

**The Little Red Hen and the Gospel**  
(Luke 17:11-19)

11/19/23  
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The Gospel reading reminds me a little bit of the story of the Little Red Hen. Do you remember that story? The Little Red Hen decides to bake some bread. So she goes around to all the animals to ask them for help. At every stage they turn down her request. Finally, after doing it all herself, she pulls the hot and tasty loaf out of the oven and asks who will help her to eat the bread. And all the animals volunteer. But she turns them away, telling them, “since you didn’t help me make it, you won’t eat it. And she goes off and eats it herself.

I’m guessing that you probably heard this story when you were a kid and that it was one of the many lessons that shaped your attitude toward work. It's a cute story, but it also contains a serious message. And how we relate to that message has major consequences for our lives and for the people around us. I’m not sure if the story belongs in the category of tough love. It seems to me that there is a touch of cruelty in it. But on the face of it. It seems that everyone gets what they deserve.

There are probably all kinds of reasons why the other animals didn’t want to help. Maybe the cow already gave milk that morning and felt

the need to rest and eat grass so she could keep up her milk production. That seems legit. The chicken had her eggs to sit on. Legit. The duck was probably just being lazy and didn't want to get out of water on a hot day.

We don't really know what they were all up to. But we do know that the Little Red Hen really could have used some help and that every one of them could have turned aside to give her some. We know that, because when it came time to eat the bread, they were all suddenly able to spare a few minutes and they showed up right away.

It's a story about pulling our weight in the world; about being willing to work hard for the benefit of everyone, including our own benefit. It seems kind of a like an old school Republican story to me. Get rid of the welfare state and let everybody learn how to work! No free rides! If you don't work, you don't eat!" I have to say that on one level I agree with this sentiment. But I am also uncomfortable with the cruelty and lack of compassion with which it is sometimes enforced.

There is apparently a more progressive Barney version of the story, in which the Little Red Hen gives the other animals a second chance that

strikes me as a little bit too easygoing; It sort of takes away the consequences. So put me in the middle on this.

### **A Lean Towards Mean**

But if you go by the original Little Red Hen Story, there is a certain cruel satisfaction in it that bothers me. In the end, the Hen eats the bread by herself – kind of a selfish thing to do, and all the other animals look on with hungry eyes. That’s all. No redemption for the other animals and all the glory and the goodies for the Hen. I don’t like that ending, because it’s not even good for the Hen, who is going to end up being overfed and all alone. What kind of a life is that? Basically, even though justice is served, everybody loses.

### **Gospel Comparison**

I like the comparison between the Little Red Hen story and this morning’s Gospel story, because I think it highlights the differences that make the Gospel “good news” for us. Because, even though the Gospel story is also in some ways an uncomfortable story, nobody actually ends up being left out.

Instead of a bunch of farm animals who are unwilling to help, and yet are more than willing to enjoy the goodies, the Gospel story is about

ten lepers who, having come to Jesus in search of healing, go away cleansed, and yet can't be bothered to come back to say thank you.

Both stories are about folks who seem to be entirely guided by self-interest. They are simply not willing to inconvenience themselves on behalf of others. Except that, in the Gospel story, there actually is one who goes out of his way to come back and say Thank You; a leper who also happens to be a foreigner. And this is where the two stories go their separate ways.

The Little Red Hen story is a story of judgment pure and simple. The other animals fail to contribute and they get what they deserve, which is "nothing." There is no forgiveness, there is no role model provided, who can reveal a more excellent way. There is only cold hard justice.

In the Gospel story, Jesus is much more forgiving and lenient than the Little Red Hen, maybe even disturbingly lenient. Because when the nine others walk away without even returning to say thank you, he just lets them go. Privately, he shares his disappointment in their failure to return with the one leper who did. But he still lets them go off to enjoy what he has given them without punishment, without even a rebuke, as ungrateful and undeserving as they are.

If there is any touch of cruelty or insensitivity in this story it works in the opposite way. Whereas the Hen was insensitive to the needs of the other animals, in the Gospel story the one who bears the brunt of insensitive behavior in this story is Jesus himself.

