

Wild Chickens and a Mother's Love

Luke 13:31-35

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It is no surprise to many of you that I am a South Georgia girl. Born and raised below the gnat line. From an early age I perfected the art of blowing gnats from my eyes and nose. And only those who are true South Georgian know what a precious skill that is.

I grew up in the small town of Fitzgerald, Georgia; where everybody knows your name, and your daddy's name, and your mama's name, and all your secrets. One of my fondest childhood memories occurred in Fitzgerald, GA and involved my oldest brother, Troy. You see Troy was a very adventurous, outdoorsy boy. One of his favorite things to do was to chase the wild chickens.

Please tell me you are curious about these wild chickens? Please don't assume that we lived on a farm with these chickens, because we did not. We lived in the city limits. Yes, Fitzgerald is known for its Burmese wild chickens and even has this to say on the city's webpage, which I find completely amusing. It starts like a great novel... Long ago, flocks of chicks were released several miles from Fitzgerald at the Ocmulgee River. Populations of the bird never took hold in other areas of the state, but for some reason, they left the river site and made their way to downtown Fitzgerald, where they have [prospered ever since.] Exotic and beautiful, Burmese chickens are more athletic than your average chicken. According to one poultry resource, if caught in a fight, Burmese chickens move around and think out their moves, while other breeds move straight into the fray. Fitzgerald residents have a love/hate relationship with these wild birds. Some folks buy seed and feed them regularly; others chase them out of their yards and gardens with a broom and a few choice words.¹

Oh, what a city. What a sophisticated place to be raised! But I must say, all of it is true. While most folks hate the wild chickens, my brother, Troy, loved them. Because the birds were unusually athletic, they provided him hours of entertainment. His favorite activity with the wild chickens was to chase and catch the baby chicks or the "bitties" as we referred to them.

One sunny afternoon, Troy had been chasing these wild birds and so proudly bounded up to our home to show my mom and me these handfuls of bitties he was able to scoop up. He had at least four tiny chicks in each hand and a big smile across his face. And as he approached our house with these handfuls of birds, he had not even made it out of the alley when we witnessed the mother hen, the wild Burmese mother hen, take a dive onto his head. And while my mother should probably have been a little more concerned for Troy, she and I looked at this site in amazement and just laughed. It was the absolute funniest site to be seen. And that was the day my brother understood what mother hens are willing to do to protect their babies.

My story might seem wild or just wildly inappropriate to tell as part of a sermon, but it's the first image that came to mind after reading our scripture text for today.

In this text in Luke 13, Jesus has been making his way through Jerusalem teaching about the Kingdom of God. Then, we readers are given a vivid image in verse 31 of Jesus speaking candidly with a group of Pharisees. What's unusual is that these Pharisees, who are usually the ones "out to get" Jesus, were warning Jesus of Herod's plan to kill him. We are not given any indication as to why the Pharisees are showing concern. But Jesus responds to them, telling these Pharisees without any hesitation, "You guys go tell that FOX this for me... tell him I am doing my work and when my work is done then, I can be killed."

¹ http://fitzgeraldga.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=50&Itemid=148

And then, as if Jesus knew what his future held, he began this lament, this cry for people of Jerusalem. He was struck with grief as he called out to them, and these verses look as if they could be taken straight from the laments of Isaiah. We hear the heartbreak in Jesus' voice,

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! See your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'²

We hear the defeat in Jesus' voice, we feel the defeat in his bones... as his children turn from him. Jesus likens himself to a mother hen, trying desperately to gather her fleeing chicks under her wing. Jesus understands and feels that extreme anxiety only a parent or guardian understands- the need to gather his children, to pull them close to his side, to protect them from the chaos and destruction of this world. But... the chicks scatter, our children scatter, they run with full force... fleeing their parent's shelter. Why? No real reason, except to experience life on their own, to taste life without the hovering mother hen.

This text reveals much to us about the nature of God. This simple lament by Jesus, reminding me of my brother being accosted by a mother hen, discloses some serious characteristics of the nature of God that we must not overlook. God, made manifest in the body of Jesus, decides to use female imagery to describe God's self. This is so important because throughout scripture readers are given an abundance of male images of God. But here, we are given a new image, that of a mother. We feel something new about the nature of God- a level of compassion, of caring, of mothering that we haven't felt before.

