

2 Lent C March 17, 2019
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Hard to Hear
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

Barbara Brown Taylor is an Episcopal priest who lives into her priesthood by serving not in a parish, but as a University professor and writer of several best-selling books on Christian Spirituality. Just recently, I learned that she also loves to watch chickens. In an article she wrote for the Christian Century titled “Barnyard Behavior”, Taylor writes about the time she found herself with some baby chickens, those cute, fluffy peeping things called chicks and had to find a female chicken, a hen, to care for those chicks. She found a place to purchase hens, brought them and a rooster home to a newly made chicken yard and coop, put a baby chick in a cage with a hen, and then sat down to watch. What happened next made a powerful impression on her. While the hen stayed perfectly still, the small fluffy chick approached the hen and peeped once. No response from the hen. The chick then hopped closer to the hen and peeped once. No response from the hen. The brave little chick then hopped up next to the hen who lifted her wing, allowing the little chick to lay down beneath her protective wing. After that, the hen was the chick’s mother in every way: guiding it to food and protecting it from the occasional hawk that soared above the yard by running beside the chick with her wing outstretched over it. One morning, Taylor said she came into the yard to find the chick without its mother, and the only thing left of the mother hen was a few of her feathers on the ground, evidence of a predator that had somehow cunningly got into the chicken coop during the night. The hen had apparently once again lifted her wing and gathered her chick to protect it, this time by giving her life.

In her article, Barbara Brown Taylor writes how this hen taught her a great deal about God, because it reminded her of today’s Gospel from Luke, where Jesus compared himself to a mother hen yearning to gather her chicks under her wings. It is an image that can bring comfort, the idea of Jesus welcoming those who come to him with open arms. But if we look closer, this Gospel lesson can also reveal heartbreak, which makes it a very appropriate reading for the season of Lent.

Today’s Gospel starts with Jesus getting some information that most of us would probably consider bad. Turns out not everybody liked Jesus in his day. Herod was one of those people. Jesus’ response to the Pharisees sounds a bit like blowing them off to me. Jesus was going to do what he was going to do, he was not afraid and was going to live into God’s will no matter what people thought. And after calling Herod a fox, which at the time was probably an insult, inferring Herod was clever in a way that brought destruction instead of life, Jesus then did something very appropriate for Lent: he lamented.

Lamenting is very biblical. Old Testament prophets tended to be very good at it. A whole section of the psalms is dedicated to it. To lament means to passionately express a deep grief or sorrow. And in today's Gospel, Jesus seems to be lamenting the failure of Jerusalem to listen to the voices of the prophets of old who repeatedly called people of the city to turn from following their own goals and agendas, or those of occupying governments, and turn and follow God. Often, those Old Testament prophets promised an outpouring of God's wrath if people did not change, but that is not what Jesus says in his lament. He did not say his deepest longing was to smite or punish the unfaithful. Instead he said his deepest yearning was, like the hen in Barbara Brown Taylor's chicken coop, to receive and care for the penitent, those who turned from whatever ways they were living and turned to God. That is Jesus' deepest hearts' desire, and God's desire too: not just for the residents of long ago Jerusalem, but all of us, to turn from the ways of sin and turn to God and allow God to shelter us under the shadow of those arms of Jesus which he opened wide on the cross so that all, as it says in the prayer in our Book of Common Prayer, might come within the reach of his saving embrace.

It's a beautiful vision, isn't it? Jesus' heart's desire is another way the Kingdom of God what some call the Beloved Community becomes that much closer being made real. And it can start when we recognize the ways we have run away from God. As one priest wrote, that is the very heart or essence of sin: the rejection of God's will, the rejection of God's love. And that refusal, that rejection, seems to be what causes Jesus and God heartbreak. Because it is a stubborn insistence, that we don't want or need God and can handle things perfectly well all on our own. And maybe we can, but what we do won't be God's Kingdom, it will be a version of whatever kingdom we want, whether it's Rome's kingdom, or one based on consuming, or superiority, or violence, or power, or whatever we run to for protection or comfort or security instead of running to God.

That seems to be Jesus' lament in today's Gospel. And when seen in that light, we can see Jesus isn't out to punish people or places, and he doesn't have to be, because we humans are just too good at doing that ourselves. We were then, and we still are to this day whenever we suffer the consequences of choosing to hurt rather than heal, choosing to hate instead choosing to understand, choosing to consume selfishly rather than share, or choosing to use the earth's resources without care for those who come after us, choosing fear instead of dealing with personal discomfort when God calls us deeper into the world around us. That is another way of understanding Jesus' words in today's Gospel about your house being left to you. Those consequences aren't God's punishment, they are what happens when we choose something other than God.

Lent is the time when we are tasked by the church to lament those choices when we as an institution, a community and individuals have turned from God. This is not meant cause shame or guilt, but instead to invite us to share in an aspect of God that Jesus showed us in Luke's Gospel: one who loves us so much God allows God's heart to break and grieves our sin. Perhaps it is not so much expressing disappointment as it is God expressing a deep loneliness created by our unwillingness to turn to God. And the opportunity for us is to recognize the loneliness in our hearts that yearns for God and to be part of God's Kingdom here on earth.

Let me put it this way: we just heard what made Jesus lament, or deeply grieve. Have you ever asked what makes preachers grieve? When he was a teenager, Will Willimon, a retired bishop in the Methodist Church saw the answer to that question without asking it. When he was a teenager, Willimon was the teen representative to his parish's board, what is the equivalent to our Vestry in the Episcopal Church. One summer, Billy Graham was planning to do one of his revivals in Willimon's hometown, and this caused quite a lot of excitement in his small town. Especially with the clergy. Willimon remembers the night his pastor told the board about the upcoming revival and how he had met with other clergy in town and they were all planning on working together to support and play a role in the revival. After the pastor's excited report, the board members, one by one, expressed their rejection of the pastor and parish's participation in and support of the revival. They were primarily opposed to supporting it because Billy Graham would not allow those who came to hear him to be segregated by race, and this troubled the board. They also felt the revival was beneath their parish, and so they voted against the pastor. After the meeting, as he was leaving the building, Willimon says he remembers hearing sounds coming from the pastor's office. Out of curiosity, he walked down the hall to the office, where through the window in the pastor's office door, he saw his pastor holding his head in his hands sobbing. Grieving. Lamenting. Not just that the board was not behind him, surely, but that they rejected the very things the pastor had been excited to be part of: inclusivity and reviving the spirit of the church, practices that are moving closer to the Kingdom of God being present in the present day. That is the day, Willimon said, he learned what made preachers cry. It's the same thing that makes Jesus cry or lament: when we beloved children of God not only turn from God but move farther away from God, creating a deep spiritual loneliness in order to try and protect our foxy and selfish ideals or destructive prejudices instead of being willing to let God challenge us and draw us closer to those outstretched arms of love.

Lent is the season the church gives us to not only acknowledge the reality of sin, but to help us learn the practice of lamenting our own sin and those sins around us. To recognize the value in learning to let that realization of our sins help us turn toward God, to learn to trust more in those outstretched arms of love and move toward them. Maybe we all don't have the instinctive confidence of a little chick, but we can make our prayers of confession, our prayers of intention, our small actions of trusting God, of letting God lift those wings of love over us so that we who are weary from all the pain and violence and hatred and bigotry that cause further division and spiritual loneliness can rest in the shadow of those arms of God's holy and life-giving love which hold us, renew us, and revive us so that we can go forth with God into the world and show the world there's plenty of room for everyone in God's Kingdom, in the Beloved Community that exists under the protective shadow of God's love.