You almost wish that Jesus was more like the Little Red Hen, who masterfully built up the expectations of the other animals, calling out to them, “Well now, who will eat this bread with me?” “I will,” “I will”, they all said as they salivated over the bread. And then she practically snatched it out of their mouths, before going off to eat it all by herself. She played the situation for maximum effect, to teach them a lesson and maybe also to satisfy her desire to punish them.

The story never tells us whether they learned the lesson and what we are left with is one big winner and a barnyard full of losers. But the lesson is clear. You work or you don’t eat and it is up to you to choose work or die.

The Gospel reading works a little differently. As the story tells us, all ten were cleansed, even the nine who failed to come back and say thank you. And Jesus does not bother to teach them a lesson by punishing

them with negative consequences. They have run off and are happily enjoying being accepted back into society, free of their skin diseases.

But there is a second greater reward in this story, that the nine happy lepers are entirely unaware of. It is an added blessing that only the one who returns receives. Only this one is present with Jesus to hear his words of disappointment over the failure of the others to show up. And none of the others are told by him that their faith has made them whole. The one who returns has entered into a private conversation with God, in which God is sharing his inner thoughts with him in a conversation the other nine are not a part of.

Still it is not an all or nothing story. When Jesus cleansed them, you could say that the nine ungrateful lepers received half the prize; that they were made half way to whole, and they were very happy about it. But the one who came back, completed the circle, that the others who were too busy enjoying what they received, left only half completed.

Or maybe you could think of it as being like a half completed electrical circuit, where the lightbulb doesn't really come on until two halves are joined together; the half in which God heals us and the half where we return in gratitude to express our thanks.

My guess is that all the other lepers who were healed had a moderately flattering view of themselves. Things were now going pretty well for them, now that they were accepted back into society. They could sit in their armchairs thinking spiritual thoughts and feel pretty good about themselves, knowing that they had been touched and cleansed by Jesus. They could live in full enjoyment of only half a life.

But a whole life in this story is one in which the good thoughts are completed by good actions. In the blunt words of classical theology: Faith without good works is dead. In other words, when in gratitude for what we have received, we are driven out of our “rocking chairs” and into action, turning good spiritual thoughts into good deeds, our half-a-life is made a whole life - a life in which we enter into a personal relationship with Jesus that we never had before; in which he shares his joys and disappointments with us.

### **You and I**

Is Jesus asking us to consider whether we may be half, rather than wholly alive through this story? I think so, because, in the story he goes out of his way to identify us with the nine lepers who did not come back. He does this by making it clear that the one who did come back was a foreigner, in other words, not an insider, as we consider ourselves to be.

And I think this only makes sense, because neither this story nor the Little Red Hen story does us any good, if we identify ourselves with the most exemplary character and simply treat it as story designed to pat us on the back and congratulate us.

When we use these stories to criticize others, they become an expression of our self-righteousness and a deadly tool for condemning others. But if we are willing to identify with the flawed characters and accept the stinging criticisms these stories contain and accept the challenges that are being directed at us, then these stories have tremendous saving power for our lives.

### **Thanksgiving Thankfulness**

This week is Thanksgiving Week. It will be a time for celebrating the blessing and grace of God who makes us whole through sharing generously as God has shared with us.

Because we are God's people, our story is not the Little Red Hen Story. We don't look at the world around us as though whatever we have to offer was entirely of our own making as the Little Red Hen seemed to believe. And we don't withhold the plenty that we have access to as a way to punish others who don't live up to our standards, as the Little Red Hen did as she judged her neighbors with her cold beady eye.



I'm sorry, I guess I'm being hard on the Little Red Hen! Jesus talks about a Mother Hen as a warm and tenaciously protective mother, while I'm talking about hens as though they are cold and judgemental with their beady eyes. So, I guess there are different ways to look at it, depending on the story.

In this case, this week is a time for thanksgiving. So, let's be thankful for all the people in our lives who in a thousand different ways, bake the bread that we eat each day. Let extend our hearts out to each other in the pews and be thankful for all God has done for us through each person here in this sanctuary and everywhere.

And let's be thankful to God who doesn't just give us a half a life, but offers us a life that is truly made whole when we return to him, by sharing ourselves and what we have, with others in his Spirit. All praise and glory be to you, O God. Amen.