

**Reading from the Gospels:** Luke 13:31-35

*The Ladder in the Window*

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Sunday, Feb. 28, 2010

I've finally solved the ancient riddle that has befuddled humankind for centuries ... which came first, the chicken or the egg?

The answer, without a doubt, is the chicken. And how did I come to that conclusion? Well ... it has everything to do with brooding ... the process in which a hen protects the eggs during the incubation period as well as when she protects her young during those early days of life outside the egg. A brooding hen provides her young with warmth, protection, feed, and water ... and without those key ingredients, an egg would never hatch. Now if you want to know where that first hen came from ... well, I don't have a clue. I'm not heading down that slippery slope this morning.

But the image I want you to keep in mind is that of a mother hen tending her young chicks ... seeing to their needs ... protecting them from predators ... leading them to food and to water. That's the heart and soul of our Gospel reading this morning ... it is God's desire for us ... as well as for the people of Jerusalem ... as he prepared to go into the city and face what he had to face.

Open your hearts and minds to God's word to us from the 13th chapter of Luke, verses 31-35. I will continue our reading this morning from Eugene Peterson's translation, *The Message*.

**31** Just then some Pharisees came up and said, "Run for your life! Herod's on the hunt. He's out to kill you!"

**32** Jesus said, "Tell that fox that I've no time for him right now. Today and tomorrow I'm busy clearing out the demons and healing the sick; the third day I'm wrapping things up.

**33** Besides, it's not proper for a prophet to come to a bad end outside Jerusalem.

**34** Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killer of prophets, abuser of the messengers of God! How often I've longed to gather your children, gather your children like a hen, Her brood safe under her wings—but you refused and turned away!

**35** And now it's too late: You won't see me again until the day you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of God.'"

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Jesus is preparing to walk into the city of Jerusalem ... Zion ... the city of the temple and the Holy of Holies ... the city where he and his family visited when he was only 12 years of age ... the city that is the religious center of the Jewish people and their heritage ... and the city where Jesus will die upon a cross. It's not the way he wants it to happen. But Jesus knows there is no other way.

The Chief Priest and the Scribes ... the Pharisees and the Sadducees ... their hearts have been hardened. They can't hear the words Jesus is speaking. Their ears are closed to the revelations he has brought into

the world. The truth he speaks to them ... the mirror he holds in front of their eyes ... is met with angry defensiveness. They know they are right ... they have the power ... they have the law on their sides. He is wrong ... his words will turn not just their world upside down ... but the entire Jewish culture and society. He will have to die.

And Jesus stands there ... on the outskirts of Jerusalem ... looking at the holy city of Zion ... and I'm sure tears are streaming down his face. Everything God had promised the people ... from the time of Noah and Abraham ... has been given. But the people have broken the covenant ... it lies shattered in the heart of the city ... and there is only one way to free the people from the bondage they have created for themselves.

Now, of course, we know that Jesus was crucified and rose again from the dead. And by that single sacrificial gift ... a new covenant in the body and blood of Jesus Christ was created with us ... the Kingdom of God was ushered into the world ... the apostles and disciples were sent out into the world ... and the church was born. And everything has been just fine ever since. Right?

Hardly. As a matter of fact, Jerusalem is an even more divided city today than it was in the time of Jesus. And I'm not just talking about the differences between Jews, Christians and Muslims ... I'm talking about the divisions within the Christian church itself. If the church is meant to be the role model to the world on how to get along with one another ... to show how we are to love one another ... to demonstrate how we are to share our resources and our gifts ... then we've got a big problem.

Look at the picture on the front of your bulletin. That's a picture I took of the outside of the church of the Holy Sepulchre ... the most sacred Christian site in the entire world ... for there inside of the Holy Sepulchre are the proposed sites of the crucifixion of Christ ... the burial of Christ ... and the resurrection of Christ.

This is the Christian Mecca ... the one place in the entire world that Christians come in droves to see and touch and smell. So wouldn't you think that this place ... the Holy Sepulchre itself ... would be filled with all the hope and love and compassion of Christ ... that it would be the model to the world of Christian love and charity and peace. And yet ... and quite sadly ... it is one of the most divided Christians places in the world ... and the ladder you see in the picture ... well that ladder has left an indelible print in my mind of the dysfunction and chaos that envelops the Christian church today.

Six separate Christian denominations share the responsibility for the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. And yet ... a highly complicated set of rules governs the denominations as to when and how and where someone may be at any time during the day. In the church, it is not uncommon for fights to break out when a boundary is crossed such as in November 2008 when a fistfight broke out between the Armenian and Greek monks.

There is even the story of the time a chair was moved a mere 20 centimeters to get it out of the hot sun ... resulting in 11 monks and church personnel being hospitalized from the ensuing fight. Did you know that because no one can even agree on who should open the Holy Sepulchre each day, that a Muslim family has been entrusted with the only key ... and every morning someone from that family unlocks the door ... to let the Christians inside.

And then there is that ladder ... it has been sitting in that very spot up there outside that window since the mid 1850s. No one agrees on how it got there ... and no one to this day ... can agree on how to remove it. And so it just sits there ... an iconic emblem to the brokenness of the Christian Church. And Jesus stands there today ... on the outskirts of Jerusalem ... looking at the holy city of Zion ... and I'm sure tears are still streaming down his face.

