

# Three Wills and a Promise

Luke 13:31-35

Laura Anderson ~ Faith Presbyterian Church ~ December 30, 2018

<sup>31</sup> At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” <sup>32</sup> 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. <sup>33</sup> Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem.’ <sup>34</sup> 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! <sup>35</sup> 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.’” (Luke 13:31-35)

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If you read the reminder email about worship today that went out on Friday, you know that I don't have any great fondness for end-of-the-year sermons that talk about New Year's resolutions. Truth is, I don't have any great fondness for New Year's resolutions either. I guess a lot of people do, though, because about 40% of Americans make resolutions every year. Many resolutions are really good ideas: save more money, exercise more, organize the boxes in the garage that are overflowing with old photos, clean that messy closet, eat more family dinners together. Some of us resolve to fold the laundry immediately once it is dry so that our linen closets are stocked and organized. Some of us fail in that resolution, such that if you walked into our foyer right now, this is what you'd see: Yup, a basket of clean laundry just waiting to be folded. And, truth be told, there's another load sitting in the dryer also ready to be folded. Sigh.

Our intentions are so good! Most of us genuinely *want* to make positive changes in our lives. Why, then, is it so hard? Why is it that of the 100% of people who make New Year's resolutions, only about 7% of them actually achieve their goals? And here's an even bigger question: If some of us can't even get our

laundry folded promptly, how the heck are we going to be able to make changes that really matter, like growing in faith? Like learning to follow Jesus wherever he leads us? Like bearing the fruit of the Spirit? We know these sorts of changes are the result of God's work in us. But we know we have to play a part, too. So, to the extent that growing in Christ depends on us, prone as we are to failed resolutions, what are we going to do?

In some ways, today's Scripture passage has a lot to say to us about failed resolutions. More than this, though, we find in these verses some straightforward advice from Jesus that is both a simple spiritual practice and an amazing promise. Before we get to this promise, though, we need to spend some time looking at the three wills that shape this text. We'll do this by moving through the text in three parts.

**Part 1.** At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” 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. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem.’”

The Herod mentioned here is Herod Antipas, and we have already seen him in action in Luke. Herod has John the Baptist thrown into prison, and this, Luke says, is just one of Herod's many evil deeds. Herod is responsible for having John the Baptist beheaded. In Luke's second volume, the book of Acts, he puts Herod's name even before Pilate's in the list of people responsible for the death of Jesus (Acts 4:27). In other words, Luke puts the majority of blame on Herod. And the annals of Roman history tell us that in the year 39, during the reign of Caligula, Herod was recalled to Rome and exiled for amassing weapons – a provocative threat to Roman rule.

Both Luke and Roman history, then, tell us that Herod Antipas is a dangerous and lethal ruler. So when some Pharisees come to Jesus and tell him to get out of here because Herod wants to kill him, this is no

empty threat. And it's in these words, "Herod wants to kill you," that we encounter our first will. The verb "wants" here can also be translated as "will": Herod wills to kill you. It comes from the Greek root verb *thelō*. Each of the wills we focus on today comes from this same root verb.

So Jesus hears that Herod wills to kill him, and the first words out of his mouth are, "Go and tell that fox..." Now, if these words sound to you as if they might be a little less than polite, it's because they are. Calling a ruler a "fox" was not a compliment. The implication is that the person *thinks* they are as powerful as a mighty lion, king of the beasts, but in fact, they are much smaller game. They have a lot less power than they imagine.

Now, by calling Herod a fox, Jesus is not gratuitously insulting him. Back in Luke 9:51, we read, "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem." Jesus knows the divine will and submits himself to it in obedience. He is heading to Jerusalem to carry out his Father's will. In the face of Jesus' trust in God's sovereignty, even a man like Herod, who truly does have the power to do great harm, appears like small game. Compared to the Lion of Judah on the throne of heaven, Herod is no roaring lion. Just a yapping fox.

And yet, that yapping fox Herod can be sly and malicious and predatory, can't he? He will protect his throne at all costs. When John the Baptist condemns his behavior, he has him arrested and beheaded. To protect his throne, he uses his power to go out into his world in pursuit of those he perceives as threats, including Jesus. In truth, that's what a ruler in the ancient Near East did: protect himself and his throne at any cost.

