

Luke 13: 31-35 “Still I Long to Gather You” Rev. Janet Chapman 3/23/25

This week, I watched online one of the films nominated for Best Adapted Screenplay, entitled “Sing Sing.” It is a true-to-life prison drama based on the Rehabilitation Through the Arts program or RTA at Sing Sing Maximum Security Prison, which aims to use theater as a form of rehabilitation. Under the guidance of the theater director, a man that goes by the name Divine G, incarcerated for a crime he did not commit, emerges as the star playwright and performer. Highly respected for his emotional depth and acting talent, Divine G is determined to prove his freedom while inspiring other men to get in touch with their emotions as a way towards anger management and problem-solving attributes. As the RTA group prepares for their new production, a new recruit joins – he is a gruff and aggressive inmate with a difficult personality. He is played by one of the original inmates of this program, as are many of the cast members in the movie. Dismissive of acting, believing it to be pointless, this inmate considers himself just another “gangsta.” In contrast, Divine G views theater as a transformative and therapeutic process that helps individuals connect with their inner selves. Thus, the two men end up clashing over and over. Their rivalry intensifies with unpredictable encounters and plot twists which I won’t spoil, but suffice it to say that as I watched this movie, more than once I saw Christ in the lead character, who tries so valiantly to gather in the rebels and “gangstas” of this prison and show them a better way. Men who had lived their entire lives looking out only for themselves are brought into a group process that heals and comforts, sustains and strengthens. Like a mother hen, Divine G encircles the men with the vision of what it would mean to live in freedom and become law-abiding, productive citizens, what it would mean to belong for good rather than evil, to be a part of the beloved community. He even teaches his other brothers to stop using the n-word and instead call each other “beloved.”

Beloved is what Jesus would have probably termed the folks of Jerusalem had he lived in our day and time. In our text, you hear the anguish Jesus feels when the beloved turn away from God, when the beloved fail to resemble what Jesus taught. “Jerusalem, O Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones

those who are sent to it,” he says, choked with tears, “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” It is the lament of one whose love has been scorned, whose guidance has been rejected. At the risk of his own life, Jesus has brought the precious realm of God within the reach of the beloved city of God, but the beloved aren’t interested. They have better things to do than to hide under the shelter of this mother hen’s wings. They have a fox as their head, named Herod, who commands a great deal of subservience and fear. Consider the contrast: Jesus has disciples, Herod has the government with soldiers; Jesus serves, Herod rules; Jesus prays for his enemies, Herod seeks revenge on them. Barbara Brown Taylor asks us, “In a contest between a fox and a chicken, whom will you bet on?”

In the movie I mentioned, there is a scene where the lead character has found one spot in the prison where a small open window sits, no bars or fencing to block its view, where he can sit for hours and gaze out on the hillside imagining what liberation will feel like once more. He is even able to fit his hand through the window and feel the air of freedom, reach for the skyline and imagine touching the hillside a mile away. He sees the new inmates arrive from over the hillside and ponders what caused them to lose their way in the wilderness. Outside Jerusalem, there is a hillside where a chapel was built, supposedly on the spot tradition holds that Jesus wept for the city. On this hillside, Jesus would have seen the Kidron Valley where the “tombs of the prophets” were placed so he is inspired to speak of the prophets. He wasn’t just recalling history, but he is giving a haunting glimpse of his fate to come as he grieves. Maybe he feared for his followers like Stephen who would be stoned to death there in Jerusalem. In that chapel, there is a wall behind the altar which is made entirely out of glass. It gives tourists a splendid view of the skyline of Jerusalem. On the front of the altar is a bright, fierce-looking bird made out of colored tiles with a flock of little chicks under his wings. For those who know birds, it is obviously not a hen, it is a rooster. But the problem is Jesus didn’t say rooster, he said “hen.” So maybe the artist took some liberties with the text because a rooster can defend itself far better than a

hen. The rooster has sharp spikes on the back of his feet that work like little stilettos on anyone who bothers him. A rooster can also peck pretty dang hard, and he doesn't wait for you to peck first. If you have ever tried to get eggs from a hen house with a rooster on the loose, you may know what I mean (but with the price of eggs these days you may still consider it worth the risk). Yet Jesus didn't liken himself to a rooster; he compared himself to a brooding hen, whose chief purpose in life is to protect her young, with nothing much in the way of a beak and nothing at all in the way of talons. About all she can do is fluff herself up and sit on her chicks, or put herself between them and the fox, as ill-equipped as she is. At the very least, she can hope that she satisfies his appetite so that he leaves her babies alone. I don't know about you, but this image of God that Jesus presents is a bit troubling for me. When the foxes of this world start prowling close to home, when you can hear them snuffling right outside the door, then it would be nice to have a little bigger defense budget for the hen house, right? Except Jesus' words and his actions seem to show that isn't how God designed creation nor is it God's will for the beloved. Jesus shows us a heart-broken God, who looks out on the children with tears streaming down, "O beloved, dearest beloved, who insist on going your own way rather than remaining together as one human race, who demand divisions based on national borders and dialects, sexual orientations and races, who think only of yourselves, who kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you, how often I *still* long to gather you as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing!" Jeremy Troxler once said that if you have ever seen a church you love become a travesty, a profoundly disappointing institution rather than the Body of Christ, or if you have ever tried to explain things to people again and again and they just don't get it, then in that terrible, painful, frustrating place, you are very close to the heart of Jesus.

Some rogue Pharisees and that fox Herod tried to shut Jesus down with threats or, even better, tried to get him to respond with aggression and violence himself. Getting Jesus to respond with violence, like gangsters do, would make him just like one of them and their world would remain intact. But Jesus confounds them with love.

He responds, “I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the 3rd day, I finish my work.” In other words, “Do what you have to do, but I’m going to keep on loving. I’m going to keep on making the beloved whole and heal the world the only way that works, with Love.” Jesus was a threat to the gangsters of his time, not as a rival gang, but as a power that dismantles every other gang, every other empire; a power that makes everyone equal as beloved children of God; and that power is love. As MLK put it, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.” When Herod and his bullies came after Jesus and his brood, he didn’t pull out a prison shank to stop them in their tracks. He just put himself between them and the chicks, all fluffed up and hunkered down like a mother hen. It may have looked like a minor skirmish to those who were there, but that contest between the chicken and the fox turned out to be the cosmic battle of all time, in which the power of tooth and fang was put up against the power of a mother’s love for her chicks. And God bet the farm on the hen.

Brown Taylor writes it this way: “Depending on whom you believe, she won. It didn’t look that way at first, with feathers all over the place and chicks running for cover. But as time went on, it became clear what she had done. She had refused to run from the foxes and she had refused to become one of them. Having loved her own who were in the world, she loved them to the end. She died a mother hen, and afterwards she came back to them with teeth marks on her body to make sure they got the point: that the power of foxes couldn’t kill her love for them, nor could it steal them away from her. They might have to go through what she went through in order to get past the foxes, but she would be waiting for them on the other side, with love stronger than death...Who would have thought being a mother hen offered such opportunities for courage? Maybe this is why some call it the “Mother Church”? It is where we come to be fed and sheltered, but also where we come to stand firm with those who need us to grow from chicks into chickens, by giving what we receive, by teaching what we have learned, and by loving the way we ourselves have been loved – by a mother hen who would give his life to gather us under his wings.” May it be so!