As if it weren't enough to see God in this new mothering role, Jesus uses this imagery to convey what I feel is the crux of his message. Jesus uses this imagery of chicks fleeing from the safety of their mother's wings, then returning after realizing how hard it can be trying to survive on their own to teach us this lesson- ***our wandering is expected, and our return is never too late.***

Our wandering is expected. As children of God, our wandering is expected. I believe with all that is within me, that these verses are revealing to us that God understands the nature of God's children... we run, we scatter, we want to taste life for ourselves.

If you are a parent or have ever helped raise someone else's children, you know what I'm talking about. There is nothing more heartbreaking than a parent who desperately wants to provide for her child, a parent that wants to keep his child safe, but at some point when that child becomes a young adult- they flee, they run, they break their parent's hearts with this newfound need for independence.

It's a natural part of our lives to run from what we've always known, to run from that which gives us boundaries. God knows that at some point we will all run. Our wandering is expected. The hymn writer penned an appropriate lyric about this phenomenon, "Prone to wander, prone to leave the God I love."

But it is this time of wandering, it is this time we spend alone in the desert of our lives where we learn a whole lot about who we are. Some of us escape this time with a sense of enlightenment about who God is. We see and experience God in new ways. Some of us dig ourselves deep into a spiritual rut while in the desert. We feel so far and so distant from God that it even seems pointless to try to escape. Some of us are forced into this desert, into this time of wandering by illness or disease that clouds our view of the road ahead. Illness and disease can steal all hope and all joy from our lives and can leave us sitting on a curb in the desert, waiting to die. Some of us are wandering from God because we don't want to be seen by God. We have been living a lie to our spouse, to our kids, to our employer, to ourselves and we are wandering to keep from facing our mistakes.

² New Revised Standard Version, Luke 13:34 & 35

There are many reasons we wander away from God. There are many reasons we flee from the safety of God's wings, but whatever the reason... it doesn't catch God by surprise that we wander. It doesn't anger God, although it does break God's heart to see us hurt, to see us in so much self-inflicted pain. And as an earthly parent would gladly take a returning child in her arms, so would our God.

Our wandering is expected, and our return is never too late. There is nothing more beautiful about the nature of God, than God's unrequited love and grace for us. Some of us are fortunate enough to have a parent or a guardian that helps us understand the love of God. I remember the heartache I caused my parents when I left for college, hell-bent on doing things my own way... running from them as fast as I could, no turning back- only to find myself a few years later, crawling back into their arms scarred and battered from facing life on my own. They didn't say, "I told you so." They didn't turn their backs on me; instead, they waited on my return with open arms. *That is the kind of God we serve. That is the kind of mother God that waits to take us back under her wing and shelter us.*

Many of us have been desert travelers. Many of us have wandered from the God we love. Many of us will return to the desert, again, and again, and again. Some of us are there right now, hurting, lonely, isolated, stuck. Stuck in the desert- thirsty and roaming, searching for an oasis of living water only to find a mirage, and end up with a mouth full of dry sand. Stuck in the desert with no hope to guide us out, fearing our return to an angry parent, a vengeful parent who will surely turn her back on us, who may not forgive us, who could punish us. No. No. Our return is never too late. Our return to God from the desert is never too late.

Our wandering is expected, and our return is never too late. If you are stuck in the desert of your life, wandering aimlessly, it is time for your return. It is time and it's not too late for you to get your life back on track, redefine your relationship with God, and move forward from the isolation of the desert into a loving and open community of faith. A community made up of travelers who have all been wounded and scarred by life in the desert- a family of brothers and sisters who have discovered a way to share their experiences, learn from one another, and support each other through difficult times.

I must warn you, it is possible and probable that some of us will end up in the desert again, but it's up to us to so deepen and strengthen our relationship with God, that God will be our compass that can help guide us through the next desert, the next valley, the next detour. **Our wandering is expected, and our return is never too late.**

As soon as my brother dropped his handful of chicks to the ground, they scurried as quickly as they could back to the shelter of their mother's wings. Their wandering was expected, but their return was never too late. A mother will wait a lifetime for her children to return home safe. Amen.