

**“EVEN AT THE RISK OF LOSING ITS LIFE”**

**PSALM 27:1-6; LUKE 13:-31-34**

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I don't usually turn to the *Book of Order*, otherwise known as the *Constitution of the Presbyterian Church* for inspirational reading. Yet, because it is one of the first documents of democracy written in 1789 it contains some remarkably stirring passages.

But our constitution is not just about democracy, it testifies to our faith. And there is one phrase that jumps off the page every time I read it. It comes at the conclusion of the section dealing with the church and its mission.

The church's mission says the book is: "To heal, reconcile and bind up wounds; minister to the needs of the poor, the sick, the lonely, and the powerless; engage in the struggle to free people from sin, fear, oppression, hunger, and injustice; give of itself and its substance to those who suffer; and share with Christ in establishing his just, peaceable, loving kingdom."<sup>[i]</sup>

Now that's not exactly uninspired writing either. But then, that phrase that comes off the page: "The church is called to undertake this mission *even at the risk of losing its life*."

"Even at the risk of losing its life." Amazing.

What that says is that we belong to the only institution that I know of that has as one of its core values choosing its mission, if need be, over its life.

Can you imagine Microsoft or General Motors making a statement like that; or SUNY at Buffalo; or the Albright Knox? In every other case, the existence of the organization trumps its mission. Change the mission if you have to but don't let the organization die.

Yet, not the church, *ideally*. This is what sets us apart. The Greek word for church 'ekklesia' from which we get 'ecclesiastical' means "called out from the world."

I say ideally because in fact there are probably very few churches that would sacrifice their stock portfolios and stained glass for their mission. The instinct to survive is very human and powerful.

I'd like to take a look this morning, in this season of soul-searching called Lent, at this core value of the church: that we risk our very being for the sake of what we are called to do. You might be wondering whose idea was this anyway. If an organization goes around risking its life how effective will that organization be if it's not around? Hello!

But the answer is quite clear. The church, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, says St. Paul, is the body of Christ in the world: we are his hands, his feet, his eyes and ears. So if we are called to live like Christ in our work we are called to die like him as we carry out that work.

Today's story illustrates. Jesus gets an ominous warning from some friendly Pharisees (in fact our stereotypes have done a grave disservice, many Pharisees were friendly to Jesus). "Herod," they tell him, "has a bounty on your head." But Jesus, not

intimidated says to them, “go and tell that old fox I will continue my ministry despite his threats.” And this not long after Herod has beheaded John the Baptist. Risking life for mission.

Now I’d like to make a distinction. The idea of risking your life is not new with Jesus. Human beings are wired to be noble creatures. God made us in God’s image, after all. Maybe you saw the movie *Flags of our Fathers* or *Letters from Iwo Jima*. Clint Eastwood gets high praise for putting a human face not just on war but on the enemy.

These are films not about the hero defeating a faceless enemy. These are films that raise perplexing questions about the efficacy of war. That’s another sermon. What is compelling about the movies are the noble creatures on the battlefield.

At one point in *Flags of our Fathers* a wounded medic crawls out of his foxhole risking his own life to save the life of another wounded soldier. That act has nothing to do with patriotism or fighting for freedom and everything to do with simple decency. The point is that while soldiers will fight for their country they will die for their friends.

Here’s the distinction: as noble as such an act is that is not what we are talking about today. What we are talking about today is risking life not for a friend but for anyone, even a rival or enemy. Someone not a member of the tribe but members of other tribes, strangers who are different; prostitutes, tax collectors, occupation soldiers in Jesus’ day.

When Jesus says, “Jerusalem the city that kills prophets and stones those who are sent to it how often I would have gathered you as a hen gathers her brood under her wings,” he gives us a picture of the kind of sacrifice he’s talking about: a mother hen standing between her chicks and a fox loose in the henhouse. God’s sheltering wings is a venerable image of divine protection in Hebrew Scripture.<sup>[iii]</sup>

You can finish the scene in your imagination: the fox devours that brave hen, feathers flying everywhere while the chicks scatter and hide. Not unlike the scattering disciples on Good Friday.

