

Are you familiar with the fable about the country mouse, the chicken, the pig, the cow, the farmer and the farmer's wife (it is a large cast of characters), and its message about the risks of dismissing our neighbours' worries, needs and fears as unimportant because we don't share those same worries, needs and fears?

One day, the mouse looked through a crack in the wall of the farmhouse to see the farmer and his wife opening a package. The mouse was curious to see if the package contained any food, but was alarmed to discover that instead of food the package contained a mousetrap. Retreating to the barnyard, the mouse proclaimed the warning: "There is a mousetrap in the house!"

In response to that news, the chicken clucked and scratched and said, "Mr. Mouse, I can tell this is of grave concern to you, but it is of no consequence to me. I cannot be bothered by it."

The mouse turned to the pig and said, "There is a mousetrap in the house!" The pig sympathized but said, "I am very sorry, Mr. Mouse, but there is nothing I can do about it. But I will keep you in my thoughts."

The mouse turned to the cow and said, "There is a mousetrap in the house!" The cow said, "Mr. Mouse, I am sorry for you, but news of the mousetrap is no skin off my nose."

The mouse returned to the house, head down and dejected, to face the farmer's mousetrap alone.

That very night, a sound was heard throughout the house – the sound of a mousetrap catching its prey. The farmer's wife rushed to see what the trap had caught. In the darkness she could not see that rather than a mouse, the trap had snapped shut on the tail of a venomous snake. When she approached the trap, the snake bit the farmer's wife on her hand. She soon developed a dangerous fever from the snake's venom.

The farmer thought, "I will treat my wife's fever with some chicken soup," so he took his hatchet to the barnyard and promptly turned the chicken into the soup's main ingredient. Unfortunately, his wife's condition worsened. When friends and neighbours came by the farm to sit with her around the clock, the farmer butchered the pig to feed all the visitors. Bed rest and chicken soup could not counter the snake's deadly venom, and within days the farmer's wife died. So many people attended her funeral that the farmer slaughtered the cow to provide enough meat to feed all the mourners.

As for the little mouse, from its crack in the wall it looked upon all that had happened with great sadness.

I have attended and been a member of several different church congregations throughout my life. Each church I have attended has been in many ways different from all the others. But despite their dissimilarities, all those churches shared one characteristic in common. Every one of those Christian congregations were places I encountered people who were caring and compassionate and concerned about their fellow church members. Every church was a place where I observed people who were not like the chicken, the pig, and the cow in the fable, but instead were people who always were prepared to listen and respond to the worries, needs and fears of their fellow congregants, and to treat those worries, needs and fears as if they were their own.

This has been one of the great joys of my life. To meet repeatedly people in churches who are caring and compassionate and concerned. Of course, not every church member has fit that description, and certainly there have been times when my own expressions of care, compassion, and concern for fellow churchgoers has been lacking. But in general, it has been in churches more than anywhere else that I have consistently found people of care, compassion, and concern.

Every Sunday at St. George's as worship begins, we do something quite special and important. We set aside a few minutes to share our personal Good News. A person's news might be of a big and exciting life event, or it could be of some relatively simple everyday occurrence that has caused them

joy. The specifics of the Good News do not matter. What matters is that it is joyful good news intended to be shared. As significant as the sharing is the response by others in the congregation, because the Good News always is received with smiles, sometimes with laughter and even applause.

Although I am not recommending this necessarily, if instead of beginning our worship each week with the Good News we intentionally set aside time to share the Bad News, the sad news, the difficult, scary, upsetting news of our lives, I know exactly what would happen. There would be people present in our congregation – it might be one person or it could be twenty – who unlike the chicken, the pig and the cow will respond to those difficulties as if the problems were their own and will find some way of reaching out to their fellow hurting parishioner.

We are quite good at looking out for, and trying to look after, our own, and that is exactly as it should be. But it does beg the question of how good are we, how responsive are we, to the needs of those beyond this congregation? How effective are we at Christian outreach, at taking the love and commands of Christ's gospel and communicating them in our words and actions to others who are not part of our immediate Christian community? That is a question of critical importance, but it is not my question for today.

-I have another question: if we are generally effective at responding to the worries, needs and fears of our fellow congregants, how effective are we at inviting God into our own personal worries, needs and fears? More particularly, what are our worries, needs, and fears that prevent us from letting down our well-developed defences and trusting God with a bigger share of our lives than we currently allow God?

In today's gospel reading we see two very different but equally passionate sides of Jesus. He is in Jerusalem, and some Pharisees have just informed him that Herod, the same thuggish ruler who had recently imprisoned and beheaded John the Baptist, now wants to have Jesus killed as well. Jesus defiantly dismisses the threat by saying to the Pharisees, "you tell that fox, Herod, that I have no time for you, I have my ministry to perform, and I will decide when my time has come."

Jesus in no uncertain terms and at great personal risk told the bully Herod to take a hike (or use whatever colorful descriptive you wish). Jesus called Herod a "fox." Foxes are deceptive and wily. They are small animals reduced to chasing weaker animals like chicks in the barnyard, because foxes possess no intrinsic power. Jesus is essentially calling Herod a varmint.

Jesus' determination is clear. He will press on. He will reach his goal. Jesus most certainly would have known that by continuing on to Jerusalem he was on a collision course with Herod, a petty yet ruthless tyrant who was a megalomaniac, paranoid, callous, rich, cruel, and very dangerous. One does not need to look very far to identify such individuals in our own time. Like Vladimir Putin and all of Putin's pathetic apologists ... varmints every one of them.

For Jesus, there is no turning back. He then speaks these heartfelt, almost mournful words of lament: "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!"

With that vivid image of the courageous, self-sacrificial mother hen instinctively protecting her brood, Jesus communicates the message that defines his whole purpose for existing. His message is, "All I want to do is love you and care for and comfort you. All I want to do is help make your life more joyful, more peaceful, more meaningful than anything you have achieved so far in your life. Why won't you let me? What is your hesitation? Why are you reluctant to allow me more fully into your life? All I have ever wanted you to do," Jesus tells them and us, "is trust me to help you in coping with the worries, needs and fears of your life. Allow me, "Jesus says," to protect you, even unto death, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings when life threatens."

That's it. That is what Christ requires of us. No matter how much we trust God now, no matter how fully we are prepared to follow Jesus's words and example in our lives, there is always more we can do. There is always some lingering unease, some hesitancy, some fear perhaps that prevents us from taking that next little step towards merging our life more closely with God.

Ask yourself, "How and why have I been unwilling to trust fully in Christ's love for me? What obstacles am I putting in the way of achieving that trust? What are the corners of my life that I remain unwilling to allow God to enter?"

When we encounter Jesus in today's gospel lesson he already is on an unstoppable course toward Jerusalem and his death. That also means he is on an unstoppable course towards us, and he is determined not to be blocked. Even when his offer of love repeatedly is tossed back in his face, Jesus refuses to cease giving his love away.

He will not give up on us. Not ever. **Amen.**

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