Thank goodness we're not like that, right? None of us are rulers protecting our thrones, right?

But then again ... each of us does have what's known as effective will. This is the power to make choices as we live and act in our world. Just because the range of our effective will isn't nearly as broad or unquestioned as Herod's would have been, it doesn't mean we don't have the power to choose and act. Just because we aren't ruthless and lethal like Herod doesn't mean that the expression of our effective will is harmless as we wield it in the world.

We may not behead John the Baptist, but maybe we engage the world by biting people's heads off, responding with harsh, critical words to our co-workers or our spouse or our kids. Is barely contained anger our throne? Maybe it's time for us to get off the throne. Or maybe we move in the world with sarcasm, speaking words that cut to the heart even as they hide behind a mask of humor – "Just kidding!" Or maybe it's a tendency to gossip. An untamed tongue as our throne? Get off the throne! Maybe we move through our world mentally undressing and consuming every body we see. A throne of lust? Get off the throne! Maybe we barge through the world claiming for ourselves the privilege of always having the last word, the right to be right all the time. A throne of self-righteous self-justification? Get off the throne! Maybe we tell fibs and exaggerate the truth to make ourselves look better. A throne of lies? Get off the throne! Maybe we say nothing at all but secretly know ourselves to be better than – the rich, the poor, the Democrats, the Republicans, the unemployed, the workaholics, the alcoholics, the abstinent, the promiscuous, the pierced, the inked, the immigrants, the homeless, the hungry, the overweight. A throne of scornful pride? Get off the throne!

You see it now, don't you? We aren't Herod, but we do have thrones that we try to protect by hiding them away from God, from others, and even from ourselves. These are thrones that don't sit anywhere near the heart of Jesus and the will of God. This is not to say that everything we do in the world, every way we exercise our will in the world, is sinful. Of course not! I know many of you. I know the love and grace and healing and help and beauty that you bring with you when you go out into the world. However, I think the invitation that this passage of Scripture offers us is to take a look at some of the ways we continue to choose to sit on thrones that don't line up with the will of God. And in becoming aware of the gap that exists between our thrones and the throne of grace that is Christ's (Hebrews 4:16), perhaps the Spirit might also awaken in us the *will to at least be willing* to get off the throne.

But how? How do we get off the throne? It feels as if we're back to impossible New Year's resolutions, doesn't it? And in a way we are. And I'm going to leave you hanging! We will come back to this, but for now, we need to move on to the second part of our passage.

**Part 2.** “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! See, your house is left to you.”

Jesus is still in Herod’s territory, still within reach of Herod’s threats, but he turns his back on him and instead focuses his attention and his heart on Jerusalem. And in these words of lament we find our last two wills. The second instance of the word refers to Jesus: the word “desired” is also from the root verb “thelō”. The third instance is the one that is plain – “you were not willing.” Same root verb. So we can reword the verse this way: “How often have I willed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing.” Two wills in direct opposition.

In getting ready for today’s sermon, I had to do some research on mother hens. In the course of my reading and my viewing of more than a few YouTube videos, here is what I learned: mother hens will gather their chicks under their wings to protect them from wind, rain, sleet, potential threats and real threats. As her brood pushes and pokes their way underneath her to escape an advancing threat, the mother hen will continue to move so her chicks can scurry under, but she will also continue to shift her body so that she is face to face with the coming threat, ready to take the next step of action to protect her brood – whether pecking at a predator or ruffling her feathers to look bigger and more threatening. I read that in cases of fire, if there is no clear way out, a mother hen will gather her chicks, and even when the hen herself perishes from the smoke or flames, there are times when the chicks will survive, sheltered under the wings of their mother.

Hens may be protective, but they are also small and vulnerable. One quick twist of the neck and they are goners. And remember Herod at the beginning of this passage? Not a lion but a fox. And foxes like to eat hens. There is such an element of tender vulnerability in this image, isn’t there? Jesus compares himself to a mother bird, he stretches wide his arms, his “wings,” and in doing so he exposes his heart. Can you imagine anyone not willing to run straight to Jesus?