What today’s story tells us, as someone said, is that at the risk of his own life, Jesus brings the long-awaited kingdom of God within the reach of the beloved city of God, but the city of God is not interested.

Jerusalem has better things to do than hide under a mother hen’s wings. It has a fox as its head who commands more respect. Consider the contrast: Jesus has disciples; Herod has soldiers. Jesus serves; Herod rules. Jesus prays for his enemies; Herod kills his.

You see Jesus calls the church to regard the suffering, lonely and lost, of any zip code, time zone or hemisphere, as a mother hen regards her chicks.

Yet the world loves to follow a wily, devouring fox. Sometimes we are torn between the two. Sometimes we want to be on the side of the fox because the fox it seems, with his defense budgets and intelligence, muscle and cunning invariably wins the day.

But in the church things are not always what they seem. In the upside down world of the Gospel the rich are poor and poor rich, the strong weak and the weak strong, the wise foolish and the foolish wise.

When Jesus puts himself between the forces of darkness and those of light, the battle was already won. Even though they took his life nailing him to a cross they could not contain that life to the tree or tomb. His life entered the lives of his followers and turned them each into willing mother hens.

The history of the church at its best is the history of mother hens defending their chicks. For every fox in this world there is, thanks to Jesus, a potential mother hen willing to defend her brood, willing to take a stand for what is right when everything seems wrong.

Some years ago the last time this was the text for the sermon I concluded by suggesting that we consider our sanctuary as a big mother hen. Its yellow Italianate brick helps the analogy to work.

But so does our after school tutoring program for West Side children and the plan we have for more Habitat houses on Ferguson Ave.; so does WECP – our weekday school for little chicks of all socio-economic backgrounds and physical abilities. And Mitzvah Day—when Muslims, Jews and Christians work together in caring teams for our community.

But each day the question is new: will the potential mother hen in me, in us be willing to stand up for the chicks threatened by the foxes of poverty and injustice and disease. When and where are we now risking the life of this institution for our mission? And if we aren't confronting a fox every now and then do we need to take a closer look at our mission?

What would it take to put our endowed funds, our tax status, our beautiful buildings, our reputation on the line? It happened in Germany in 1534 and 1934. It's happening today in China and Africa and Saudi Arabia.

I'm not suggesting we go looking for trouble. I am suggesting that we be ready when God calls us to stand between some fox and the chicks.

I use the word "potential mother hen" because my own experience tells me I side with the fox more than I'd like to admit. Being a mother hen is not easy. You can't just do it. You can't just give up your life. Everything in our culture is aligned against the very notion. Self-preservation, self-perpetuation, self-elevation.

So learning to be a mother hen takes hanging out with people who hang out with Jesus—for where two or three are gathered in his name you'll find him he said. It means learning as much about him as we can trying to do what he did in all our affairs.

It takes coming to the table, as we are about to do, to let him feed us so that we can be strong for this work.

It throws new light on why we're here doesn't it! What all this is for—from the beautiful libraries to the Aeolian-Skinner organ to this beautiful hand-carved pulpit.

We are not here to perpetuate the name of Westminster at 724 Delaware Ave. We are here to learn how to position ourselves between starvation and the hungry; between

oppression and the suffering; between the jaws of despair and the unemployed or addicted or sick or our young people who face extraordinary challenges and decisions.

Lent is the time of year to ponder what it takes to be that kind of person and institution. Relearning, equipping ourselves with what to think and say and do when the foxes of the world stalk and threaten at the door. When it comes to peacemaking, justice and healing you can't beat a mother hen. Amen.

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<sup>[i]</sup> *Book of Order*, G-3.0400

<sup>[iii]</sup> Deut. 32:11; Ruth 2:12; Pss 17:8; 36:7; 91:4; Isa 31:5