

Clear Out Your Independence

A sermon preached on Luke 13:31-35 on Sunday, March 16, 2025,
by Emily Hull McGee with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC
I.

There once was a young man, said to be the most pigheaded fellow in town, and a young woman, said to be the most mule-headed gal around, and of course they fell in love and got married.

They hosted the wedding at their new home, and it was full to the brim with festivities – a grand feast, a live band, the tastiest wedding cake anyone had ever had, and a Pinterest-worthy photo booth that soon filled the Instagram feeds of their friends. When the celebration began to wind down, their guests left one by one, until the last person had departed and the happy couple crashed with exhaustion. They were just about to kick off their shoes and relax, until the young man realized that the last guest out forgot to shut the door.

“My dear,” he said to his new wife, “would you mind getting up and shutting the door? There’s a draft coming in.”

“Oh my feet are killing me,” she responded with a yawn, “and I just sat down. You shut it!”

“So that’s the way it’s going to be, huh?” the young man snapped. “Just as soon as we seal the deal, now you turn into a lazy good-for-nothing.”

(This is when I might have had words to say!)

And she did too! “How dare you,” the bride shouted. “We haven’t even been married for an hour, and already you’re calling me names and ordering me around and ohhh I should have known this is the kind of husband you’d turn out to be!”

“Nag nag nag,” the husband responded. “Must I listen to your complaining forever?”

“And must I listen to your carping and whining?!” she shot back.

The newlyweds glared at each other for a full five minutes, until the bride had an idea.

“My dear,” she began, “neither of us wants to shut the door, and we’re both tired of hearing the other’s voice, so how about we have a contest. The one who speaks first must get up and close the door.”

“That’s the best idea I’ve heard all day,” the husband replied. “Let’s start right now.”

So they got comfortable – each on a chair facing each other – and didn’t say a word. They’d been that way for nearly two hours when a couple of thieves passing by noticed the open door. They snuck in, found the house seemingly deserted, and began to steal anything they could lay their hands on. They hauled away tables and chairs, rolled up some rugs, rifled through the large stack of wedding presents, even grabbed the new air fryer on the counter. But those newlyweds neither spoke nor moved.

“I can’t believe this,” the husband thought to himself. “They’ll take everything we own, and she won’t even make a sound!”

“Why isn’t he calling for help?!” the wife wondered frantically. “Is he just going to sit there while they take whatever they want?”

Eventually the thieves noticed the silent, motionless couple, and mistaking them for wax figures, stripped them of their jewelry, watches, and wallets. But neither husband nor wife uttered a sound, and off the thieves went with their haul.

They continued to sit into the night, and at dawn, a policeman passing by noticed that the door was open and stuck his head in to make sure everything was ok. He couldn't get a word out of the couple, who remained resolutely, stubbornly silent.

"Now see here," the policeman yelled, "I'm an officer of the law, and I demand to know who you are, and if this is your house, and what happened to all your stuff!" Still getting no response, he raised his hands to box the groom's ears.

"Don't you dare!," the wife cried, jumping to her feet. "That's my new husband, and if you lay a finger on him, you'll have to answer to me!"

"Ha! I won!," cried the husband, shooting up out of his chair and clapping his hands. "Now go and close the door."¹

II.

Ahh, stubborn independence. Insisting that we are utterly self-reliant. Refusing help or support. Digging our heels in, even when it costs us something. Going it alone until the very end.

But that doesn't sound very good; surely independence isn't all bad! Independence gives space for asserting agency, for declaring truths and possibilities about one's life, for making one's own choices. What we might label "stubborn" in a child may become "tenacious" in an adult. What we might call "self-reliance" is really just a chance to learn and grow, to take off from the nest and fly on your own! These are good things, right? Isn't independence a fundamental right of being human?

This story of the newlyweds has been found from Sri Lanka to Scotland, only reinforcing the truth that yes – the drive for independence is a universal

¹ "The Silent Couple," *The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories*, p215-216.

human experience. But we Americans have a particularly potent version of it, don't we? Freedom is our birthright, independence is our inheritance, give me liberty or give me death! Here in the United States, we call this "rugged individualism." Stemming from the generation of frontier settlers who had to survive across large swaths of land without neighbors close by, it was Herbert Hoover who first coined the phrase and characters like John Wayne who embodied it. In their minds, freedom to the individual for personal liberty, independence, self-reliance, resourcefulness, and free competition in the marketplace epitomized American ideals – unlike the suckers who traded in their liberty for security. Hoover's Secretary of the Interior and long-time president of Stanford University, Ray Lyman Wilbur, championed this line of thinking and once said, "It is common talk that every individual is entitled to economic security. The only animals and birds I know that have economic security are those that have been domesticated—and the economic security they have is controlled by the barbed-wire fence, the butcher's knife and the desire of others. They are milked, skinned, egged or eaten up by their protectors."²

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

III.