Now we can laugh at what seems like such trivial disagreements that have led to century-long arguments. We can wonder why people can't be more like us and just grow up and settle their problems in a mature and Christian way. However ... when you get to the root of the problem ... it really has very little to do with the love of Jesus Christ.

But it has plenty to do with pride ... with power ... with greed ... with discrimination ... with who's better than whom ... who's right and who's wrong ... and of course ... it has a lot to do with all the rules and regulations we have put in place to organize the church of Jesus Christ. If you don't follow my rules ... if you don't accept my beliefs ... if you don't interpret the way I interpret ... if you don't serve communion the way I serve communion ... if you don't live the way I live ... if you don't look the way I look ... if you don't worship the country the way I worship the country ... if you don't do what I want you to do ... then, by God, you're going to have a big problem with me ... and I don't want to have anything to do with you!

In my heart, I know that's not how Jesus Christ envisions the coming of his Kingdom. That's one of the reasons I love the Presbyterian Church. You see, one of the strengths of the Presbyterian Church is its connectional structure ... the relationship of each part of the Body of Christ ... to every other part of the Body of Christ. The PCUSA is not a dictatorship or an oligarchy ... it is a church in which the discernment of God's will by the entire body of believers determines what we will do in work and mission.

And yes, sometimes my opinion or belief may side with the majority ... and sometimes it might not. But that's okay ... because we believe God leads us as a gathered community and not as individual ones. Sort of like a mother hen ... brooding over her chicks.

But let's be honest ... our own denomination, the Presbyterian Church USA, has its own ladder outside a window and no one can figure out how to remove it. Theological debates have now become bitter ... particularly when it comes to matters of sexuality and ordination. These debates have also impacted the work and mission of the greater church. One such squabble involves how each church in this Presbytery is asked to pay an apportionment ... a fee of about \$25 for each member of each church.

This fee helps pay for the work of the Presbytery ... the dedicated staff ... it helps support smaller churches with grants and loans of which we have benefited ... it supports the outreach mission of the greater church whereby all of us together can do much more than we can separately. However, there are churches in our own Presbytery of Greater Atlanta who are withholding their per capita from our local Presbytery ... at the expense of the greater church ... resulting in a shortfall of almost \$300,000.

However, at its last session meeting, the elders of this church made it clear that we would pay our entire per capita in the coming year ... nothing will be withheld. I applaud their actions.

But sometimes even individual churches can have a ladder sitting in their own window ... that no one can figure out how to remove. Yet even when a ladder does appear ... it doesn't mean it has to stay there for over 150 years. Long-term festering disputes do nothing to build the Kingdom of God ... they will actually strangle a church ... and sometimes disagreements can even split and kill a church.

But a healthy church is ones whose leaders and members recognize that a ladder sitting outside on a window ledge needs to come down ... in other words ... if there is a problem, then it needs to be faced and solved ... that if a dispute arises, it needs to be settled ... that if there are difficult issues and choices to be made ... they need to be brought out into the open and shared before a decision is made. A healthy church is ones who believes that the collective wisdom of all of its leaders ... the shared prayers with God ... and the belief in the power of the Holy Spirit to guide the church in discerning God's will ... are best done

together and decided together.

A couple of years ago, the elders of this church spotted a ladder outside on one of the window ledges. No one was really sure how long it had been there ... but the consensus of the session was to remove it ... to deal with a difficult issue facing this church. We, as a church, have been struggling for a long time financially. Through excellent stewardship practices, tight budgeting, and keeping our focus on our mission ... we have been blessed to keep doing what God has called us to do.

Even last year, in the midst of a great global financial crisis ... you, the members of this church, have supported with your time, your talents and your tithes to keep this church growing. But your elders have also recognized that we have been carrying a large debt for a number of years ... a debt of over \$20,000 that follows us from one year to the next ... and it has been a steady drain on the resources of this church ... preventing us from catching up with some of the basic maintenance that needs to be done as well as keeping us from fully implementing some of the mission programs we long to do.

However, through a process of discernment ... beginning first with a church wide Bible study of the Gospel of Mark in which many of you were involved ... a special Visionary Committee of the Session has been working hard and praying hard for two years to discern a new direction for Columbia. I don't know what the final result of all this study, prayer and work will be ... but I do know that all of us will soon be called on to make some changes in how we use our buildings ... in a more prudent and resourceful way for a church our size.

Sometimes that kind of change can be painful ... and it can even cause conflict. But it doesn't have to. In its more than 60 years of being the church at the corner of Kirk and Columbia ... Columbia Presbyterian has sought and followed God's will through many times of change. And ... because of God's mercy and love, and the Godly wisdom and care of the Session and the Vision Committee, our goal is to keep moving into being the kind of congregation that doesn't make Jesus weep – but into a congregation that Jesus can look upon and smile with joy.

Because the good people of Columbia ... the disciples and apostles of Jesus Christ in this church ... have gratefully accepted his sacrifice and have always followed our Savior – all the while being cared for like baby chicks ... loved by their brooding mother hen.

Ladders will always appear on window ledges. But unity found in the discernment of God's will is our goal – within our church, and within our denomination, and – someday ... even in Jerusalem. In the meantime ... continue to pray for those in leadership as they seek to embody God's loving care and wisdom ... for you and for the future of Columbia Presbyterian Church.

Let us pray:

God, bless Your church with hope!

Despite chaotic days, may we in chaos shine to light a pathway through life's maze.

May justice be our aim, and kindness ours to share,

In humbleness O may we walk, assured our God is there.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.