

Story and Meditation: That Fox

March 13, 2022

Psalm 27

Luke 13:31-35

by Eric Anderson

The mano pa'ele – or blacktip reef shark – wasn't hungry. He was bored.

Though still somewhat young by mano pa'ele standards, he'd grown large enough to hunt the deeper waters of the reef. That's what he was doing. He was finding schools of fish and chasing them about, clashing his teeth together from time to time to encourage them to swim faster. He didn't want to catch one – he was full enough that another fish would start to make him feel uncomfortable – but he certainly did want to watch them swim away in panic.

An older mano pa'ele watched what was happening. When his panicked school of fish flashed by her, got in front of him and asked, "What are you doing?"

"Chasing fish," he replied.

"You're not catching any," she said, "and I'm pretty sure you could have by now."

"I'm not trying to catch any," he said. "I'm not hungry."

"Then why are you chasing them?"

"I'm bored. It seemed like fun."

"It's not fun for them," she said sternly.

"What does it matter about them?" he asked. "They're just fish."

"And you're just a mano pa'ele," she replied. "We hunt to eat and we eat to live."

He made a dismissive sound that you can only make with gills and I'm not going to try to imitate it. She looked at him.

"You're bored?" she said. "Come with me."

The two of them swam out to sea until they found a sport fishing boat. It had various lines in the water.

“What are they doing?” asked the younger one.

“Fishing,” she said. “Watch.”

A fish seized one of the lines and was hooked. The people on board gradually hauled it out of the water. They seemed rather pleased with it.

“OK,” said the young shark. “So they’re fishing.”

“Watch,” said the older one, and as she finished speaking, the people on board threw the fish back into the water. It was weak and bleeding and gasping. It swam urgently but very slowly away from the boat. It was pretty clear that it would recover slowly – if it ever recovered at all.

“Oh,” said the young mano pa’ele. “Why did the humans do that?”

“I don’t know,” said the older one. “But we are not humans. We are mano pa’ele. What do we do?”

“We hunt to eat and we eat to live,” said the younger one. “I’ll be a mano pa’ele from now on.”

“Go and tell that fox,” said Jesus. We are not dealing with “Jesus meek and mild” here, are we?

I grant you that he had some provocation. Jesus had just been told that Herod –Herod Antipas, the tetrarch, who ruled Jesus’ homeland in Galilee – wanted to kill him. That was no empty threat. Herod had already arrested and executed John the Baptist. What he had done once, he could easily do again. These Pharisees came with a message intended to keep Jesus safe.

Still. Harsh language, don’t you think?

Cheryl Lindsay writes at ucc.org, “Referring to Herod as a ‘fox,’ Jesus speaks to his character and nature. Herod is dangerous and predatory. He cannot be trusted, and it is right to be wary of his strength and the power he wields.” Indeed, in the rough and tumble of first century political authority, “dangerous,” “predatory,” and “untrustworthy” might be considered job requirements. About ten years after Jesus’ death and resurrection, Herod Agrippa found himself outfoxed, as it were, stripped of his titles and his properties and exiled. Why? He was betrayed by his nephew, Herod Agrippa, the brother of his own wife, Herodias.

If you are shaking your head over the fact that everybody’s name seems to have “Herod” in it, I don’t blame you.

The insult seems earned, then, but John Wesley had some words of caution about that. “But let us carefully distinguish between those things wherein Christ is our pattern, and those which were peculiar to his office. His extraordinary office justified him in using that severity of

language, when speaking of wicked princes, and corrupt teachers, to which we have no call; and by which we should only bring scandal on religion, and ruin on ourselves, while we irritated rather than convinced or reformed those whom we so indecently rebuked.”

It's not even a good description of foxes. Rather like our *mano pa'ele*, foxes aren't generally indiscriminate killers. They do it occasionally, and those who keep chickens tend to fear them and even despise them. But if I were to pick a species that frequently exhibits the characteristics of Herod Antipas, that dangerous, predatory, untrustworthy man, I'd pick: people.

Yep. People.

We, after all, have been known to wipe out entire species with sport hunting. No fox has ever done that.

“Go and tell that human being...” Yes, that's more like it.

"Go and tell that [human being] for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.'"

It's something of an echo of what Jesus told the messengers of John the Baptist, when he wanted to know if Jesus was the one he'd been expecting. Jesus answered the messengers, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

Jesus defined his Messiahship by the work that he was doing – work that was radically different than the Messiah feared by Herod Antipas and by Pontius Pilate. That Messiah was a political or military leader, one who would resist and overthrow the Roman occupiers and their puppet rulers like Herod. But Jesus did not see that as his role. “Are you the Messiah?” asked John. “I'm healing,” said Jesus. “I'm going to have you executed,” said Herod. “I'm healing and I won't stop for you or for anybody,” said Jesus.

Because that's my work, said Jesus.

That is also our work.

For most of us, the work of healing doesn't put us at high risk. That's not true for everyone. Last week a Russian Orthodox priest, the Rev. Ioann Burdin (my apologies for what I'm sure is an incorrect pronunciation), was arrested for criticizing Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Reports of protests against the invasion in Russia are matched with stories of repression of those protests. And in Ukraine, it is the healers, the doctors and nurses and other medical professionals, who remain with their patients as bombs and missiles hit hospitals.

Medical staff around the world have suffered disproportionately from COVID-19. The vast majority stayed at their jobs when masks, gowns, and goggles were the only protection from infection. As of last October, with vaccines available for some months, health care workers in some countries were protected at high rates, but according to the World Health Organization in a survey of 119 nations, only 40% of medical staff had been fully vaccinated. "That average," said WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, "masks huge differences across regions and economic groupings. In Africa, less than 1 in 10 health workers have been fully vaccinated."

Serving in such conditions sounds a lot like what Jesus said, and did, in response to the threats of Herod.

You and I, however, also face an uncertainty that Jesus did not. We may be called to healing, and comforting, and peace-making, and loving, but we are not as confident of our abilities as Jesus was, we do not have the abilities that Jesus did, and we do not always know the extent of our abilities as well as Jesus did. In the face of calamities like invasions and insurrections, in the face of governmental policies that favor the propertied and further impoverish the poor, in the face of strife within our own households and wondering just how to persuade this person I love to stop doing this thing that harms them, well. What do we do?

Rebekah Anderson, who is currently serving a crisis hotline, writes of her experience: "Although I don't always reflect on it as deeply as I would like to, I do believe deeply that we are all created in the image of God. There is love, power, brilliance, justice, and all things God inside each of us, even when it doesn't seem obvious to others or to ourselves. Just because I don't know how a quality of mine, or someone else's, images God doesn't mean it doesn't."

In other words, you are more of a healer than you know.

You may not have the skills to do surgery, but you can let the one facing surgery know that you love them. You may not have the skills to build a house, but you can hold the board in place while somebody else puts the nails in. You may not have the answers to someone's deep soul questions, but you can sit there and say, "I'm with you. I have the same question, and I don't know the answer, either."

As the world focuses on the war in Ukraine, you can keep reminding policy-makers and leaders that some countries desperately need more COVID-19 vaccines. You can encourage disputing neighbors to seek mediation rather than jumping into lawsuits. You can listen – just listen – to a loved one in pain.

You can keep it up, to the limits of your body's and spirit's strength, even if the going does get rough, even if the setting turns hostile. You can say, "Go tell that human being, I will do the work of healing and compassion and I will not stop. I will work until all God's children are gathered under the wings of love."

Amen.

<https://religionnews.com/2022/03/10/orthodox-priest-reportedly-arrested-in-russia-for-sermon-decrying-invasion-of-ukraine/>