Sunday, March 11, 2001
THE FOX AND THE HEN
Luke 13:31-35

After listening to hundreds of sermons, you've probably noticed that there are times when the title given to a sermon has little to do with its contents. That's partly true of the sermon today. Sometimes that also applies to newspaper headlines and the stories that follow. In defense of the title of this sermon, the words "fox" and "hen" are included in the Bible story on which the sermon is based, and they do partially relate to the theme of the sermon, as you will later see.

Jesus had been gaining momentum. He was acquiring supporters and opposition, friends and enemies. He had been especially critical of the leading religious authorities of his time — the religious establishment. Some of these leaders were Pharisees, a group of pious and respected people. Despite his criticisms of them, he must have had the respect of some of them. After all, they listened to him teach in the synagogues, and as Luke tells us, several of them had invited him to dinner in their homes. This would indicate that some of them at least viewed him as a professional colleague and social and intellectual equal.

Some of these Pharisees had taken Jesus' message seriously, because Luke tells us in this little story that when a small group of them learned of Herod's plan to kill Jesus, they came to him in person and warned him to get out of that region. Although they did not always agree with him and questioned his interpretations of Jewish law and tradition, they were willing to let him continue preaching and teaching. They wanted to protect his life. In today's terms, they defended his right to free speech, a right that is today guaranteed in our United States Constitution.

In our Protestant tradition since the Reformation of the 16th century, long before our United States Constitution, there has been what has come to be known as the "free pulpit." According to the tradition of the "free pulpit," it is the right and duty of ordained ministers to preach and teach the word of God as the minister understands it, even when it calls into question some long-held assumptions and challenges traditional beliefs. This does not mean that those listening have to always agree with what is said or taught.

I remember when I came to this pulpit almost 30 years ago, one of the most respected leaders in this congregation and in the State of Nebraska was Judge Robert Van Pelt, a highly respected figure. He said to me, "I strongly urge you to always remember that you have the right and the responsibility of a free pulpit. You are called here to preach and teach the word of God as you understand it. Never be hesitant or hold back from preaching God's word as you believe it because you are afraid someone will criticize you or disagree with you. Never be afraid to challenge us." He went on to say, "I will defend your right to a free pulpit in every way open to me." Those of you who knew Judge Robert Van Pelt know that he was a good man to have on your side.

You have to admire these Pharisees who came to warn Jesus, even though in his teaching and actions, he challenged many of the religious traditions they held. He ate with outcasts, worked when he was supposed to rest, treated women as equals, accepted Samaritans, and taught that the poor should be housed, fed, and clothed. He was not content with the social or religious status quo. He said that the kinds of behavior he was exhibiting toward others were signs of God working.

How did Jesus respond to the warning from the Pharisees? He said, and here I'm paraphrasing, "Go and tell that fox (Herod) for me that I am going to continue to do God's work as I am called to do."

To call Herod, one of the highest Roman government officials, a "fox," was a carefully chosen metaphor. In other places in the Bible, a fox is used as a symbol for slyness and cunning. In the Old Testament, false prophets are called foxes.

Jesus was not only critical of Herod but also of Jerusalem, the holy city, and especially its religious leaders. He described it as the place where prophets were killed. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it." He was saying that the religious establishment had bought into Herod's agenda as an acceptable way of life, even when it meant silencing the true prophets. They were compromising their own integrity, and they were lacking in courage. More than that, throughout history, many of the religious leaders were more willing to protect their own status and positions than to listen to what the prophets had to say. When they didn't like the message, they killed the messenger.

After calling Herod a fox, Jesus described himself as being like a mother hen. Speaking of the people of Jerusalem, he said, "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 fox and the hen — a revealing contrast. Jesus the mother hen is not about to abandon the house to the foxes or leave the chicks abandoned, even though there is tremendous risk for the mother hen in extending her wings and trying to protect the chicks. Jesus was ready and willing to take that risk, but the chicks in this case were not ready and willing to come under his wings.

Now comes the difficult part of the sermon. How does this story of Herod the fox and Jesus the hen apply to our lives today?

Jesus was a man of courage and calls us also to be people of courage. That is not always easy. He knew the Old Testament and its stories of courageous people. Like other people of courage, he was not afraid of the cunning, sly fox. In his parables, he described people of courage. One example is the story of the Good Samaritan. Here was a man who had the courage to stop and help an injured Jew in a ditch by the side of the road in a day when Jews and Samaritans would have nothing to do with each other. They were not supposed to associate with one another. To do so was considered sinful. The Good Samaritan had the courage to violate some very strong religious laws.

Like the Good Samaritan, people of courage can be found in some surprising places. Consider Ruby Bridges. A federal court had ordered the City of New Orleans to open its public schools to black children. The white people of the city were scared, and so were the black people. The parents of the white children decided that if they had to let black children in, they would keep their white children out. They let it be known that any black children who came to school would be in for trouble. So most of the black children stayed out of school.

