

“Cultivating Courage”  
By Ridgley Joyner  
Luke 13:31-35

For Lent, our theme is “**Cultivating and Letting Go**” through curriculum created by *A Sanctified Art*—a group of liturgical artists, pastors and educators seeking to weave art and creativity and the word of God in communion with one another in the church.

In the introductory materials, the team explains the theme by defining the two powerful verbs they’ve chosen to inspire people during the season:

**Cultivate (verb):** *to prepare and use for the raising of crops; to foster the growth of; to improve by labor, care, or study; to refine; to further; to encourage.*

**Let go (verb):** relinquish one’s grip on someone or something.

*“Lent is a season of spiritual gardening, of inviting God to unearth in us what lies fallow, what needs to be tended, and what needs to die for new life to emerge. This Lent, we’re embracing the literal and spiritual practices of cultivating and letting go.”*

As we continue on our Lenten journey, I’d like to invite you to keep reflecting on this concept of **cultivating** and **letting go**.

Last Sunday, we heard Luke’s Gospel account of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness and how Jesus cultivated faithfulness and **let go** of the temptation to exploit God’s gifts.

This morning’s scripture reading, Luke 13:31-35, takes us now to the middle of Jesus’ ministry. Right before our passage we can read that Jesus was going “through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem.”

Our passage begins with a group of Pharisees approaching Jesus saying, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you,” Jesus was closing in on Jerusalem and also close to the tetrarch Herod’s reach—close enough that murderous threats become an actual threat.

And hearing the Pharisees “warn” Jesus of upcoming danger is strange for us. We so often in scripture see characters one way, perhaps not as multivalent as we see characters in books or movies. What do you think of when you think of Pharisee? I immediately assume, religious elite only concerned about the law of faith. I can’t say it is always a *good* connotation. Would you be complimented if someone told you that you reminded them of a Pharisee? I wouldn’t.

It's hard to not immediately jump to that conclusion here. To be wary of the Pharisees warning to Jesus. What are their motives here in sharing this information?

Do they *actually* care about his safety? Maybe. Maybe all Pharisees aren't bad, and these are the good ones, who genuinely care. Or are they, as usual, trying to provoke him, get a rise out of him—get him to slip up. Or maybe their motive might have more to do with *themselves*. They're saying this in a persuasive way to get Jesus to stop it with his caring for the outsider, healing the sick, preaching the love of God not the letter of the law. Perhaps they're scared and they want to share their fear. Fear of disrupting the political order and what might ensue if this happens. For if this Jesus' ministry rumbled loud enough to be a problem in Rome—his provoking of the political "order" would lead to death to more than just Jesus. But to them as well.

As Americans who have lived our whole lives in a democratic and capitalistic country, it is hard for us to understand this kind of fear completely. The Roman Empire thrived on its military conquests, but also maintained order among civilians by governing with the *fear of death*. We know this from historical accounts but also biblical accounts, like that of Herod the Great the father of Herod Antipas who literally killed every first born in all of Bethlehem just to ensure that this "savior baby born in a manger" didn't pose a threat to his power. Or like the Herod in today's scripture, a puppet of the Roman empire who literally *beheaded* John the Baptist on a dinner party dare. Ruthless. The empire ruled using fear as a tactic banking on trained complicity. And the ministry of Jesus was far from complicit.

Jesus' response to these Pharisees is "You go tell that fox to come get me, I have work to do—casting out demons, and performing cures" Whew. A fox in ancient Hellenistic thought was like calling someone conniving, manipulative, sly, and smart, but in a way that used their smarts for something other than the greater good. But Jesus isn't on a journey to get to Herod and stand up to him, Jesus has his eyes on something, someone else: Jerusalem. Because Jesus came not for the kingdom of man, but for the kingdom of God. It is Jerusalem, the people of God who Jesus has his eye on. He says

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

The book of Luke mentions Jerusalem 90 times, while the other gospels only 49. To Luke, Jerusalem is the dwelling place of God. The place where God's glory shall be revealed (Isa 24:23) but it is also the place where God's people stone prophets sent to it, hate good and love what is evil (Mic 3:2)<sup>1</sup> Jerusalem was well known for being the city that had failed to receive God's prophets sent there in the past, and next in our reading we hear a lament of Jesus's. He longs to gather God's people, unite them together in the shadow of God's protective and loving wings, yet God's people choose against it.

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<sup>1</sup> (<https://www.religion-online.org/article/as-a-hen-gathers-her-brood/>)#

In his lament for Jerusalem, Jesus uses a feminine metaphor for God—a mother hen who gathers chicks under her protective wings.

Over the years, I have observed a growing trend among some millennials to homestead: growing your own food, making your own bread, and yes, you guessed it. Having some chickens. It is hilarious to me that in places like Conshohocken and Manayunk with backyards the size of postage stamps that young people are doing everything they can to make a home for chickens to lay eggs. It seems like wherever you go you can find “farm fresh eggs”. And in these efforts it’s become so apparent to me all the different ways we have gone out of our way to “protect” the chickens. Because, if you think about it. A fox vs a chicken. The odds are against your farm fresh eggs.

Some have resulted to ensuring a rooster is in the mix, one for fertilization but also for protection. Roosters make themselves known, crowing to express dominance. Roosters are known to defend themselves attacking aggressively with sharp spines on their feet and a pointy beak. Having a rooster around when you have hens works in your benefit for protection of your chickens. But in my research for this sermon I realized that we often look at the end of that fight if a hen doesn’t make it. We see the fox winning. What we don’t see—is the tremendous courage of a hen to protect her chicks...at all costs...even that of her life.

