

Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church, Camden, UUCC, March 13, 2022

³¹ At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." ³² He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. ³³ Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' ³⁴ 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! ³⁵ 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.'"

A friend once told me a story that always returns to my mind and heart when I hear today's story from Luke's Gospel. When my friend's father was growing up in Odessa, Washington, in the early 1930s, small brush fires were quite common in the countryside. Back in those days, some of the fires were caused by sparks flying off the railroad tracks, igniting the prairie grass around them. After one such fire, my friend's dad and his buddies set off dressed in their baggy pants and sporting crew cuts to assess the damage. They wanted to see the effects of the fire while the smoke was still rising.

After walking for a while, they could make out a small heap up ahead. It soon became apparent that they were looking at a bundle of charred feathers that were the remains of a prairie hen who had perished in the fire. There were no apparent signs that the bird had been injured prior to the fire. The boys began to wonder why the hen had not sought shelter when the fire approached. They went to look for a wooden stick and decided to poke at the body. Eventually, they pushed the hen's body to the side. What they found took their young breath away: four healthy baby chicks were looking up at them. The chicks had survived the fire under the shelter of their mother's body because she had not moved. The boys took the chicks home to care for them and remembered this encounter for years to come.

Whether the hen's response to the fire was primarily instinctual or not, she is an image of courage to me. In our Gospel text for today, Jesus portrays himself as just such a mother hen

who will not budge at the sign of danger but only desires to gather up her children under the protective shelter of her wings. As Jesus says: “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 like a hen gathers her brood under her wings and you were not willing (Luke 13:34).” We encounter Jesus at the pivotal moment of journeying to Jerusalem and therefore heading straight into danger. Today’s text shines a visceral light on what challenges lie ahead for him. Jesus shows us the depth of his love, pain, courage, and commitment to embody love and remain true to the callings of his heart through the images and words he chooses. In what follows, I hope to explore both the scope of Jesus’ outward courage and the inward dimensions of courage that matter for all our lives. I am indebted to the poet David Whyte for his insights on the latter, the internal dimensions of courage.¹

Let’s first return to our story and the context of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem. Jerusalem stands for many things. It was the place of famous kings, especially David, and the hopes that a Messiah from David’s line would someday restore glory and peace. People believed that God was present in the Temple which housed sacred symbols and offered opportunities for worship and required sacrifices. But Jerusalem also had its history of corrupt political and religious leaders and occupying foreign powers whose love of power overshadowed the city’s beautiful potential. Many prophets came to the seat of power to speak out against false worship, corruption, and abuse only to be killed.

In our passage, some Pharisees - devoted to keeping religious laws - come to Jesus to warn him, saying: “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” We don’t know if they just don’t want trouble and prefer to point the finger at Rome’s puppet king, Herod, or if they genuinely care for Jesus and admire his ability to heal and transform people.² As it turns out, the various

¹ See his reflection “Courage” shared by *Gratefulness.org*. Original source: David Whyte, *Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words*, published by Many Rivers Press; First Edition (January 1, 2015).

² This Herod was ruler of Galilee, Jesus home region, and son of Herod the Great who was king at the time of Jesus’ birth. He was in Jerusalem for the Passover festival. Luke suggests that Herod and Pilate become friends over the

religious and political power brokers of the day will all collude in Jesus' murder though none of them want to take actual responsibility.³ Jesus refers to Herod as a fox, capable of frenzied destruction in a hen house and, as lore would have it, cunning and deception. The contrast to the image of the creative, caring, and courageous mother hen presence manifested in Jesus could not be stronger. Jesus laments that the offer of love has been extended but not received, especially not by those charged to lead the people. ["How often have I desired to gather your children together like a hen gathers her brood under her wings *and you were not willing* (Luke 13:34)."]

Jesus certainly holds authorities responsible for the suffering of people. The need to call out abuses of power is as strong now as it was in Jesus' day from the obvious manifestation in the war in Ukraine to the more subtle and not so subtle forms of exploitation and discrimination in our world, including this country. Florida's new laws forbidding coherent teaching on the history of slavery and the legacy of racism as well as punitive measures against families with transgender children are just recent examples. Jesus joins all who have the outward courage to speak out. He is present in Ukraine where people, including mothers, are risking everything to protect their children. Jesus is present where people fight for a more just and equitable future for their children in our own neighborhoods.

