

Loving is a Risky Business

A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab
2nd Sunday in Lent, Year C. February 28, 2010. (Text: Luke 13:31-35)

Many years ago I read a book called *The Risk of Loving*. It was a good book, and the title alone conveys a truth we know intuitively – though we may never have pondered it much: Loving someone is a risky business. I mean *really* loving someone, whether it's your spouse or your neighbor ...or your enemy. — And why? Because the ones we love may not accept our love, and may – in fact – reject us.

Think back to when you were a youngster in the first fever of adolescent emotion. Do you remember the first time you felt you were “in love” with somebody? Sure, that was “puppy love,” kid stuff. But still, wasn't it hard to say, “I love you” – at least the first time – to that special person? And it was hard because your tender young heart wanted to hear the other person respond with equal passion, “*Oh, I love you too!*” And there was the risk that your beloved might not say those words. What if it turned out that the one *you* loved really didn't love you back? ...Or – even worse – loved someone else, not you. What a risk there is in proclaiming your one-sided affection! Spurned love, rejected love, is about the bitterest pain of all. —As most all of us know from experience.

In Luke's gospel, Jerusalem is mentioned 90 times by name –compared with only 49 times in all the rest of the New Testament. It's just a guess, but Luke might have been a gentile convert, a foreigner. And, as a convert – first to Judaism and then to being a follower of Christ – he seems to have had a “thing” about Jerusalem. For Luke, the city had a personal spiritual power and attraction. It was the city beloved of God, the place of his chosen dwelling on earth, the place to which all the nations of the earth would be drawn to behold his glory. “Jerusalem” stood for all that God's people could be, all that God's people could do. We might say that for Luke the Holy City symbolized *spiritual potential*.

Jerusalem was also the place of *destiny*. In Luke, Jesus sets his face to go to Jerusalem and more than half the book is taken up with the description of his journey there. It was a journey that most of his followers were sure would end with Jesus sitting on a throne, but Jesus himself never saw it that way. He saw it as from day one as a long trip that was certain to end with rejection and death.

There's a chapel up on the Mount of Olives, overlooking the city of Jerusalem, known by the Latin name *Dominus flevit*. That means “Jesus Wept.” It's supposedly located on the exact spot where Jesus said the sorrowful words quoted in today's gospel reading: “*Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! 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 maternal image that Jesus chose for himself is a poetic portrayal of the kind of love that he embodied. It's a picture whose significance is revealed on Good Friday, when Jesus stretches out his arms to be nailed to the wood of the cross, and is then lifted up to face the city of Jerusalem with those open arms. A mother hen instinctively shelters her chicks beneath her wings when danger threatens. She doesn't have sharp teeth or claws to use in their defense, like a mother bear would. She only has her body to put between her babies and the evil that might do them harm. She's ready to make the ultimate sacrifice, to give her life to save her children.

An article in *National Geographic* after the great Yellowstone fire back in '88 told this story: Once the fires in the national park were over, rangers began a trek up a mountain to assess the damage. One

ranger found a dead bird that had been literally mummified in ash, perched on the ground at the base of a big tree. Somewhat sickened by the sight, he knocked it over with a stick. When he knocked the bird over, three tiny chicks came out from under their dead mother's wings. The mother bird, aware of the coming disaster, had gathered her offspring under her wings at the base of a big tree. She could have flown away to safety but she wouldn't abandon her babies. When the blaze arrived, with awful heat that would instantly incinerate her small body, the mother bird remained steadfast. Because she had been willing to die, the little ones under the cover of her wings would live.

There you have a picture drawn from the annals of nature which portrays the love of God for his children, the love that carried Jesus to the cross, a love that was spurned. People might say, "A mother bird, whether she's a hen in a barnyard or a wild bird in Yellowstone National Park, is merely behaving according to nature's hard-wiring. She's programmed. It's not really love; it's just a *reflex*." —Maybe so. I really don't know what emotions birds are able to feel, if any. Or how birds make decisions. But I would answer that the self-sacrificing love of God which is embodied in Jesus Christ on the cross, is a perfect revelation of the *nature* of God. Love for us comes "naturally" to our God. (And hallelujah for that!)

When you think about it, little chicks fly to their mama in time of danger by the same kind of natural reflexes that lead her to stretch out her wings to shelter them. The story of Christ and his people is a story of saving love offered and rejected. "*He came to his own, and his own would not accept him.*" Their response was: we don't need you. We can manage for ourselves quite nicely. —It seems unnatural.

And believe me, when the gospel says Jesus came "to his own," it doesn't just mean the relatively few people who lived those days in Galilee and Judea. It means *the world*. As Jesus applied the metaphor to himself, the mother hen – seeing the hawk hovering – called to her chicks to come and find shelter under her wings. (After all, that should have been *their* instinct!) But, instead, they scattered. Everyone for himself.

Really loving others is risky. It makes us *vulnerable*. In the gospel, in the person and work of Jesus, we have a picture of God risking himself on us,
...taking a chance on us,
...reaching out to us again and again,
...all because he loves us.

To me, the whole complex tapestry of the Bible – from the Garden of Eden straight on through the New Testament – is a portrayal of God's love, a love that persevered even if when was spurned. Jesus experienced enough hostility and rejection *before* he was crucified to have made you or me – if we'd been in his place – to give up on Jerusalem, even give up on people in general. But Jesus didn't give up. Jesus' passion was the product of his compassion. He put himself, literally, in their place —in *our* place. He took it upon himself to do whatever was needed to set us free.

If we can get to where we see the cross in the context of our Lord's whole life and message, then we're ultimately going to join *our* tears with Jesus' tears as he wept over Jerusalem. We'll weep along with him when we've learned how to love the way he loved.

When we do that, we'll finally grasp that the cross is not just a pretty piece of stained glass up there over the altar, or a work of art, or a piece of gold jewelry on a chain around our necks. The cross was not only about Jesus' life; it's about ours too. It's not simply a moment in history when Christ did something for us for which we should be thankful. Christ challenged us to own the cross for ourselves, to see it as an essential aspect of our own faithfulness. Jesus' cross was *for* us, yes. But it was to set us free from the reflex of *self*-love and self-sufficiency, so that we would have the courage to take the risk of loving others, pick up our own crosses and follow where he leads the way. As we learned in the Lenten Study on Thursday night, Jesus called as his disciples people whom he expected would ultimately be able *do what he did*.

In writing to the Philippians, Paul said, *"Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears."* "Enemies of the cross of Christ" doesn't refer to people who hate Christianity. "Enemies of the cross" are people who bear the name of "Christian," but whose life goal is the pursuit of personal advantage. "Enemies of the cross" are Christians who see the cross as something Christ did for us, but won't embrace it as their own way of life.

His friends and followers expected Jesus to experience a great victory in Jerusalem. Palm Sunday and the triumphal entry were exactly the kind of thing they had in mind. Jesus knew that such a hero's welcome wouldn't last. —But he made the journey anyway. And he wept over Jerusalem.

Over whom or over what will you weep as Jesus wept over Jerusalem? When you can answer that question — and it is a very *difficult* question — then you will have discovered your own life's true mission and meaning.