

**Luke 13:31-35** <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> Jesus 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 outside of 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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“You Gotta Know When to Hold ‘Em...”

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Some of you may have looked at the sermon title printed in your bulletin this morning with a bit of wariness: “You Gotta Know When to Hold ‘Em...” Those are the opening words to a classic old Kenny Rogers song called “The Gambler”.

You got to know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em,  
Know when to walk away and know when to run.  
You never count your money when you're sittin' at the table.  
There'll be time enough for countin' when the dealin's done.  
*[from “the Gambler” by Kenny Rogers]*

Now what on earth would a good, solid, United Methodist preacher want with words from a song about gambling? Is that really a good idea? Don’t you know that Methodists have a long and glorious history of standing against gambling? You won’t find our bishops meeting in a casino, no matter how inexpensive the conference rooms are. You won’t find Bingo in a United Methodist Church—at least, not for money. Most pastors even tiptoe around a raffle with caution! Methodists are skittish about that kind of thing, don’t you know?

I’m well aware. I’m not offering commentary on Kenny Rogers’ music, and I’m certainly not advocating for gambling. But I want to talk this morning about holding on, because deep down, that’s one way to talk about this morning’s scripture lesson.

As lessons go, it’s a bit of a strange one, so let’s pick it apart a little bit before we dig deeper. The story begins with a warning...for Jesus...from some Pharisees—which may seem out of character to those of you who’ve studied your bibles. After all, we are used to thinking of the Pharisees as ‘bad guys’, but it’s not really that simple. We’ve got the Scribes (who would be the lawyers or students of the law) and the Pharisees (the day-to-day community religious leaders), and they always seem to be the hecklers in the crowd, deriding Jesus for his mission and his method. At various points in scripture, Jesus lambasts them for their derision, calling them ‘blind’, ‘lazy’, a ‘brood of vipers’, ‘whitewashed tombs’, ‘thieves’ and ‘evil-doers’. That’s not an exhaustive list either. He reprimands them constantly: “Woe to you Scribes and Pharisees...”

Yet for all that, pay careful attention. Jesus also goes to eat at the homes of Pharisees. He is entreated to come and heal children and servants of Pharisees. He is prepared for burial by Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea—two Pharisees—and is laid to rest in the tomb belonging to a

Pharisee. It is a Pharisee named Gamaliel in Acts 5 that advises caution against persecuting Christians, lest they inadvertently be found to be fighting against God. At least some of Jesus' disciples started out as Pharisees. The Apostle Paul was most definitely a Pharisee. He states it directly several times in Acts and in his letters to the early church. And although we have very little information about Jesus before beginning his public ministry, what little we do have supports rather convincingly the theory that Jesus himself was raised as a Pharisee. And this should not surprise us.

In many ways, the Judaism of the Pharisees and the teachings of Jesus are not all that different. They both stressed righteousness and personal faith. Unlike the Sadducees (who were the ruling elite), the Essenes (who isolated themselves in the desert to live a monastic life), and the Zealots (who were political extremists more than religious adherents), the Pharisees advocated a day-to-day life of faith that promoted the practice of prayer and spiritual discipline, cautioned about the dangers of wealth and riches, shared a concern for the poor and oppressed, believed in resurrection and an afterlife, and espoused the virtues of personal relationship between God and the individual. The differences between them had to do with how one achieved these things. Jesus talked about grace. The Pharisees talked about following the law. Nothing frustrated Jesus more than his own people—so close, and yet, so far... That, I think, is how Jesus saw it. His relationship with the Pharisees was a complicated one—animosity and affection co-mingling precariously.

Which brings us back around about to our scripture lesson this morning. Pharisees, with genuine concern, come to give Jesus a head's up. These Pharisees know what happened to John the Baptist. They know what Herod is capable of. And their message is "Hey Jesus, Herod has heard of you and it's not good. He's dealing, and death is in the cards. Now would be a good time to fold 'em and walk away—or run." It's a warning given in good faith.