It's a fraught journey that Jesus is on – not into the frontier, not sitting still by an open door, but rather moving toward Jerusalem to which he has set

² I enjoyed reading about "rugged individualism" this week and did so at the following spots: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rugged_individualism#:~:text=Rugged%20individualism%2C%20derived%20from%20individualism.of%20collective\)%20assistance%20or%20support](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rugged_individualism#:~:text=Rugged%20individualism%2C%20derived%20from%20individualism.of%20collective)%20assistance%20or%20support), and <https://www.thehastingscenter.org/rugged-american-individualism-is-a-myth-and-its-killing-us/> and <https://whatworks.fyi/articles/hope-beyond-rugged-individualism>

his face. Jerusalem, Jesus knows, will be the last stop on his life's path. For when Jesus turns to Jerusalem, he turns toward the sure pain. He knows where he must go and what he must do, and does so purposefully, with intent and care and a hint of defiance.

That defiance is directed at Herod, "that fox," Jesus calls him. The Pharisees try to warn Jesus. "Herod is after you," they say, admonishing him to turn back and walk away. To Herod, Jesus was a threat, a rival, one whose talk of a 'kingdom of God' was surely meant to usurp his own. The Herod who was uneasy about Jesus at birth, uncompromising about John the Baptist who he had just beheaded, uninterested in allowing prophets to stir up the people under his fist, is the Herod who would prefer to kill Jesus himself. But to Jesus, Herod represented everything he came to reverse: the power of this world versus the power of our God, one who valued domination against the one whose strength was made perfect in weakness, the one who killed and the one whose death will give eternal life.

"Go and tell that fox for me," Jesus responds, evoking an image of a cunning, sly creature, "that my mission cannot be stopped, that God's work of Love: the work of liberation and reconciliation, healing and salvation, purpose and passion — this is the work I'm here to do, and I will not forego it. I feel as strongly about it as does a fierce mother hen who gathers up her brood for refuge under her wings to keep safe from the foxes of the world. The powers that be will go to all lengths to stop me, but I will stay the course and be on my way — for on the third day, my work will be complete."

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem," Jesus continues, his eyes looking with love and lament on the people who will abandon him, "how often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings,

and you were not willing.” There, the image of Jesus for us to ponder on this 2nd Sunday of Lent, in the words of one beautiful writer: “Jesus as a mother hen whose chicks don’t want her. Though she stands with her wings wide open, offering welcome, belonging, and shelter, her children refuse to come home to her. Her wings — her arms — are [outstretched and] empty.”³

III.

The words he spoke over the city that will soon welcome him with hosannas and call for his death days later aren’t just for Jerusalem. They’re for us too.

How often I desired to gather you, Jesus says, but in your fear, you stubborn, scared chicks have assembled an arsenal of weapons instead, trading my care for your money, your guns, your isolation, your security.

How often I desired to gather you, Jesus says, but in your patriotism, you have confused the kingdom of God with the kingdom of these United States, and I’m not sure where your true loyalties lie.

How often I desired to gather you, Jesus says, but in your hunger for status and power, you have sold out your witness by letting the Herods of this world into your hen house and now are somehow surprised by the destruction.

How often I desired to gather you, Jesus says, but in your stubborn pride and unchecked greed, you think you have no need for my protection because you’re at the top of the pecking order, and you think you’ve got this thing called life figured out.

³ Debie Thomas, “I Have Longed,”
<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=3341>

How often I desired to gather you, Jesus says, but in your relentless striving, you have fooled yourself into thinking that you have no need of me, that your achievements are yours alone, that you must not be drawn away from the path toward greatness you've begun, that your hustle matters more than my healing.

How often I desired to gather you, Jesus says, but in your despair and exhaustion, you aren't even sure you have the strength to be pulled into my refuge.

How often I desired to gather your children together, Jesus says, but you didn't want to be together with your neighbors, together with those who don't look like you or vote like you or pray like you or live like you.

How often we have desired to be gathered to you, Jesus, we say in our most honest voices, for rest beneath and within, tucked, our raw, exposed patches nestled in the soft, warm embrace of our mother hen, vulnerability against vulnerability... but "we do not do the good we want, but instead the evil we do not want is what we do."⁴

IV.

"We live in a menagerie," Dr. Alan Culpepper writes. "Evil threatens in the form of a fox, and the mother hen laments because her young are exposed but will not accept her protection."⁵ So what will it take for us to nestle under the wings of Jesus instead of either reaching for the might of Herod or insisting that we can go it alone? What will it take for us to be gathered together, choosing the abundant truth of our interdependence over

⁴ Romans 7:19

⁵ Dr. Alan Culpepper, "Luke 13:31-35," *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Volume VIII*, p283.

the scarce lie of our independence? What will it take for us to walk together into the open arms of our Savior?

That human unwillingness races through our minds. We don't want to relinquish our drive, our successes, our rightness, our resources, our addictions, our distractions, our needs, our beliefs, our power, our control! We want to hold on and hunker down and handle it ourselves!

To this, I ask –

First – If not now, *when*? If we're unwilling to be gathered to Jesus *now* – when fears are high, and challenges are wide, and griefs are deep – then when will we be? What will it take, what circumstances have to change, what must be reworked within us for a return to Jesus with our whole heart and our very lives?

