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First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC
Second Sunday in Lent
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1 Corinthians 15.12-20

Gathered By Love

How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!—Luke 13.34

This morning's Gospel lesson contains one of the most touching and poignant—and just plain wonderful—images of Jesus in the whole Bible. Did you catch it?

Jerusalem, Jerusalem ... How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings ... (Luke 13.34)

Jesus compares himself to a mother hen! The Bible never ceases to astound with its radical ideas and insights. A mother hen—it doesn't sound very masculine or macho, does it? Yet, Jesus wasn't afraid to describe himself—or God—with tender, “feminine” images. He wasn't bound, as we so often are, by patriarchal figures of speech, or by a one-sided, male view of himself or God. In this way, as in so many others, Jesus was way ahead of his time. Why shouldn't he compare himself with a mother hen nurturing her young?

Actually, it's not as outrageous as it sounds: in the Old Testament, the relationship between God and God's people is compared several times to the relationship between a mother bird and her young. In Deuteronomy, Jacob (or Israel) is cared for by a God who is like a mother eagle:

As an eagle stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young; as it spreads its wings, takes them up, and bears them aloft on its pinions, the Lord alone guided him; no foreign god was with him. (Deuteronomy 32.11-12)

A psalm speaks of refuge in the shadow of God's wings. (Psalm 36.7) And Isaiah describes a very parent-like image that suggests an ancient parallel to the modern reality of "helicopter parents" who hover around protecting (sometimes over-protecting!) their children:

Like birds hovering overhead, so the Lord of hosts will protect Jerusalem; he will protect and deliver it, he will spare and rescue it. (Isaiah 31.5)

Jesus loves us. And so, like a mother hen, Jesus wants to gather all of us under his wings to protect us and keep us safe.

Martin Luther, preached a great sermon in the sixteenth century on the imagery of "the mother-hen and her chicks." He said, "When you look at the mother-hen and her chicks you see a picture of Christ and yourself better than any painter could paint...Behold, this is the loveliest mother-hen...But what happens? We refuse to be chicks..."¹

We stubbornly and stupidly refuse to be embraced by the caring arms of God. We'd rather run off on our own and live separated from the love of God. And God, like a good mother, allows us the freedom to grow up and make our own choices, even when those choices are wrong.

So what does it mean for us to say that God's love in Christ is like the love of a mother hen? Several things come to mind. First of all, to the observer outside the hen-house, the love of a mother hen can appear a bit rough. Sure she gathers her chicks under her wings, but how does she get them there? She pecks and prods and pecks some more. The love of a mother hen—the love of all mothers, I suppose—can be annoying at times! (Oh, boy, I'd better be careful here. I've just returned from visiting my mother and she reads copies of my sermons that get sent in the mail!)

Most mothers I know take any opportunity presented to gently teach their children a lesson or to reinforce some standard of appropriate conduct. Fathers, too. "Beth, please stop egging on your brother." Or one I remember vividly from my childhood, "Mike," if you don't say thank you for that cookie, you'll have to give it back." And so it goes. Peck. Peck. Peck.

A mother's love is always rounding us up, tightening the tether, gathering us in. At our more rebellious moments, it seems like no accident that the word "mother" rhymes with the

word “smother.” The gathering love of a mother doesn’t always feel comfortable, but it sure does help us to keep our bearings.

I remember once taking a youth group to visit a homeless shelter. The director explained their policies. As she described their efforts to help these homeless men to make a plan for a better life, I thought of the mother hen. She said that first they suggest nicely that they need to talk with a social worker to design a plan. Then they insist that they do it. Then they put forward the threat of expulsion from the shelter in thirty days. Then, perhaps on the twenty-ninth day, they offer a slightly easier plan. Then the client can appeal the process for another thirty days.

It sounds long and drawn-out, but it actually seems pretty logical—if you use mother hen logic! They don’t *want* to throw these guys out into the cold streets. But neither do they want to allow them to sit around and do nothing with their lives. So, they bring up the need for a change—again and again and again: gently, but persistently, remaining in their faces with the pecking love that tries to gather the stray chick back into the fold of society.

The love of a mother hen pecks us into line, protecting us from our own moral inadequacies. But that same love is also quick to protect us from outside threats—from various foxes that wander into the vicinity of the hen-house.

If Jesus sees himself as something of a mother hen, then it stands to reason that the church will bear some resemblance to a hen-house. Some Sundays Jesus will be pecking away at our faults, gently but consistently staying in our faces. We may come out of church on those Sundays looking a bit worse for the wear.

But some other Sundays we will find here the love of a mother hen who holds out a wing to protect us from the dangers of our daily lives. Here we will find a sanctuary, a refuge from the illnesses that stalk our families. Here we will find some peace from the enemies whose hatred of us seems relentless. Here we will find a strong wing of love, ready to gather us into safety.

The important thing about the image of Jesus as a mother hen is to see the *various* ways that God gathers us in love. If all there is around the church is peck, peck, peck—moral improvement and the preaching of virtue—then we begin to feel “beat up” here just like we feel

out in a hostile world. By the same token, if all we experience in church is protection and refuge under God's wings, then we will neglect the changes in our lives that are necessary for true, grown-up flourishing. A faithful church won't peck us to death, but neither will it coddle us into complacency. Like good mothers, Jesus and his community of followers are always seeking the right balance between the prodding power of the beak and the protective shelter of the wing.

Understanding the love of God to be like the love of a mother hen opens up a vast space for exploring the complicated dynamics of our lives and the place of our faith within them. But in many ways, thinking about God in this way is as radically counter-cultural today as it was when Jesus first tossed out the metaphor in first-century Palestine.

For when it comes right down to it, our world still views the gathering love of a mother as weak and ineffectual—no match for the pushing, coercive care that uses force to get us into line. It is no accident that the organized violence of most every society isn't controlled by a bunch of mothers. When we call Jesus a mother hen, we undercut some assumptions that run very deep in our culture.

In this place, we've made a decision to worship the God whose Son presents himself to us using the imagery of a mother's gathering love. Is that kind of love really no match for the rage of our world? If it isn't, then we should be spending our Sunday mornings somewhere else.

I'll confess...sometimes I wonder. But, mostly, I think we are in the right place.

¹ Quoted in Fred W. Meuser, *Luther The Preacher* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983), pages 62-64.