So, we would expect Jesus to say, "Hey, thanks very much. I appreciate it." And then to high tail it out of there. But Jesus doesn't respond that way. Instead, he's defiant, unapologetic, brash. "Go tell that fox..." Don't miss the insult here. Jesus calls Herod a fox, but he's not thinking of Aesop's Fables, where the fox is the sly, cunning, calculating, intelligent villain. That's modern thinking, and we can't impose it on ancient texts. The image Herod used for himself was that of a lion. When Jesus calls him a fox, he is poking Herod in the eye. Randall Buth points out that, "Jesus was instead commenting on Herod's ineptitude... Jesus questioned the tetrarch's pedigree, moral stature and leadership, and put the tetrarch "in his place." [from Randall Buth, *That Small Fry Herod Antipas, Or When A Fox Is Not A Fox*, on illustrations for Lent II, year C, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

In the face of a real and credible threat, Jesus chose to hold rather than fold. I will do what I was sent here to do, he tells them. I've got work to do. Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. I've been given a mission, and threats will not induce me to walk away. He holds on in the face of intimidating circumstances.

I heard a cute little story once about a man on the highway. His wife was at home watching the news and noticed that on the highway her husband would be taking, there was a crazy driver who was going the wrong way down the highway. So she called her husband on the cell phone to warn him to be careful. And he said, "honey, there's not just one—there's a whole bunch of cars going the wrong way!"

Sometimes that's what it feels like to be a person of faith—like everything or everyone is coming against us at once, and the easiest, most expedient thing to do would be to let go, turn around, walk away rather than stand for what's right. But Jesus says: know when to hold 'em. Know when to hold on to God's grace, God's promises, God's presence. When there's hurt that needs healing, wrongs that need righting, people that need loving, don't fold because it's hard.

"I came across a story recently about U.S. Senator Edmund G. Ross of Kansas. If you've never heard of him, you're not alone. No law bears his name. Not a single list of Senate "greats" mentions his service. Yet when Ross entered the Senate in 1866, he was considered the man to watch. He seemed destined to surpass his colleagues, but he tossed it all away by one courageous act of conscience. Remember that at that time, Andrew Johnson had ascended to the presidency upon the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. Johnson was determined to follow Lincoln's policy of reconciliation toward the defeated South. Congress, however, wanted to rule the downtrodden Confederate states with an iron hand, and thus, shortly after Senator Ross was seated, the Senate introduced impeachment proceedings against President Johnson. Those instigating the proceedings calculated that they needed thirty-six votes to win. They had thirty-five, and mistakenly concluded that Ross, from Kansas, would provide that needed final vote.

"When the day of the vote arrived, the courtroom galleries were packed. A deathlike stillness fell over the Senate chamber as the vote began. By the time they reached Ross, twenty-four "guilties" had been announced. Eleven more were certain. Only Ross' vote was needed to impeach the President. But when the Chief Justice asked Senator Ross for his vote, the answer came—unhesitating, unmistakable: "Not guilty!" With that, the trial was over. And the response was as predicted.

"A high public official from Kansas wired Ross to say: "Kansas repudiates you as she does all perjurers and skunks." Ross' political career was in ruins. Extreme ostracism, and even physical attack awaited his family upon their return home.

"But today, historians honor his courage which almost certainly saved the United States from what could potentially have been irreparable crisis and division post civil war. [4 ¶s adapted from Jon Johnston, *Courage - You Can Stand Strong in the Face of Fear* (SP Publications – 1990) pp. 56-58.]

He knew when to hold the line. He sensed the call on his life to do the right thing, and even in the face of incredible public pressure, he didn't fold. There's a time to hold 'em.

But one could argue that there's also a time to fold 'em—a time to surrender our will and defiance; a time to fold to the possibilities of hope and the power of grace; a time to walk away from grudges and jealousy and resentment. There's a time to fold because there are some things that none of us can do. Listen to what Jesus says: Jerusalem! Jerusalem! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

You were not willing. Frank G. Honeycutt offers fascinating insight when he writes:

*"One of the popular images of Jesus in many religious circles is that he is a man who can do anything. Walk on water. Turn a couple fish and a few loaves into a feast for thousands. Make the blind see and the lame walk. Even raise the dead. But one thing he cannot do is make us love him. He cannot legislate love nor control human will. 'How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing'." [from "Jesus, Desirous" in *Sermons on the Gospel Reading, Cycle C, CSS Publishing; on www.Sermons.com.*]*

