

Freedom under the wings

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,
at the eleven o'clock service, February 28, 2010: The Second Sunday in Lent.
Based on Luke 13:31-35.*

My mother will be 92 years old a week from today. She is an amazing woman. I have always said that she is capable of running General Motors over the telephone. At this point in the history of GM, if she were to apply, she just might get the job. What is for certain truth, though, is that she has never shrunk from running my life—or at least from giving it her all! It is wonderful finally to be old enough for that not to bother me so much, perhaps even old enough to recognize it as the fierce love it is.

As a dad myself, I am quick to claim that fathers love intensely as well; and we do. But at least in my experience, there is something extra, not really more but somehow extra, about the love of a mother. Nothing is truly like God's love, I suppose, but a mother's love may come close. Jesus had no problem likening the love of God to an image of a hen gathering and protecting her brood under her wing

In the short five verses of the gospel lesson today, the love of God is just one of the several themes covered. Jesus furiously rebuffs any threats from Herod, refusing to stop for one minute his healing ministry, and emits a passionate lament regarding his beloved Jerusalem, the approaching climax of his life and the tender love of God. With growing clarity, Jesus now acknowledges that the turn in the journey he and his followers are taking will not end happily. The road to and through Jerusalem is stained with the blood of prophets, and soon his will be shed there as well. Even with ears that do not want to hear, the disciples are beginning to sense the inevitability of their journey. In their revered city, their center of holiness, the one they have come to call "Lord" will be killed.

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how I have longed for you, how often have I desired to gather your children as a hen gathers her brood under her wings." As the narrator moves Jesus toward Jerusalem, writing fifty years later, knowing that Jesus' rejection and murder are inexorably set by this time, he remembers the words of Jesus as words not of bitterness—disappointment perhaps but not bitterness or retribution—but words which invoke the kind of love that a hovering hen has for her chicks. Even now so near the end, Jesus' thought is of a God whose desire is that all people will be gathered under the protection of divine love and mercy. Only their unwillingness keeps them away.

As I try to make sense of this story, I believe the theme for it is actually set by a brief exchange between Jesus and the disciples found in the verses preceding what we read today. One of the disciples asks Jesus, "Lord, will only a few be saved?" As readers, we can almost feel Jesus' exasperation; even his inner circle seems unwilling to understand. After walking and talking with him, after seeing his way of living and being, still they look to him for the reestablishment of some sort of religious meritocracy rather than the bringer of unlimited grace. How, they wonder, could Jesus really love the tradition and at the same time override the rules with his talk of love alone as the standard?

Their struggle is not hard for us to understand. To this day, religious people seem to be obsessed with where the lines are drawn. Who is in and who is out? It is almost as though we rejoice in being "in" only if we can be sure that someone else is "out." My guess is that this is true less because we are arrogant than that we can scarcely believe that God's grace is really for us.

What it is that prevents our accepting this divine mercy offered so freely mystifies me in others and even more deeply in my own soul. We know that we desire grace more than anything in the world and, yet, almost invariably we find ways to reject it, to wiggle from its warm embrace. Why? I think because we still believe that we have to earn it, that it really is too good to be true. Believing that it is given to us when we are good and we are bad, when we are faithful and when we have backslidden, when we are generous and when we are stingy—believing that is just hard for us. Beyond that, it doesn't fit our own sense of fairness in the world. Surely, we think, God cannot really love us as we are, cannot save us in the sorry state of our lives. We have to do more than we are doing in order to be acceptable.

When we think and live like that, we have the order reversed. We don't live for Christ in order to be saved; we live for Christ because we are saved. We don't love the poor and give generously to God's work so that we will be rewarded with salvation; we love the poor and give generously to God's work because we are saved! We don't come to church to store up salvation chits; we come to church to worship God because we are saved by the wideness of God's mercy.

These are two quite different views of salvation. One puts all of the work of salvation on us; the other puts it as the gift of a loving God. For those of us—which is all of us at one moment or another—who think that this notion of freely given salvation is too easy, I pray that the journey through Lent this year, our version of walking toward Jerusalem, will include gratitude—gratitude for the gift of salvation. It is a gift that comes not because we deserve it, not because we have finally found the correct combination of belief and action, but a gift that comes to us because we are God's children.

Many of us as Episcopalians argue that we do not really concern ourselves with salvation, that we understand it as pure gift. We attribute such theological worrying to others, those

lesser religious sorts. Believe me: that is a lot of baloney. We grew up in Western Christianity just like most other Christians around us, and the emphasis was clearly upon a soteriology, an understanding of salvation that claimed Jesus as savior, the one who came to save us from our sins. That notion of God's goodness and our utter lack of it inevitably makes our relationship with God tenuous, causing us consciously or not to be constantly evaluating how we are doing. And that dynamic particularly shows itself in our reaction to hardships in life. "What did I do to deserve this? How can this be happening? Why would God do this to me or allow this to happen to me? I am faithful; I am moral. I have tried to do everything I am supposed to do, everything God asks of me. Now this. How can it be?" Such questions belie our claims that we do not worry about salvation. Of course, we do, but we don't have to.

Though the narrators of the gospels sometimes have Jesus answer questions about who will be saved, the words they have Jesus say usually tell more about them than about Jesus. His primary response to such questions is to continue to live his life with integrity and love. That fact finds support and voice in Cynthia Bourgeault's book, *The Wisdom Jesus*. Pointing out that in the Eastern Church the idea of salvation means to be made alive, to experience life by following the path of wisdom, she claims that our single-mindedness about what it means to be saved stops us in some cases from living the life Christ to which calls us. If we could comprehend once and for all that Jesus came to bring us life in a particular way, not a new system of religion, how different our lives could be. Lent would no longer be about tightening up to please God, about trying hard to do something better; it would be about looking for new ways to celebrate the fact that the kingdom of God is ours because God gives it to us and that the way we remain in it is to give it freely and generously away to others.

In my imagination when the disciple asked

again, "Lord, will only a few be saved?" Jesus really said, "You are asking the wrong question. You—all of you (and by extension all of us)—are okay not because you are good or righteous enough but because God loves you with a love that will not let go. Stop worrying about getting salvation and live life as one who has it!"

So does this mean that Lenten discipline is foolish and misdirected? Not at all, in my mind.

I pray that we will keep all the disciplines of Lent. Such practice is good for us; it hones our devotion and helps us to amend our lives where we need to. But through it all, what we can know is that God loves us simply because we are, like a hen loves her chick or an old mother loves her aging son.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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