These two metaphors: a fox: crafty, fierce, a predator. A hen: vulnerable, weak, maternal. Jesus chose a hen, not a rooster, for a reason.

Hens are fiercely protective of their chicks and try to be intimidating as possible when there is perceived danger. Some will growl, shriek, puff out their feathers, and peck at anyone or anything that might intrude. Some studies have shown that mother hens can actually *feel* their chicks’ pain. In experiments, hens showed clear signs of anxiety when their chicks were in distress. They found that Hens can possess at least one of the attributes of empathy—“the ability to be affected by and share the emotional state of the other”<sup>2</sup> Jesus chose a hen for a reason.

Episcopal priest, author, and barnyard animal caretaker Barbara Brown Taylor writes “Jesus won’t be king of the jungle in this or any other story. What he will be is a mother hen, who stands between the chicks and those who mean to do them harm. She has no fangs, no claws, no rippling muscles. All she has is her willingness to shield her babies with her own body...If the fox wants them, he will have to kill her first.”

You see, Jesus chose the hen, the fiercely protective, self-sacrificial empathetic hen because our God is not a God of dominance and aggression. Our God is a god of vulnerability. Taylor goes on in her article to say,

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Mother+hens+%27can+feel+their+chicks%27+pain%27.-a0251104710>

“If you have ever loved someone you could not protect, then you understand the depth of Jesus’ lament. All you can do is open your arms. You cannot make anyone walk into them. Meanwhile, this is the most vulnerable posture in the world—wings spread, breast exposed—but if you mean what you say, then this is how you stand. . . . If the fox wants them, he will have to kill her first; which he does, as it turns out. He slides up on her one night in the yard while all the babies are asleep. When her cry wakens them, they scatter. She dies the next day where both foxes and chickens can see her — wings spread, breast exposed — without a single chick beneath her feathers. It breaks her heart . . . but if you mean what you say, then this is how you stand.”

Jesus knew what was before him when he had his eye on Jerusalem, even in the face of the fears of the Pharisees, even in the face of death threats by those in power. But like a mother hen, Jesus pressed on out of love of the other, empathy for God’s people and the desire to gather God’s people under his wing. He knew that ultimately his death would come, but still he outstretched his arms to the very moment of death, welcoming even the least of these, a criminal on a cross, into the kingdom of God. Courage. Fierce love. Protective. Caring. This courage, required deep vulnerability. The mere presence of Jesus on earth- the incarnation- is that of vulnerability on God’s part. To become one with us, God’s children, in the flesh to feel our pain, to share our joys—to empathize—with us in our journey. To hold us close.

Why is it that we do not gather under the brood of God’s protective love? What are we so fearful of? Is it our complicity and allegiance to order? Is it our need to keep everyone comfortable and happy around us? Is it our need to stay just where we are, not to a risky place that God is calling us?

So often we live life thinking that if we are good kind hard working people that know God loves us we have this whole discipleship thing down. But when life gets risky around us forcing us to face things we never had to face, experience things we never thought existed in our world, we begin to realize that perhaps God is calling us to more than that. And It is then that the fear begins. So much so that we fight to keep the status quo because it isn’t hurting anyone, it works this way, this is the way it is supposed to be, we worked hard for this. And when change happens, we find our foundations shaky and do everything we can to depend on ourselves. We’d rather be complicit out of fear of the unknown, than bravely risk vulnerability and depend on God. Because that God calls us out of ourselves, and toward the people who need God’s saving love the most. Perhaps even that person who needs to experience God’s saving love the most is you.

This weekend I watched two things on Netflix that well, broke my heart and filled it up at the same time. One of which was Brené Brown’s Call to Courage. Now, if you haven’t seen it I highly recommend that you go watch it. And if you, like me, have. Go watch it again. Brené Brown is a researcher and storyteller who has spent the past two decades studying courage vulnerability, shame and empathy. In her Netflix special, she highlights the link between courage and

vulnerability, which she describes as “having the courage to show up when you can’t control the outcome”<sup>3</sup>

Having the courage to show up when you can’t control the outcome. Jesus chose a mother hen for a reason.

Perhaps to cultivate courage, we must first let go of this fear of what will be if we open ourselves up to vulnerable life-giving discipleship. To choose if we are going to be chicks who scatter, or the chicks who gather under the wings of a mother hen. To choose whether we are going to be a fox, or a hen.

What is it today that you need to show up for? For yourself? For someone else, For a group of people? Perhaps courage for you is believing the still small voice that is speaking to you to take a big step, despite the unknowing, despite the vulnerability it presents. Taking that leap in your job, donating money to refugees when your pockets are already tight, ducking out of that important commitment to be present with your kid who needs you. Volunteering to advocate for justice. Advocating for yourself in your relationships. Having a hard conversation with someone you disagree with. What is it today that you need the courage to show up for?

Often in our prayer of confession we confess that which we have done, but also that which we have left ‘undone’—this idea that yes sin can be something we do to someone or something. And also sin can be something we leave undone that God so desperately needs the world to hear and see. We ask for forgiveness for failing to show up, to be vulnerable, to show the courage Jesus showed. And so with us, may we cultivate deep within us the courage to be vulnerable. To share God’s vulnerable love. To love what is good and to turn away from evil. To counter hatred and stand up against manipulation. To feel the pain of our neighbors and do something about it. To share ourselves even if it threatens our own comfort. May we have the courage to show up and be the church—the hands and feet of Jesus Christ in the world, beyond these church walls until the day he comes again in Glory. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/tv/2019/04/19/brene-brown-call-courage-netflix-vulnerability/3497969002/>