

Feast of St. Francis of Assisi
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
Rev. Jason S. Glombicki
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This is fun today! Isn't it great having some pets in worship today? I love the sounds of both pets and children in this space. When I think about my childhood I can't help but remember the many animals I had growing up. And I'm not the only child with pets, in fact it's estimated that 4 in 10 children begin life in a family with a pet, and as many as 90% of children live with a pet at some point during their childhood.¹ Yet, by the looks of it here, it's not just children who love having pets -- we adults really enjoy our non-human friends too. We all have reasons why we love pets, or perhaps why we don't really like pets or why pets don't like us. Regardless, today's scripture readings give us three views on animals.

In Genesis we read from the second creation narrative where God notices that humankind is alone. God response to this loneliness was to make helpers. God made the birds of the air, and animals of the field and the first human named them. While none of the animals were found to be a human partner, they were still created as a response to loneliness.

I totally get that. We know that pets cannot help us in the same way as our human partners. After all, I've never seen a dog do my laundry, or a cat clean the dishes. However, I have seen a pet comfort me when I was lonely and be present with me in difficult times.

One of those difficult times was after graduate school when I was unemployed. I worked for a while as a hospital chaplain, but after my residency was over I moved in with my parents, worked retail, and hoped for a call as a pastor. The seven months I waited for a call was frustrating and disheartening. I'd often find myself on occasion laying face down on the carpet flustered. Without words my parent's dog Kiaya would sense these feelings. She'd come over and just lay down with me. In those moments she responded

¹ <http://www.parents.com/parenting/pets/kids/pets-good-for-kids/>

to my feelings and comforted me without words. That is what our creation story is trying to communicate to us about animals, namely that animals help us overcome loneliness.

In our second reading today from Revelation we hear of angels, living creatures, and humans are all gathered praising God and giving thanks. In this reading we see that animals and all creation point to God and is interconnected.

Today we celebrate the feast of St. Francis. More recently the name Francis has become popular with the current Roman Catholic pope. St. Francis took seriously a life of poverty and he would share the message of Christ by living it out. In this he'd find joy in community and gladness in all of creation. One of the ways he'd see the interconnection of creation with humankind was by calling them our brothers and sisters. That expression draws us into deeper care and concern for things that are very much like us. The hymn we'll sing after the sermon today has text written by St. Francis where he calls the sun our brother and the moon our sister. He names wind, fire, rain, and animals our kin. This language deepens our understanding of our interconnectivity.

In the industrialized world we have become so disconnected. We don't often encounter the food we eat as living being before consuming them. Recently I was in a local butcher shop that offers a full pig butchering class. I was talking with a friend about wanting to take the course to better connect me with my food. My friend thought the idea was disgusting and didn't want to know where his food comes from. However, it's that disconnection that devalues life. I've talked with small-scale farmers who witness the sacrifice of the animals they eat. They say their meal is made more meaningful when they raise the chickens, pigs, and cows. They become more aware of the importance of life and gift of the animal. With our knowledge of our food there's the potential for a deeper sense of the interconnectivity between animals, creation, and humankind. It was St. Francis who noted this when he calls animals his brothers and sisters, and the book of Revelation notes this interconnectivity when all things give praise and direct us toward God.

Finally, our Gospel reading from Matthew gives us another glimpse of animals. An initial read seems to really downplay the importance of the birds

of the air saying that humankind is more valuable. However, Jesus is responding to our emotion here while also teaching us about all of creation. In our reading we hear Jesus say, “do not worry” or another translation might be “do not be anxious.” Here Jesus is giving emphasis towards the care that God gives all things – God cares for humankind, God cares for the birds, and God cares for the lilies. You are loved by God. You are cherished by our God. Your pets, the pigeons on the street, and the fish in Lake Michigan are all cared for by God.

With that statement we realize the deep care God has for us and for all creation. We’ve received a gift for free from our God – a life filled with hope and love. We respond to that gift with love, care, peace, and concern. We show compassion to animals and advocate for their good care. We give of ourselves because we’ve been given so much.

Here in this place we strive to give of ourselves to care for animals and creation. As a Wicker Park Bucktown Green organization we strive toward eco-friendly practices in the little things like using reusable items during coffee hour instead of single use items or pet friendly ice melt. We also strive in some larger things too like installing energy efficient fixtures and conserving our heat with programmable thermostats and even though sharing our space with other groups. It’s through your offerings and gifts that you become a partner with us as we strive to care for the earth. Through your gifts we are able to oversee and develop these ways to care for creation. Right now is just the time to partner with us during our “Give. Grow. Restore.” campaign. A bit later in the service you’ll learn more about this important time in our year.

Today I’ve said all of that to remind you of this: our God cares for each and every one of us dearly. We are interconnected with all of creation and cared for by our God. It’s a gift from God to be with our beloved pets – for in our caring for them they become a blessing to us. As you walk your dog, or pet your cat, or interact with your pets remember the gift they are to you from our God of love. Thanks be to God for these special relationships. Amen.