

“Mother hen and communities of Compassion”, a sermon preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 13 March 2022 by Kerry Enright. The readings were Psalm 27 and Luke 13:31-36

When I was young, I went looking for a community of compassion. At the time I didn't know that's what I was looking for or how to name it. The search continued for many years but the most intense searching happened when I was a lawyer. I was looking for an alternative to our nation's hardness of spirit that seemed determined to punish the young people for whom I used to act. We seemed unwilling to deal with the underlying causes. I sense many people today are looking for communities of compassion. When people are feeling isolated and alone and want to be safe and included and valued. When peer pressure is harmful and people want a safe place in order to flourish. When the horror of war is before us. When people express hard attitudes about politicians and officials and health workers. Yesterday the person who was helping us check in at the market told us about the abuse to which she had been subject. We need communities of compassion.

I have learned that whether people are compassionate does not depend on them believing in God. However ... where they do believe in God, the kind of God they believe in, the kind of God they worship, makes a big difference. Which is why the image used of God in the gospel today is important, the image of mother hen. After years of teaching theology, Barbara Brown Taylor moved to live on a farm and the farm had chickens. She writes about what happened when she bought a hen to look after an orphaned chick.

“I lay on the grass while she and the baby watched each other through the mesh of the cage. Then I placed her inside. Both she and the baby froze. The baby cheeped. The hen did not move a feather. The baby cheeped again. The hen stayed right where she was. The baby took a few steps toward her. I held my breath. The grey hen lifted her wings. The baby scooted right into that open door. When I checked on them an hour later, all I could see was a little guinea chick head poking out from under that grey hen's wing.” A few weeks later, something broke into the pen one night and ate the mother hen and the rooster. “When I went down to feed them in the morning, all I found were a few silky feathers tilting in the wind. But her sisters have picked up where she left off.” There were other hens with their own chicks but they had all gathered in the newly orphaned chicks. Taylor says, “If this hen is into the preservation of her species, then she ought to be looking out for her own babies and letting

the others go hang, but she does not. She accepts all comers, no questions asked. She has never seen a chick she didn't like."

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings ..." The mother hen gathers chickens but cannot prevent suffering. If a fox is determined to kill a hen, she cannot save herself or her chicks. Jesus cannot save Jerusalem from Herod the fox. Herod has the power to kill. The hen is vulnerable. Yet in that vulnerability is the capacity to care for the other.

Elie Wiesel survived the holocaust. He spent time in a concentration camp. He wrote this about an experience in that camp. "The SS hung two Jewish men and a boy before the assembled inhabitants of the camp. The men died quickly but the death struggle of the boy lasted half an hour. "Where is God? Where is he?" a man behind me asked. As the boy, after a long time, was still in agony on the rope, I heard the man cry again "Where is God now?" And I heard a voice within me answer, "Here he is – he is hanging here on this gallows."

William Sloane Coffin was minister of Riverside Church in New York. One Sunday he announced this to the congregation. "As almost all of you know, a week ago last Monday night, driving in a terrible storm ... my twenty-four year old Alexander, who enjoyed beating his old man at every game and in every race, beat his father to the grave. When a person dies, there are many things that can be said and there is at least one thing that should never be said ... The one thing that should never be said when someone dies is, "It is the will of God." Never do we know enough to say that. My only consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God's heart was the first of all our hearts to break."

The wonderful theologian, Dorothy Soelle, was convinced that only those who were able to weep with another will abolish conditions where people are exposed to unnecessary suffering such as hunger and oppression. "The ideal of a life free from suffering" and "the illusion of painlessness destroys people's ability to feel anything." The God of Jesus is a God who suffers, a God who feels, a God who laments, a God who gathers the vulnerable, a mother hen God rather than a God of power and might.

Shusaku Endo's novel Silence explores the difference. The novel is about a dedicated young Jesuit missionary in seventeenth century Japan. The God who initially inspires Father Rodrigues is a God of power and might, a Christ of glory, a victorious Jesus who demands heroism from his disciples. This is a God of the strong who judges with severity and casts aside the lukewarm and the

weak. But the God Father Rodrigues meets in Japan is not a strong God but an emptying God who identifies with those for whom he suffered. This is a God for Christians who were required to trample on a bronze plaque with the face of Jesus while renouncing their faith. So Endo portrays a God who is weak, powerless, anguished and emaciated. This is a vulnerable God who has compassion for the people who betray God, who trample down the face of Jesus, who are faced with terrible choices. This is a mother hen God. Father Rodrigues begins with a romantic vision of his mission. He anticipates heroic martyrdom. But he ends with a revelation of the true Christ – sunken, exhausted, compassionate and forgiving.

We live at a time of stress when it is understandable that people are hard and judgemental and categorical. We are having to deal with complexity we do not entirely grasp. We are troubled by the responses of others. We wished more of life was manageable. At such times, we need communities of compassion, a community that softens the hardness, a community that holds to hope, a community where people journey with each other when times are tough.

In 2004, I was part of an international group to visit El Emina on the coast of Ghana. El Emina is a castle to which slaves were brought from the Ghanaian interior. They would be marched across the country and chained together in the castle until ships arrived to transport them to America. I visited El Elmina with descendants of slaves from America. As we got off the buses and moved towards the castle, people were weeping and crying. And then as we entered the castle, people began singing, the old slave spirituals that had been sung for generations in the south of the United States. Songs of lament and hope. We shall overcome. It would have been one thing for me to have gone to the castle alone or with other people like me as a tourist, but it was entirely another to go with the descendants of those who had suffered as a pilgrim. I experienced what it meant to belong to a community of compassion, a community of raw suffering, because of which it was also a community of hope.

Communities of compassion bring suffering close. They do not pretend. They do not gloss over. They do not avoid. They do not sanitise. Communities of compassion have a raw honesty born of shared vulnerability. The journey of Lent to Easter, takes us on that path with the mother hen God who cares tenaciously.

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