How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers a brood under her wings, and you were not willing! (Luke 13:34)

When I was a child, I loved to be cuddled, drawn into my parents’ arms, attended to, willing to be loved. Sometime between childhood and adulthood, resistance to this open and accepting posture began to take root. To this day, when my mother requests a hug, I find myself reluctantly submitting to her embrace. In my unwillingness, I am reminded of this morning’s scripture wherein Jesus says, “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers a brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Luke 13:34).

In the Belgian film, The Kid With a Bike, an 11-year-old boy escapes from his foster care home, and takes off running toward his estranged father’s home, who lives in a nearby village. With his caretakers in pursuit, the boy darts into a doctor’s office, where he stumbles upon a crowded waiting room.

Terrified, he bounds into the lap of a waiting patient- a woman, whose maternal instincts move her to embrace the boy. Realizing he is in the arms of a stranger, the boy springs from the woman’s lap and runs from the office. Remaining calm, the woman watches the boy leave, having provided, at least for a moment, a loving respite.

In this morning’s scripture, Jesus finds himself in a similar predicament, “casting out demons and performing healings”(13:32), saying, “O Jerusalem, how often have I desired (longed) to gather your children as a hen gathers her brood”(13:34). But, alas, “you were not willing”(13:35). The New English Translation reads, “You would have none of it!” And yet another version states, “you would not let me.” Jesus knows that Jerusalem is a dangerous place for him, the “city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it.”

In spite of impending danger, Jesus remains unarmed, willing and determined to do his part, gathering his brood under his wings. Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “If you have ever loved someone you could not protect, then you understand the depth of Jesus’ lament. All you can do is open your arms. You cannot make anyone walk into them. Meanwhile, this is the most vulnerable posture in the world --wings spread, breast exposed -- but if you mean what you say, then this is how you stand.” This is Jesus’ stance in today’s gospel.

We find Jesus patiently demonstrating and persistently teaching about the Kingdom of God. Rather than saying, ‘Look, there or here it is!’ He instead instructs, “the Kingdom of God is in the midst of you”, is even in the midst of you. The will and way of God is neither in the oppression or violence of a worldly Empire, nor in the disengaged, privatized lives of those minding their own business. No. The

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will of God is making its loving way into the midst of and growing within them. This is the story and truth of a loving God whose will it is to love the whole world. The will of God is for his children to know to what brood they are beholden.

Jesus will confess to Pontius Pilate, “My kingdom is not from this world If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would … keep me from being handed over … But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” Pilate will respond, ‘So you are a king?’ Jesus answers, ‘You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.’

And just who listens to Jesus’ voice, the voice of the living God. At the time, Jesus’ words were alien to just about everyone in the Scripture, except to the least of these, particularly children. Which brings us back to where we started. From our very creation we have been rooted in this truth; we are made for God’s ways, God’s will in this world. Jesus will soon attest in Luke’s gospel “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.” As we take on adult manners and ways, this truth becomes veiled, waiting quietly to be reclaimed in our hearts and souls.

As adults, we neglect taking the risk to reach out and invest in caring, truly, about the welfare of others. Our hearts grow closed, limited, and we are fearful to take action in our lives. Ironically, this is true in the church where it would seem to be the safest place to take these kinds of good risks- to welcome God’s expression in our lives. In contrast, I may attest to this miraculous will of God in my own beginning here at Grace Church School and at Grace Church. Though I earned my first degree in teaching students grades Kindergarten through 8th grade, until now I had never taught these ages. I spent the first 15 years of my career with High School students. I appreciated and loved these high school students, and sensed at times they appreciated and loved me. I worked in a boarding school for most of those years, enjoying my role as a stand-in mother, as most of their parents were scattered all over the United States and abroad.

As many of you may attest, the ways of the world push many teens into hidden and protective corners. Now, working with students from age 4 to 14, I watch them, the younger children, hold hands, hug, ask for help, enjoy laughter, and reflect a genuine happiness to be alive. What an honor to be in this place and to be reminded who I am, for whom I was made. That same spirit living in these “little children,” lives in me, lives in us all.

Something of the “All I Ever Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten” is true. True growing up, growing the Reign of God within, is a returning to a place wherein we will once again make manifest the ways of a loving God, willing God to captivate us, animate us, and make us like him, in this world. Jesus calls the Church in its living to build up in her members the remembrance of this truth dwelling within each of one of us, without exception. “Do you love me?” Jesus will ask Peter in the Gospel of John … then “feed my sheep … take care of my lambs … feed my sheep,” (with your allowance in light of today’s gospel), and “gather my brood under your wings.”

The church must be a safe place, a sanctuary wherein we can grow up together without fear or panic, as we get to know, together, the ways and will of God, to help bring the kingdom, the reign of God very near us. In personal devotion, Sunday and Wednesday worship, Morning Prayer, Bible Study, in evening classes, work days on Staten Island, and in gatherings such as this very weekend’s ECW – Grace and the Arts, we build up a repertoire of practicing the presence of God. The prophet Ezekiel wrote, “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your
body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and … ; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.” Jesus would have known these words well.

In this Gospel of Luke, he echoes the words of the prophet Jeremiah in his lament, expressing sadness for this land, his creation, this world, “Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place.” Be in this world, but not of it- and the will of God will reign in this place. “The Kingdom of heaven is like a hen who gathers her brood under her wings.”

So, let’s get back to The Kid With a Bike… The woman who gathered the boy in her arms ends up seeking the child out, offering to care for him, willing to love this boy into remembering that he is lovable. The woman offers the boy a place to re-root himself, to grow himself up in a new way, under the stretch of her life’s arms.

In my own life, as I look at the people all around me, from subway platforms, to bustling “cab”-ed streets, to this very place- Grace Church –I wonder “might we all be the sheep, the brood God means to love?” And the resounding answer is yes. This must be the place. This is the place and these are the people. Without an earthly father, the kid with a bike sought new understanding. This all plays out nicely in the simple Belgian film. And like the boy clinging to the woman in the doctor’s waiting room, I cling like a child to the truth of God’s love, desirous to be a sign of God’s mercy, and freedom, and compassion. God’s love is all and for all. The challenge and opposition of Empire is still resonant; yet the power of the world is humbled always to the peace of God passing understanding. In a world valuing competition and aggression, resulting no more than in our wanting, our present, engaged, compassionate, and faithful lives fill us, make us one in the love of Christ. We are drawn into the arms of a loving God and attended to, willing to be loved first by God and then growing in our love for one another, stretching in our openness and in our vulnerability in this world “as a hen gathers a brood under her wings.”

Are we willing to be the body of people, the members of the Church Jesus makes plain to us this morning? A welcoming, merciful, loving life is rooted and abides here, is celebrated in our gathering. This must be the kingdom of God come near, to be a sign of hope and of good news for the whole world.