

Norman Mclean's story called *A River Runs Through It* begins with this line: "In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing." That's probably true of most Montana families. I know it was true for mine. In his story, Mclean shares the love and spirituality of fly fishing with his brother, Paul. He and his brother are the sons of a Presbyterian minister, but the two men are very different: Norman is obedient and earnest, but left Montana to go to college. Paul is rebellious and reckless, but he stayed in Montana to work as a reporter.

Paul, whose skills with a fly rod are far superior to Norman's never teases or criticizes Norman's faults as a fisherman, but that just makes it all the harder for Norman to talk about Paul's reckless drinking, gambling and fighting, even though he knows that his younger brother needs help. When Norman has to pick Paul up at the police station after fight, the desk sergeant tells Norman about his own younger brother who is always in trouble. "What do you do to help him?" Norman asks. After a long pause, the sergeant says, "I take him fishing."

Paul's problems arise when he isn't standing in the life-giving Blackfoot River surrounded by the waters of life—the path to Paul's healing. But his addictions and appetites keep pulling him away from the river, away from redemption and ultimately away from life. Gambling, drinking and fighting threaten Paul's life and he lives hanging in the balance, where it seemed he would dangle for years. "Tell me," Norman's fiancé Jesse asks him, "why is it that the people who want help do better without it—at least, no worse. Actually," she notices, "that's what it is, no worse. They take all the help they can get, and are just the same as they have always been." Paul moves farther and farther away from the life of the river right up until the night that he is murdered and his body dumped in an alley.

In the film version, Paul and Norman's father, John, delivers the point of the story in a sermon: "Each one of us here today," he says, "will at one time in our lives look upon a loved one who is in need and ask the same question: We are willing to help, Lord, but what, if anything, is needed? For it is true we can

seldom help those closest to us. Either we don't know what part of ourselves to give or, more often than not, the part we have to give is not wanted. And so it is those we live with and should know who elude us. But we can still love them. We can love completely without complete understanding.”

I imagine Jesus noticing something very similar in our gospel reading.

We can become accustomed to thinking of Jesus as a man who can do anything. He calmed storms and walked on water. Fed thousands of people with a few fish and some barley loaves. Even raised the dead. But there is one thing he could not do. There is one thing that the Risen Christ *still* cannot do.

He cannot make us love him. He cannot force us to choose the waters of life. The choice is still ours to make. “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

This same lament appears in Matthew’s Gospel, but Jerusalem doesn’t mean the same thing to the author of Matthew as it does to Luke Gospel that begins and ends in Jerusalem. A few weeks ago, I sat in the little teardrop-shaped church of Dominus Flevit, halfway down the western slope of the Mount of Olives. Dominus Flevit, meaning “the Lord wept,” takes its name from the moment in Luke when Jesus wept over the fate of Jerusalem during his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday.

But the altar at Dominus Flevit remembers the moment we heard today. The mosaic on the front of the altar, which is reproduced on the front of your bulletins, is an unusual image that captures Jesus’ lament. “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” The church is also unusual in that the altar does not face east as most do, but west. And there behind the altar, through a beautiful arched window, rises Jerusalem. The altar cross is perfectly centered like cross-hairs through a rifle scope on Calvary where Jesus was crucified.

Jesus has tried often to gather God’s children, but he cannot make us love him. He can leave a tomb empty, but he cannot force us to choose the waters of life. The choice is still ours to make.

I suspect that Norman and his father knew how Jesus felt at this moment. I imagine that anyone who has deeply loved a broken person and comes to realize that they can't shelter them from the harm that they bring upon themselves understands Jesus' lament over the city. "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!"

Dominus Flevit is an unusual church that memorializes an intriguing reference—one that can re-orient our images of God if we let it. Jesus uses a feminine image for himself and because we understand Jesus to be a revelation of the essential character and disposition of the One who sent him, Jesus is also referring to God as a mother hen whose very nature is to protect her chicks and who does this without hesitation in the face of danger.

The image of God as *mother* is not new. Hebrew scripture abounds with feminine images of God. Hosea describes God as a fierce mother bear and Isaiah imagines God as a mother giving birth and later as a mother breast-feeding her child. Deuteronomy describes God as a protective mother eagle. What is new is the image of God as a *hen*. Not the commanding eagle from Exodus or the leopard from Hosea, but a hen—an image of unparalleled vulnerability.

In contrast to Herod Antipas, the fox, Jesus presents an image of God as the one who, without concern for herself, puts herself between a violent aggressor and any of the chicks who find shelter under her wings. Jesus goes on to Jerusalem *not* to start a political upheaval that will banish the evils that people impose on themselves or each other. He goes *not* to make himself a sacrifice for sin to a judgmental and abusive God. Jesus heeds his own true nature—the nature that he shares with the One who sent him. Jesus goes on to Jerusalem and to the cross that awaits him there out of a mother's fierce love for all of God's children.

Through the incarnation, God becomes vulnerable to all the ups and downs of human life by becoming one of and one with God's children. And if you gaze at images of this vulnerable Jesus eternally outstretched on the cross, his arms begin

to resemble the loving wings of a mother hen, gathering up her chicks in a love that makes no sense, but that will surely break your heart. And yet *even there*, nailed to the cross, Jesus cannot force anyone to accept his love.

Just know this: God's desire for us is eternal. God *still* says, "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings."

What, then, shall we do?

On the one hand, we can lean into our own vulnerability to incite our courage because we *can* and *will* do things for those we love that we may not even do for ourselves. On the other hand, we must keep in mind that all we can do is *point* people to the rivers of God's life and love. We can no more make people choose God's love than Christ can. It is an illusion to imagine that we can prevent evil from happening to those we love. And yet we can also never abandon them, although perhaps we can learn to relinquish them to God in prayer.

If you have ever loved someone you could not protect, you understand the depth of Jesus' lament. All we can do is open our arms. We cannot make anyone walk into them. All we can do is take the most vulnerable posture in the world—wings spread, breast exposed. To offer love even when we can't help, we stand like Jesus does.

Remember what Norman's father said: "And so it is those we live with and love and should know that elude us. But we can still reach out to them; we can love completely without complete understanding."