

“TO HAVE OR TO BE”

A sermon preached by the Reverend Dr. Anne Gavin Ritchie on February 27, 2010, the Second Sunday in Lent, based on Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18 and St. Luke 13:31-35.

First I need to hold up in love and support the people of Chile; who, like the people of Haiti, have just experienced a devastating earthquake. Perhaps they will need less international aid than Haiti, but still they are trying to survive a horrible experience. They too will need our help.

These devastating earthquakes remind us how fragile our life, buttressed up with things, possessions... how fragile our life really is. Of course, the economic recession we're still suffering should have made the point already. If we stake ultimate security in things we have, there is an extremely good chance that we'll be disappointed. If we place ultimate security in God... that is, the best and truest force for good... we can withstand the worst the external world can inflict.

That's the message of Jesus' parable about building a home on sand, on a *wadi*, a dry river bed. You're fine for a while, before the rains come. But when the rains come, your house is going to be washed away. It's not a matter of if, but when.

There is a book by the great 20th-century sociologist Erich Fromm called *To Have or To Be*. His message is that humans tend to cling to what we know, what we're familiar with, and the possessions that reinforce our sense of security. The old tried and true – whether they really serve us or *not* – anesthetize us to the fragility of our existence. What I happen to own is not going to save my life or save my soul. If that is where I place my trust, my truest allegiance, when I or anyone I love gets sick, or hurt in any way, I will feel terribly betrayed. But the fact is that I will have betrayed *myself*.

The Genesis story we heard as our first reading may strike us as rather weird: cutting animals in half; flaming torches passes between the pieces. This story is a remnant of an ancient tradition signifying the sealing of a covenant, an absolutely binding agreement. The ritual that strikes us as so strange is a way of saying, “May I be myself be sacrificed if I break my covenant with you.”

This is an agreement between Abram, (soon to become Abraham), and God, meant to establish a permanent relationship. Abram is turning his life upside-down because of God's promises that he is being led where he most needs to go.

Fast-forwarding to the time of Jesus, we see an amazing portrait of Someone putting his entire trust in God, his heavenly Father.

Luke has Jesus standing on the hills overlooking Jerusalem. He has been there at least once before, and he knows that Jerusalem is not friendly to anyone challenging the religious or political system. Here's what one biblical commentator has to say:

“Perhaps the citizens of Jerusalem were afraid of losing what they already ‘had.’ Their magnificent city had by endowed by Herod the Great with glorious murals, two palace-fortresses, and the new temple, with amazing gardens and a colossal amphitheater. Did the city simply have too much to lose? The seat of the Great Sanhedrin, the heart of the Jewish national unity, and the center for the ruling elite – could the city truly ‘repent’ and be converted to the ‘Abba experience’ Jesus offered?”

Apparently not. Jesus was crucified because people held onto the familiar, the external. They were not willing to consider a new way of thinking and acting. In Erich Fromm's terms, they chose “having” over “being.”

This passage from Luke is striking because Jesus uses a powerful feminine image to describe himself and his ministry. He laments that Jerusalem has never been friendly to prophets or anyone challenging the status quo, and then he says,

“How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

One writer describes observing a hen and her chicks. Every night the mother hen’s newly hatched chicks found their place under her wings. They gathered there for warmth, but she would stay awake to protect them. She was on guard, and if a threatening animal – like a fox, what Jesus calls Herod – attacks, she would bare her breast and allow the fox to attack her, giving chicks time to scatter to safety. One morning, he sadly noted that all that was left of the hen were clusters of feathers. The chicks were still there, running around on their own, but still alive.

What a marvelous image for God! A mother hen, opening warm wings for us to gather under, if only we will. Warmth and love ready for us whenever we are ready to accept them.

What gets in the way of seeking the only real shelter we’ll ever know? A desire for things, relationships, positions, titles, etc., that satisfy our sense of pride? Things we think we can control? *All* of them will fail us once reality kicks in, whether it comes in the form of an earthquake, a divorce, an illness or some other unwanted event.

In Erich Fromm’s terms, we have a choice: to have or to be? Trying to live life on our own terms, or seeking security under God’s loving care? How do we know the difference?

The difference lies between desperate, compulsive desire for recognition, to be admired, to be respected, even to be feared, shaping life in our own image, and... a simple letting go. Accepting reality as it befalls us; making responsible choices when we need to, while passing along God’s love to our neighbors.

This kind of letting go may like defeat, at least at first. And it *is* a defeat of our arrogance and our pride. But it is the triumph of our better selves, our souls, grounded and upheld in God.

Just a few days ago I experienced this first hand. I was asked to visit Norvell Jones at Goodwin House. In December she celebrated her 95th birthday and decided that was enough. She was ready to go. So she has stopped eating. She is lying comfortably on a hospital bed with her daughter by her side.

When I saw her face, it was serene. This is a person who is content. She has let go of the anxieties of daily living, any desire to achieve or impress. She has chosen simply to “be.” This, by the way, is nothing new for Norvell, but a fitting conclusion to a life well lived.

She retains her sense of humor, too. When I blurted out, “I’ll miss you!” she responded, “Well, I’m not sure I’m going to miss any of you all!” She had us in stitches.

The task for the rest of us is not to wait until we’re on *our* deathbeds to choose simply to be, to rest in God’s loving arms.

Jesus knew this. Jesus knew that no possession, no title, not even the Jerusalem temple could protect him or us from reality. Life deals its blows to everyone. Especially in Jerusalem.

But Jesus knew another truth, as well. Even if we feel we're losing everything, everything we most value; even if we feel we're slipping down and nothing is there underneath to catch and hold our feet, there *is* something to catch and hold our *souls*.

It's the Mother Hen! She will *not* let our souls be injured. She will *not* let us be lost. Her ferocious love embraces us, so we may love ferociously in her name.