Except Ruby Bridges, six years old. Her parents sent her to school all by herself. She was the first and, for a little while, the only black child to attend a white elementary school. Every day, she walked alone through a heckling crowd to an empty school building. White people lined both sides of the way and shook their fists at her. They threatened to do terrible things to her if she kept coming to their school.

But every morning at ten minutes to eight, Ruby walked, head up, eyes forward, straight through the mob. Two U.S. Marshals walked ahead of her, and two walked behind her. Then she spent the day alone with her teachers inside the big school building. Ruby could have stayed home. She didn't have to go to school. And every one of the cowards who heckled and threatened her could have walked away from the crowd and come to Ruby's side. It certainly didn't take any courage to be in the crowd of hecklers.

When interviewed, Ruby's mother said, "There's a lot of people who talk about doing good, and a lot of people who argue about what's good and what's not good, but there are some people who are willing to do more than talk. They are those who put their lives on the line for what's right." That's the kind of courage Jesus lived and taught.

I believe that deep down, each one of us wants to be a person of courage. Whenever I read or hear stories of courageous people, I say to myself, "I want that kind of courage in my life. I don't want my life controlled by fear. I don't want to cave in under difficult circumstances. I don't want to compromise my convictions. I want to be a courageous person. I want to stand firm for what I know is right."

My belief is that you do too. You want the kind of courage Jesus exhibited in this story of the fox and the hen.

Unfortunately, too often the only examples of courage we hear about are those one-in-a-lifetime heroic events. Someone dives in to save a person from drowning, or runs into a burning house to save a child. These are courageous acts, but they almost seem bigger than life.

The older I get, the more I have come to realize that it also takes a lot of courage to face the ordinary, everyday challenges of life. There are countless people who live every day with tremendous courage, but you will never read about them in the news.

Here's a ten-year-old child who struggled for three years with leukemia, enduring blood transfusions, bone marrow tests, chemotherapy, and the whole bit. Through it all, she kept a delightful sense of humor. Here's a mother, grief-stricken by the death of her three-year-old, yet bighearted enough to risk it all again by giving birth to two more children.

Here's a marriage of 62 years, and one of the partners has been ill for 15 years, yet lovingly cared for by their spouse.

Now what about you and me? Every single day you make choices — some of them seem like very small ones — but they show you to be either courageous or cowardly. You can make the choice to do the right thing or the easy thing. You can choose to stick to a conviction or cave in to compromise for convenience.

Every day you make choices to either believe and trust in God, or to cower in doubt and fear. The choices can come so rapidly that you could find yourself simply following the crowd, acting like many others, instead of carefully making the courageous choice.

I am convinced that to be a Christian in today's world takes a large amount of courage. Of course, that's nothing new. In the time of the Roman persecution of Christians, consider how

much courage it took to be a Christian. Maybe you've heard people say that Christianity is for weak people. I don't believe that's true.

It takes courage even to become a Christian. Jesus said that to follow him means to repent, to own up to your sins and mistakes. It means not being afraid to turn your life around. I contend that takes courage. It means choosing generosity over greed, gratitude over envy, and compassion over hate.

It takes a great deal of courage to become and remain a Christian, because it frequently means you have to choose an alternative way from what the popular culture would have you do. It takes courage to go against the crowd. In many ways, the Christian way is counter-cultural. It takes courage to operate ethically and morally in the marketplace. There are strong temptations to cut corners, to make promises in order to get customers, and then not be able to fulfill those promises. Greed has never been a more powerful force than it is in our time.

Consider how much moral courage it takes to control sexual temptations in a sex-filled culture. It takes courage to stick to a Christian conviction when almost everyone you meet tells you that you are hopelessly naive.

It also takes courage to raise children and young people according to Christian values.

I am convinced that the early followers of Jesus remembered this story of him being warned by some of his Pharisee allies that Herod wanted to kill him, and not being afraid to face Herod because it reminded them of his courage to continue his ministry in the face of opposition, and they wanted to have this kind of courage.

What's the source of this kind of courage? I believe the seed for courage is within us from the moment of our birth because we are created in God's image. However, that seed needs cultivation and continued nurture, and that means we have to remain in constant touch with the source of all courage — God.

A white school teacher described what she saw when Ruby Bridges walked into that school in New Orleans. "A woman spat at Ruby but missed. Ruby smiled at her. Then she walked up the stairs, stopped, and turned and smiled one more time." Ruby told one of the marshals that she prays for those people, the ones in the mob, every night before she goes to sleep. It takes courage to love your enemies and pray for them, but when you do, you are cultivating and nurturing the seed of courage within you.

Courage does not mean you are no longer afraid, but that you are able to go on in spite of your fear because of your faith that God goes with you. With that kind of courage, you can, like Jesus the hen, face Herod the fox. Amen.