Whoa! That's a bold statement. One thing Jesus *cannot* do... I'll be honest with you all: I'm not sure I'm entirely comfortable with that statement. One of the popular images of Jesus in many religious circles is that he is a man who can do anything, says Honeycutt. I say it's more than just a popular image—it's sound, orthodox, Biblical theology. Jesus can do anything. In my opinion, *that* isn't not the question. The question is: WILL Jesus do anything? Will Jesus use any means to secure the desired end? Will he force his will upon us? We already know the answer to that. Last week, our scripture lesson showed us how the devil tempted Jesus to do just that, and he wouldn't bite. He wouldn't use force, manipulation, or coercion. And he wouldn't force his will on us. Sometimes I wish

he would—I really do. The world would be a better place. But would I be a better person? Would I be a person at all? If God forced his will upon me—if I did everything he said automatically and without thought or question, would I still be able to say I’m made in God’s image?

For many years early in our marriage, Brad and I enjoyed a show on TV called *Star Trek: Next Generation*. As the title suggests, it followed the voyages of the *Starship Enterprise* in the generation following Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock. This *Starship Enterprise*, captained by Jean Luc Picard (portrayed by actor Patrick Stewart), had several interesting characters. But the most fascinating character on that show, in my opinion, was an android they named ‘Data’. An android is a sophisticated robot, who looks and acts human. Data had superhuman strength, he could do a billion mathematical equations in his head per second, and he was unfailingly loyal and obedient. He proved himself a worthwhile companion on many occasions. In one episode, the captain is forced into a situation that may eventually require one of his junior officers to kill him. He looks over his qualified officers and assigns the task to Data. Why? Because Data is the only one who will carry them out unquestionably and without hesitation. Data has no feelings. He cannot feel hunger, he cannot feel anger, he cannot feel fear, he cannot feel pain, he cannot feel guilt, and he cannot feel love.

But in this particular episode, a very interesting thing happens. When it gets down to the wire, and Data is called upon to shoot his captain, he hesitates. He wavers because two conflicting orders are at war in his system, and his microprocessor freezes up. He has been programmed to protect the lives of his comrades on the one hand and to follow the orders of his commanding officer on the other hand. Now, of course, being a TV show, all reaches its happy conclusion in the end, but as that episode enters its final scene, we are asked to ponder a new question. Is love a feeling or a choice? Data consistently makes choices that are in everyone else’s best interest, because he has no self-interests. He cannot feel, but the choices he makes, based on a moral program running his microprocessor, are compassionate, caring, and yes, even loving. So the captain asks himself: Does Data love?

Let me put the question to you: what does it mean to love? I think we can safely agree that love is far more than a feeling. Yes, it involves feelings—they’re vital, but they’re not enough. When I counsel couples preparing to marry, we talk about the marriage commitment. We talk about the fact that things won’t always be good, but love sees it through, love within a marriage involves making a choice to stick it out. One of my favorite stories in one the late Tony Campolo used to tell about waking up on the morning of his 42<sup>nd</sup> anniversary. He says to his wife, “hey dear, it’s our anniversary!” And she says, “Yes. Here’s to 39 years of happy marriage!” To which Tony replies, “Dear, we’ve been married 42 years.” And she says, “Yes. 39 years of *happy* marriage.” Which seems to suggest that in those 42 years, there were times (amounting to about three years) when all they could do was hold on; when they folded the present trouble to the hold of commitment. As they celebrated that anniversary, they may have celebrated 39 happy years, but they certainly celebrated 42 years of loving and committed marriage.

Jesus holds on to conviction in the face of threat, but he also holds on to love in the face of rejection. Earlier, I said: Jesus can do anything, that’s not the question. The question is: WILL Jesus do anything? Will he force his will upon us? No. He chooses in favor of love, sacrificing himself for the sake of others. When lives and eternity were on the line, he would not fold on his mission and he would not run from fate. If he would not force his will upon us, how would he hold onto us? He folded on his comfort and security instead. He let us pound nails through his hands and feet and torture him to death. And when everyone thought he’d folded, we learned how he held—held on to purpose, to courage, to hope, to faith, to love for all us. He knew when to hold, and he knew when to fold, and it made all the difference in the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.