

Here we are in Lent when one of the practices we are encouraged to consider is fasting or giving up something we desire. Today's Gospel reading is full of desires. The word desire is translated differently each time it occurs in this passage. It is difficult to see the repetition of the Greek original, but today's Gospel reading is full of desires. Herod desires to kill Jesus. Jesus desires to gather all the children of God together like a hen gathers all her brood. Meanwhile, the children of God desire not to be gathered into that care.

My daughter, when she was a small child, absolutely did this. She pushed all assistance aside and insisted she could live without help. She could do it. Whatever it was. With all her 3-year-old passion, she desired to prove that she was capable and strong.

Consequently, we were constantly surprised to discover some discomfort she had lived with. For example, we went to buy her new shoes and found out after months and months she had been walking around with that tissue bundle that comes in new shoes (You know the paper stuffed into the toes of the shoes?). That tissue bundle was still there. Because she would not let us help her put on her shoes, we never found out that -for months- her little feet had been squished by that wad of paper in the toes.

My daughter Hannah will laugh about this story now, but she still remembers those shoes; she remembers that discomfort. Now she recalls that she didn't know. She thought shoes were supposed to feel like that. Hannah saw that everyone around her was wearing shoes, and none of them were complaining. She would suffer before she would ask for help, care or protection. Her desire was to prove herself independent, and she desired the power to control her own world.

Jesus desires, like a mother hen, to gather the brood together safe and comfortable under her wings. But like a brood of chicks, the Children of God desire to be independent. And so the Children of God reject God and turn away.

But there is an important distinction here. Receiving care and protection is not the opposite of being intelligent, capable, and strong. It is possible to desire both. Now that Hannah is actually smart, competent, and capable, she asks for help all the time. She asks me to call just to care about her. The desire for assistance, protection and care does not feel threatening now that she is independent and in control.

It is easy to smile at the images of a toddler pushing away help. Smile at the idea of a small child demanding the power to control their world. But what about when we are adults? In addition to the image of adults who are so committed to personal power and control that they will reject all help or love. What I wonder about today is what about when we think we should have control, but we do not? What about when we are supposed to be strong and capable, but we are weak due to physical illness, mental health issues, or life catastrophes? What do we desire then?

When I was in my twenties, just a year older than Hannah is now, I became ill, and I was sick for years. Just as I was about to finally be independent, I became completely reliant on the care and protection of others, and I hated it. I hated being sick. I desired the destruction of my illness. But if you look under that desire, it is easy to see that what I really wanted some personal power and control in my life.

Then one day I was walking. I was not yet a Christian, and I did not know how to pray. But I did all the things now I would call prayer. Without words, I lamented with all my heart. Without words, I shouted that I was done. I could no longer continue. I desired death.

And at that moment, I was gathered up. I felt it. Like a mother, hen the Holy Spirit took me, as broken as I was, and the Holy Spirit gathered me up into protection and care. Before that moment, I would have said I desired death, but if you looked carefully, you could see that I desired control of my body and life. After that moment, I knew that being gathered into God's care and protection was enough. After that moment, I could keep going. It took me years more to heal. It took me years to get strong and capable again – but through it all, I felt God's protection like a mother hen's wing around me. For years I practiced accepting care and protection as I also worked to get strong and capable. Because it is possible to desire to be competent and strong and also desire and receive care and protection. There is only a conflict if what we really want, what we really desire, is power. Because only God has all the power.

What do you desire?

When we read our Gospel passage, we read everyone desiring something different. Herod desires death and destruction. But if you look under that desire, we can easily see that Herod desires power. He desires to keep his powerful position (his kingship) where he can control the people around him. Jesus desires to provide care and protection. Jesus wants to gather us together in community. And then, can you imagine being cuddled safe and warm in the wing of a mother hen. Jesus wants us to feel that care. Next, in this story, the children of God desire independence. Like toddlers, the children of God cry, "no, I will do it myself." Like toddlers, the children of God reject protection and care to try to live without God. But it is possible to accept care and protection and be capable and strong. It is impossible to receive care and protection from God if all you desire is power.

What do you desire?

What about those dark desires? What about our desires for power? This can be as small as the power to control what we read or what news we watch in our lives. And I notice that many people in the world cannot control what news they watch. Their political leaders take that power away from them. Or, in the context of our lives, we can desire the capacity to walk or feed ourselves. And I notice that many people in the world cannot control walking or eating right now. At different times of our life, what we can easily do at one time can be taken away in illness or violence.

Given how much death and destruction there is in the world, power is a common desire. I am thinking about war in Ukraine. I am thinking about all of the violent crimes in the world. And

especially, my heart is full of all those impacted by domestic violence, self-harm, and suicide. Like our ancestor Herod, humans are full of desires for death and destruction. If some of your desires are dark, you are not alone. If some part of you desires power, you are not alone. And Jesus knows all our desires. The Holy Spirit still wants to gather us up like a mother hen into the care and protection of God.

This is a passage about desire. A time to notice that some desires are compatible and some are not. This passage shows us again that it is not possible to desire power and accept God's care and protection. This passage also hints that even though we cannot always accept God's care and protection – that care and protection are still there for us. Like a parent that cannot take the suffering away until the toddler asks for help.

And this passage is a fitting subject for Lent. One of the invitations to a holy lent is to the practice of fasting. Many Christians give up something for Lent. Give up chocolate or alcohol, give up social media or fast from meat. Often this is a token, a gesture to notice what we desire. A gesture to help us see when what we desire is missing, maybe the care and protection of God are enough.