

2 Lent C Feb. 21, 2016

Name Calling

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Anyone who has ever seen any of the movies in the popular science fiction *Back to the Future Trilogy* will remember that the surest way to get the protagonist, a teenager named Marty McFly to do something he shouldn't is to call him a name. Whenever he was called that name he would stop in tracks, stare down who ever dared to call him such a name and say, "Nobody calls me that." He then would do anything to prove he isn't what he was called. This character flaw ended up causing Marty all kinds of trouble, often giving added drama and tension to the plotline and sometimes jeopardizing his mission, which was to help his parents fall in love after he accidentally drove a time machine into the past where he met his parents when they were teenagers and interfered with how they met. While everything eventually worked out with his parents, Marty's weakness for being called a derogatory name is what drove the three movies, and when Marty realized that it was his reaction to being called this name that eventually compromised his future, he began to see that name a little differently and refused to let it get to him.

So what was the derogatory name that had that kind of power over the character Marty McFly? It is a name I remember from own childhood, a terrible term that signifies weakness, cowardice, and shame. That is what it meant when someone called you a chicken. It was an insult. No one wanted to be called a chicken.

Chickens don't impress us much, other than as an item on a menu in a restaurant. In the animal kingdom chickens aren't known for being fierce or mean or intimidating. They are good at providing food for us to eat: meat and eggs. But that it is. For the record roosters can be fierce or mean, they'll fight. But not a chicken, not a hen. Hens are easy targets, easy prey for predators like foxes or coyotes. Farmers who raise chickens know chickens can't take care of themselves and are easy to lose. That is why it is an insult to be called a chicken.

So isn't it interesting that today we see Jesus engaging in some name calling in our Gospel? And isn't it even more interesting that he called himself a chicken?

Is that really the kind of Savior we want to be believing and following? One who calls himself a chicken? What could Jesus be saying when he calls himself a chicken?

Today's Gospel lesson in Luke begins with Jesus receiving a message from some Pharisees. While we've been conditioned to see all Pharisees as the bad guys of the Gospel who are always trying to trip Jesus up or get him in more trouble, today we might view these Pharisees through a wider lens. Jesus wasn't in or near Jerusalem in our Gospel, he was in Herod's territory of Galilee, so these might be different people than the Pharisees Jesus will encounter nearer to and in Jerusalem. Their message could be a friendly warning, letting him know his activities have gotten Herod's attention and Herod doesn't like him. That might mean not every Pharisee was afraid of Jesus, and we could remember there were Pharisees like Nicodemus who were open to what Jesus did and said. Or we could see the Pharisees as instigators who were trying to get Jesus to take on or fight Herod, as Jesus gave them a message to take back to Herod and called him a fox. This was not a compliment, by the way. Calling Herod a fox was Jesus' way of saying Herod was sneaky, violent, and vicious who would not hesitate to harm an easy target.

However we might imagine the Pharisees, helpers or instigators, they got a very powerful response from Jesus who started calling people names. He called Herod a fox and he called himself a chicken, not a lion or an eagle or other more traditional ways to symbolize the Messiah. Not even a rooster. Jesus called himself a chicken, a hen.

A mother hen who is deeply longing to gather her chicks under wings. This might be a comforting, loving image, but is it the image of strength or courage we expect in leaders or messiahs?

Before he called himself a hen, Jesus said he was going to keep doing what he was doing: he was going to keep healing and teaching and was going to keep going all the way to Jerusalem. Not because Jerusalem was a safe place that would protect him from Herod's jealousy or fear or anger, but because Jerusalem was where he had to go. Just as the Holy Spirit led him into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil, he had to take his message of God's love to the religiously powerful in Jerusalem. Historically, Jesus stated, the people and leaders in the great city were not so receptive of the prophets who brought God's message to them. So it seems Jesus didn't expect to be treated any differently. Yet he intended to go anyway.

A hen walking into the foxes' den, as it were.

In Luke's Gospel we see Jesus trying to explain what kind of Messiah he is. He is not the warrior. He is not the action hero. He is not a stereotype of a John Wayne character nor a version of Vin Diesel or Bruce Willis action adventure heroes who bring their revenge against the bad guys with guns blazing and engines revving. Jesus isn't anger hyped up on violence. Jesus isn't out to demolish the bad guys. Jesus is looking to draw people back to God, to heal the broken relationship between people and God by showing us God is not anger hyped up on violence, God is healing, forgiving love. Which might make us wonder why there is the resistance Jesus mentioned.

Is the image of a mother hen desiring to gather her chicks under her wings a disappointing one for us? What if someone like New Testament scholar N. T. Wright told us that mother hens might not fight like roosters, but they will sacrifice themselves for their chicks by putting their bodies over their chicks so the hen's lives are taken in natural disasters like fire or cold or predator attacks so that the chicks can live? Does that make them more noble or brave in our minds?

What if Jesus was talking about a different kind of courage? The kind that isn't about violence?

Many of you have heard that a few days ago Harper Lee died. Harper Lee wrote the book that has the ability to touch people from all walks of life and one of my beloved favorites, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. If you haven't read this book or seen the movie, it would make a great Lenten discipline to take on. In the wake of Harper Lee's death, there have been many postings on Facebook and Twitter of quotes from *To Kill a Mockingbird*. One of my favorite quotes is attributed to Atticus Finch that says, "I wanted you see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It's when you know you're licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what. You rarely win, but sometimes you do." While this quote might easily apply to the heartbreaking trial that Atticus lost defending an innocent black man, in the book the quote takes place after the cantankerous character Mrs. Debose died. Mrs. Dubose was the elderly neighbor of the Finches, and she was known for being mean. She was also blatantly racist and didn't shy away from calling anyone a bad name. Jem, Scout's brother, was charged with reading out loud one hour to her every weeknight for a whole month. This proved to be just awful for Jem, and he complained about it and told Atticus every ugly thing Mrs. Debose said about him while he was there. After she died, however, Atticus explained to

his son that Mrs. Debose had been courageously facing down a morphine addiction. She knew the drug helped her through pain, but it was causing her to be disconnected from too much, so she decided to stop taking the drug, so she could be fully aware and conscience. She died free from the drug's hold on her. And that, Atticus explained to his children, is real courage. Even though they disagreed on plenty of important issues, Atticus called Mrs. Debose the bravest person he ever knew because of how she faced her death.

We might say that what made Jesus brave or courageous is that he refused to let anyone influence how he was going to be the Messiah: not the devil, not Herod, not the Pharisees, not his family, not even his disciples. As God's Son he showed us God is love by what he said and what he did, even when it didn't make any sense, or when it caused fear or worry. He showed us what a deep relationship with God is like, how God desires to gather us to God even though as chicks we resist or refuse.

Maybe today we can look at all the name calling in today's Gospel as an invitation to consider the names we call Jesus and wonder where we got them and how they measure up to Jesus' name for himself. Maybe we can prayerfully wonder how those names we use affect our relationship with God through Jesus. And perhaps, if we are brave, we might ask what we are being called to do to live our relationship with God right here in our parish and outside the doors. How are we called to show the courage of love to those filled with fear or anger or hate or anxiety? Perhaps part of our work this season of Lent is to imagine the ways we can embody such a courageous love so that we can draw and be drawn closer to our mother hen.