Second – If not Jesus, *who*? If we're unwilling to be gathered to Jesus, then whose reach are we within? What people, or person, or belief, or ideology, or conviction, or way of living is guarding us from being fully gathered to Jesus? Is it possible that we're trading the warm refuge of the hen for a ruthless den of a fox, *perhaps without even realizing it*? Who might we gather near in order to be gathered together by Jesus?

V.

Let me tell you a story about a town called Roseto.⁶ Roseto Valfortore sits 100 miles southeast of Rome in the foothills of the Italian province of Foggia. Like many other old villages, the town is organized around a large central square, framed by a palace, a church, red-tiled roof houses, and a hillside with stone steps woven all throughout. For centuries, the *paesani* of Roseto worked in the marble quarries of the neighboring hills, or cultivated

⁶ This story is told by Malcolm Gladwell in his book, *Outliers: The Story of Success*, p3-11.

fields in the valley below before they made their way back up the hill to Roseto at night. It was a hard life – many of the townsfolk were poor and illiterate, without much hope for economic mobility – until the end of the 19th century when word reached Roseto about the land of opportunity across the ocean.

In January of 1882, a group of eleven Rosetans left Italy and set sail for New York – welcomed like all immigrants by Lady Liberty herself. After some time of transition, they settled where they found jobs – in a slate quarry some 90 miles west of New York in Bangor, Pennsylvania. The next year, they were joined by 15 more from Roseto, and then one group after another packed up their bags and headed for Pennsylvania, some 1200 in 1894 alone.

They bought land on that rocky hillside outside Bangor and began to build: closely clustered two story stone houses, with red slate roofs, on narrow streets running up and down the hillside. They built a church and called it Our Lady of Mount Carmel, and named the main street on which it stood after the town: Roseto. Soon the dynamic young priest began to encourage his flock to settle in, to plant gardens and seek the welfare of their new home. The town came to life. Fruit trees lined the streets upon which schools, a park, shops, bakeries, and restaurants stood. Neighboring Bangor was largely Welsh and English, and the town just beyond it was mostly German – so Roseto retained its uniquely Italian texture.

Not long after, a man named Stewart Wolf got curious about Roseto. He was a doctor studying digestion and the stomach, who spent his summers at a farm he bought in rural Pennsylvania just outside of Roseto. He got to know the local physicians, and was astonished to learn from one over a meal that while this doctor had patients from all over the region, he rarely had

anyone from Roseto under the age of 65 with heart disease. Stewart Wolf was skeptical: this was the 1950s, years before any prevention measures for heart disease would be practiced. It's impossible, he said. But because he was curious, he began to research.

Dr. Wolf reached out to the mayor of Roseto about this medical mystery. He gathered some grad students to start poring over death certificates, physicians records, medical histories, family genealogies, you name it. They got to know the townspeople, and over time, invited the entire population of Roseto to be tested.

The results were astonishing. Virtually no one under 55 died of a heart attack, or showed any signs of heart disease. For men over 65, the death rate from heart disease in Roseto was roughly half that of the United States as a whole. The death rate from all causes in Roseto, in fact, was something like thirty or thirty-five percent lower than it should have been. Dr. Wolf and his colleagues went house to house and talked to every person aged twenty one and over. As they said, "There was no suicide, no alcoholism, no drug addiction, and very little crime. They didn't have anyone on welfare. Then we looked at peptic ulcers. They didn't have any of those either. These people were dying of old age. That's it."

There must be something happening here – like old dietary practices from Italy or exercise practices that set them apart. But no – Rosetans cooked with lard, pizza and sweets were plentiful, and many residents smoked heavily. Then what about genetics? Dr. Wolf tracked down other Rosetans living in other parts of the US, but found they didn't share the same good health as their Pennsylvania cousins. What about the region – perhaps something intrinsic to the foothills of eastern Pennsylvania? Two nearby

towns had nearly the same number of hard-working European immigrants, and their death rates from heart disease were three times that of Roseto.

What Wolf slowly realized was that the secret of Roseto wasn't diet or exercise or genes or the region where Roseto was situated. *It had to be the Roseto itself.* And then he began to realize why. He noticed how the Rosetans visited each other, stopping to chat with each other in Italian on the street, or cooking for each other in their backyards. He learned about the extended family clans that underlay the town's social structure. He saw how many homes had three generations living under one roof, and how much respect grandparents commanded. He went to Mass at Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Church and saw the unifying and calming effect of the church. He counted twenty-two separate civic organizations in a town of just under 2000 people. He picked up on the particular egalitarian ethos of the town, that discouraged the wealthy from flaunting their success and helped the unsuccessful obscure their failures.

You see, in transplanting the culture of southern Italy to the hills of Pennsylvania, Rosetans had created the type of community that fostered health and well-being. It wasn't just about the individual; rather, that health came from the individual within a larger community, fostering meaningful values and life-giving relationships and practicing the truth that this life isn't lived alone. The Rosetans knew they were gathered together, and remarkably, profoundly, their physical health reflected it.

V.

How often I have longed to gather my children together under my wings.
Friends, what will it take for you to clear out your independence, foster your interdependence, and give yourself over to the gathering arms of Jesus?