of Divine Love, inspires him to continue his course. Going to Jerusalem for the Passover, is definitely going to shake-up the status quo; but that’s what an authentic prophet of the Holy One must be willing to do. Challenging the rich and powerful is often the only way to show solidarity and support for the poor and powerless; even though it can put you in an extremely dangerous position.

Ancient Jerusalem [not unlike *modern-day* Jerusalem] is a place where prophets of the Holy One often put their lives on the line. They stand with open arms, calling for their brothers and sisters to lay down *their* arms of war, violence and divisiveness; and to embrace Divine peace and forgiveness, inclusion and love. And this is precisely what Jesus intends to do. He passionately cries-out: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, yet you were not willing!”

Those of us who have seen a loved one heading down a dark or destructive path, understand the depth of Jesus’ lament. We can warn that loved one, we can plead with him or her; but in the end, the best we can do is to keep our hearts and our arms open to them. You and I can’t make anyone accept our care or compassion; we can only be willing to offer it - again and again and again. *Doing* so can put us in an extremely vulnerable position - arms wide-open, hearts completely exposed. But if we truly intend to be there for that person, then this is the position we must be willingly to take.

This remarkable image of Jesus - like a mother hen gathering her young under her wings to protect and embrace them - certainly challenges those old images of a mighty and vengeful warrior-god, mowing-down those who stand in his way. It also says something significant about the relationship and attitude among those little ones. Gathering together under those wings requires a certain intimacy, and a willingness to remain close, for the mutual benefit of all. And no chick, or child is to be excluded from the warmth of that Mother’s protective care!

Throughout his ministry, Jesus does all within his *power* to bring reconciliation and unity, healing and peace to a divided and diverse people. And now, as he heads toward Jerusalem, Jesus is prepared to do the most powerful thing of all: to set-aside his power and personal safety, and literally throw his arms wide-open - as an expression of the Divine Desire to encircle and embrace, heal and redeem all of humankind.

With all of the trouble and heartache in this world, sometimes the best course of action, is to simply offer a Holy Hug. Hugging someone is far more risky, yet far more effective, than giving them a lecture [or even giving a sermon]. It's like when a parent finally finds that lost child, who has wandered-off. That parent will hug that child tightly and hold-on for dear life. The lecture can come later. All that matters in that moment, is that the one who was lost has now been found. And to our Gracious Heavenly Mother/Father, recovering and receiving those who are lost is the most important thing in the world!