As I mentioned earlier, there is also an interior dimension of courage that is important to explore. The poet David Whyte reminds us that the word courage is connected to the word for heart in the old Norman French. "Coeur" is the French word for heart (Spanish: Corazon). As Whyte writes, courage originally refers to "our heartfelt participation with life, with one another, with a community, a work; a future." He reminds us that being courageous does not always have to mean that we go somewhere or "do anything except to make conscious those things we already feel deeply and then to live through the unending vulnerabilities of those consequences." I mention this insight because we can so easily feel helpless or powerless in the

murder and arrest of Jesus although the chief priests and scribes are consistently the agitators for his death (Luke 23:6-12).

³ In contrast to the other Gospels, the Pharisees are not included among those hostile to Jesus.

face of suffering. We may even feel like we need to shut down or turn away if we feel that we cannot affect a given situation. How might the very meaning of courage help us to stay present?

David Whyte writes further: “To be courageous is to seat our feelings deeply in the body and in the world: to live up to and into the necessities of relationships that often already exist, with things we find we already care deeply about: with a person, a future, a possibility in society, or with an unknown that begs us on and always has begged us on. To be courageous is to stay close to the way we are made.” We are made to feel the depth of sorrows and heights of joys in our hearts, even to the point of tears. Life calls on us to remain present in a heartfelt way as life constantly surprises us with its invitation to participate from a “gravitational pull” and a “robust vulnerability.” Whyte notes that we can grow in our trust in what arises. We may begin with confusion but our attention to the heart and its innate capacity for love can reveal to us “how we can affect deepening that love.”⁴

While life experience may aid in this affecting the deepening of love, young people are capable of this as well. I read about a ten-year-old girl named Antonia in an article from Church World Service (CWS). CWS is one of the ecumenical organizations connected with the UCC which directly aids people in need around the world. Antonia and her family have just fled the Crimean Peninsula which had been forcefully annexed by Russia from Ukraine a few years ago. The family has now joined the long train of refugees fleeing further war and oppression. Antonia is a bright-eyed blond-haired girl and she is depicted in this photo holding three-year-old Galyna, perhaps her little sister.

- Show the picture if we can -

⁴ “On the inside we come to know who and what and how we love and what we can do to deepen that love; only from the outside and only by looking back, does it look like courage.”

Antonia and her family have found refuge in a camp run by Church World Service's partner organizations on the Ukrainian-Hungarian border. We don't learn much more about her except this pivotal and telling detail: Antonia fled with the few items she could carry. She was allowed to pack one toy and her coloring book along with some clothes. When she met another girl in the refugee camp who had nothing, Antonia gave her precious color book to her out of the sheer goodness of her heart. She was in a position to share, and she had an inward and embodied sense of how hard it must have been for the other girl to leave her home.

Here is ten-year-old who is suffering hardship and, yet, she is in touch with that "gravitational pull" of the heart, embracing a new relationship that presented itself to her amidst the circumstances of her life. Antonia is living a path with heart using what she has at her disposal to affect the deepening of love in a time of war and displacement. She trusted what David Whyte calls "the interior annunciations" of her heart. Jesus also models for us this deep "gravitational pull" and "robust vulnerability," a sense of being grounded in love which undergirds all his action. Like Antonia, he models the vulnerability of grief and the refusal to turn away from both challenge and opportunity. Jesus is connected and aligned with God's deep vision of building the beloved community. And, Jesus, embodies for us how God desires to take all who struggle under God's wings.

What might it mean for each of us to delve deeper into a connection with our hearts, to connect with our own courage arising from within? What are the "interior annunciations" that are arising in your own life from the encounters and relationships which shape your day? How might we individually and together be called to risk and further the deepening of love, to trust our tears as well as the creative and compassionate impulses that arise? May the Holy Spirit also help us to trust that every moment of connection and deepening of love in one part of the world affects the growth of love for all of us. Let us be of good courage, grounded in God's love that has the breadth and depth to pull this hurting creation under her wings. Amen.