Well, in fact, Jesus tells us that he can imagine a whole bunch of people saying no to his outstretched arms and open heart. Of the people of Jerusalem, he says, “You were not willing.” And not just one time.

The verb tells us this happened over and over again: “You kept on not being willing.”

What is wrong with these people?!

Let’s think about them for a few minutes. These are the people of Jerusalem. They are not pagans, not Gentiles, not foreigners. These are Jews who see themselves as faithful. The text tells us they use stoning as a form of punishment. This sounds barbaric, but the Law of Moses taught that the proper punishment for blaspheming the name of God and for worshipping other gods was stoning (e.g., Lev. 24:13-16, 23; Deut. 13:6-11).

The problem is that the people they are killing are the very ones God has sent to call the people back to God. The people of Jerusalem and beyond have gone running after other gods. They have forsaken the LORD God of Israel and broken the covenant they made with him. The prophets cry out for the people to repent, to change their thinking and their behavior, and to come home to God. Again and again Yahweh sends prophets to the people, calling them to repentance, and again and again they kill the prophets. Little by little, the words of God’s Holy Scripture are twisted into instruments of disobedience, the means by which to ignore the will and the voice of God. Little by little, not listening wholeheartedly to God’s Word and not repenting become patterns and habits of the heart. Instead of being in right relationship with the living God, it’s as if they choose an empty house. They forsake the Lord of life and settle for an abandoned house.

Well, thank goodness I don’t do that, right? Maybe I have a throne, but I definitely don’t live in an abandoned house! I’m a faithful Christian. I love Jesus. I’ve repented. I don’t ignore God’s Word, or resist it, or twist it to suit my purposes. Right? Well, think about it. You hear these words:

“I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14). But then, in the back of your head, do you ever hear words like these? “I’m not smart enough, pretty enough, strong enough, outgoing enough. I hate my hair, my skinny calves, my fat thighs, my nose. God can’t use me. Not in ways that make a difference.” Does any of this sound familiar? It’s an abandoned house. Get out of the house and run to Mother Hen Jesus!

“And the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my beloved...; with you I am well pleased’” (Luke 3:22). In reply, does your head ever say, “God doesn’t love me. God can’t love me. I don’t even love myself. If God loves me, why don’t I feel it? And if God loves me, why is my life so hard?” Does any of this sound familiar? It’s an abandoned house. Get out of the house and run to Jesus!

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?” (Matthew 6:25). “We’re never going to be able to retire. What will I do if I get really sick and have big doctor bills? My debt is bigger than God; I will never be free. And worried about my kids, my parents, the way this country and the world are going? Don’t get me started!” Does any of this sound familiar? It’s an abandoned house. Get out of the house and run to Jesus!

You see it now, don’t you? We aren’t the people of Jerusalem killing the prophets, but we do have ways of holding the Word of God at a distance. God’s Word speaks to us and we talk back, contradicting the promises that Christ offers us; they’re not really for us. And look, I’m not saying that living out Scripture is easy or that we don’t face hard circumstances in our lives that make it difficult to take Scripture at face value. Of course we do! However, I think the invitation that this passage of Scripture offers us is to take a look at some of the ways we continue to choose to ignore the Word and will of God by listening to the old tapes that play in our head out of habit. In becoming aware of the gap that exists between the Word of God and the patterns of our responses to it, perhaps the Spirit might also awaken in us the *will to at least be willing* to leave behind our abandoned houses.

But ... how? How do we get out of the house? How do we get off the throne? We can’t will ourselves off the throne. We can’t will our way out of the abandoned house. All of our failed New Year’s resolutions tell us this. Maybe we can want to want it. We can will to will it. But we can’t make it happen on our own. What do we do?

This brings us to the third part of our text, which, happily, is not a resolution that we have to try to keep. It’s a promise that Jesus gives us in verse 35:

**Part 3.** Translated more directly from the Greek, this verse reads, “And I tell you, you will not see me until you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

Perhaps the thing that stands out most about this promise is that it is stated in the negative: “You will not see me until you say...” So, let’s imagine how the positive form of this promise is going to sound. Maybe something like this: “You will see me when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

Okay, but what does this mean? What are we saying when we say, Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord? In Jesus’ day, this is what you said when a king came to town. When you say this, you are acknowledging that person as king, as the sovereign one who rules over you as one of his subjects. You are effectively voicing your allegiance to this king.

Now, if these words sound a little stilted, there are other ways we can express this idea. Here are three possibilities:

- Jesus, you’re my boss.
- You are God and I am not.
- Lord, your will (not my will) be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Do you see what Jesus is offering us here in this promise? It’s a super-simple spiritual practice, one that we can do anytime, anywhere. We can say this whether we have been following Jesus for decades or are just beginning to think we might be willing to learn how. There’s no special equipment needed, no gym membership required. All that’s necessary is a mouth and a heart *willing to try* to say these words with sincerity and then see what Jesus will do.

Dallas Willard said this about spiritual practices: “A discipline – or spiritual practice – is an activity within our power [i.e., our effective will] that enables us to accomplish what we cannot do by direct effort.” We cannot directly will ourselves off our proud, judgmental, angry, gossipy thrones on our own. We cannot directly will ourselves free of the old tapes and habits that deny the truth of the Word of God in our lives. We can’t. But we *can* choose to begin to allow the words of Christ to shape our reality and our

relationship with him. As our boss, Jesus has the power to get us off the throne and get us out of the house.

So, here comes 2019. Maybe you're going to make a New Year's resolution, maybe you're not. Regardless, I would urge you to think about taking on this one spiritual practice if you don't already do it. For the next 40 days – a good biblical number – practice saying, “Jesus, you're my boss,” or “Lord, you are God and I am not,” or “Your will be done, Lord, not mine.” Say this as you wake up in the morning. Tape it to your bathroom mirror. Stick it on your fridge. Put it on your dashboard. Set it as a three-times-per-day reminder on your phone. Whisper it out loud before you fall asleep. And when you feel that irritation rising, that clever sarcastic retort perched on the end of your tongue, that desire to have the last word ... Say it then, too. When you hear the old tapes of worry and worthlessness start to whirl in your head, say it then, too: “Jesus, you're my boss.” I truly believe that as we learn to let Jesus take his rightful place in our lives as our Lord, our God, and our boss, there is nothing he can't do. There is no obstacle, no fear, no worry, no throne he cannot overcome. And all we have to do – all we *can* do – is be willing to let him. May God make each of our hearts willing, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, amen.



1. Describe an experience when you resolved (whether at New Year's or another time) to make a big change in your life. How did that turn out for you?
2. Re-read the passage – Luke 13:31-35. What grabs your attention and why?
3. Is there any circumstance in your life right now that seems like a mighty lion to you that in God's view may be just a fox? Share that circumstance with your Life Group, or if you are going through these questions alone, consider jotting it down in a notebook/journal.
4. How does the image of Jesus as a mother hen help you understand this passage, and how does this image shape your understanding of God?

5. Herod's throne can help us think about our external actions in the world and whether they align with God's will. The people's abandoned house can help us think about our internal habits and beliefs and whether they align with God's will. What is your sense today? Is God beckoning you to “Get off the throne” or “Get out of the house”? What do you hear God asking you to pay attention to?

6. Jesus gives us a super-simple (but not so easy!) spiritual practice in verse 35, not to mention an amazing promise: We will come to see Jesus as we learn to say, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” Other ways to say this include: “Jesus, you're my boss.” “You are God and I am not.” “Lord, your will (not mine) be done on earth as it is in heaven.” A few questions:

-Do you already have this kind of a spiritual practice? If so, what difference has it made in your walk with God?

-If you don't have this kind of a practice, what do you think? Are you willing to try? What might happen if you do?

-In what areas of your life is it hardest for you to say, “Jesus, you're my boss”? Why do you think this is? What might you have to let go of in order to say this sincerely? What might you gain?

### Table to Table Question

#### A question for kids and adults to answer together

What is one thing our family can do together this week to help us remember that Jesus is our “boss”?