

Feast of St. Francis

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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September 18th, 2016

Do you ever wonder why children ask “why” so often? Adults get questions like, “why can’t I stay up as late as you do?” or “why don’t we want others to see our private parts?” or even “why do cats have hair?” Children are curious. Their curiosity helps them build vocabulary, understanding, and skills. These questions prepare them for the future.¹ As adults we want to prepare them, and so we try to answer their questions.

With that in mind, I like to imagine that the authors of Genesis were adults who happen to be parents. Parents who attempted to answer questions like “How was the earth formed?” and “How did life come to be?” and, in today’s case, “Why are there animals?”

Before we get the answer, we’re told of a man. Often we refer to this man as Adam. Now, Adam is a proper noun that comes from the Hebrew word *adam*, meaning “earth creature.” Why is it “earth creature?” Well, in the story

¹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rebecca-palacios/why-do-children-ask-why_b_9233266.html

this Adam or *adam* is made from dust of the earth. *Adam* is also a pun on the word soil, for in Hebrew the word soil is *adamah*.

Anyway, when we fast-forward a bit, we see that God created this beautiful garden in Eden where *adam* is plopped on the ground. It didn't take long for God to notice something important. God looked around and said, "It is not good for the earth creature to be alone. I will make a fitting companion." // God said, "It is not good to be alone." // So, from that same dust of the earth, God formed every animal. From that same soil, from the very dirt where *adam* was formed, with that same substance, that is how animals were formed. Humans and animals were made from the same substance. Humans and animals were created to be companions.

Yet, some of us lack sympathetic or friendly companionship. If we don't lack it directly, we know someone who is lonely. Think about that old man you pass every morning on the sidewalk. Or your next-door neighbor who just moved into a nursing home. Or the bullied child who spends hours all alone each afternoon. How about that single parent that just moved in the building? What about the new coworker who just doesn't seem to fit in? What about the hours we work in front of the computer alone and disconnected? Loneliness is

real. “It’s a condition that crosses all gender, ethnic and socioeconomic barriers.”²

God said, “It is not good to be alone.” So too doctors say, “It’s not good to be alone.” In fact, research shows that loneliness is a stress. It’s a stress like pain, injury, loss, grief, fear, and fatigue. Loneliness can trigger a stress response that causes our bodies to produce body-altering hormones. Loneliness can actually make us sick, keep us sick, and interfere with our recovery. It *is* not good to be alone.

Into our lonely world, God provides abundance of life. God doesn’t leave us in our misery. In fact, it didn’t take very long for God to recognize that the earth creature is lonely. God recognized that humans are social beings. Then, God used the same earth to give abundant life to that earth creature. So too, God responds to our loneliness, our need for companionship, and our emptiness with the gift of animals.

On this day, we see this life-giving gift. Today we see animals around us! We hear the barking of dogs, sometimes we have a scuffle during communion, and through it all we have their gentle touch in these sacred moments. These

² http://elly17.narod.ru/psyc/animther/loneliness_and_pets.htm

beloved gifts from God are companions on our journey who give us both love and perspective.

As pet owners we gain perspective when we observe an animal's unique personality. One cat might be more talkative and cuddly than the other. One dog might be afraid of water, while another jumps right in. We notice these differences. What I've learned about myself is that I'm more likely to treat these different characteristics in animals with grace and acceptance. My expectations for pets are flexible based on their personality. In contrast, my expectations for people sometimes become standardized. I begin to think that every person should operate, think, and act the same. Yet it's the dogs, cats, fish, and snakes that all remind me about the diversity of God's creation. Animals remind me of the beauty of our unique personalities.

Yet we don't always value the animals given to us for companionship. Sure, pets are easy to appreciate; yet we often overlook working animals, sport animals, livestock, and laboratory animals. We forget about the animals used and abused on our behalf. We forget that the shampoo, makeup, cleaning supplies, and deodorant were all first tested on helpless animals. We don't often treat the animals we consume with dignity. Perhaps if we thought of our bacon as Wilbur, we might have more respect. If the chicken nuggets were

made from The Little Red Hen, we might pause. If that burger had a name and a personality, we might at least give thanks for the cow's life.

This is where our pets can help us appreciate the gift of life. When we look at our dog or cat, we call them by name. We say "Monster" or "Vienna" or "Kiya" or "Kitty" or "Tiger." We name them, much like *adam* did in today's first reading. We name them, and then we know them. If we had the same connection with our food, I wonder what reverence we'd have for animals. Might we pause before we eat to acknowledge the gift? Perhaps we'd be thankful for Wilbur or the Little Red Hen?

So there it is. Why? Why do we have animals? Well, today with pets gathered around, we acknowledge the gift of companionship. We must admit our loneliness in our busy city. But, we remember that our God compassionately says, "It is not good to be alone." So we celebrate the ways God gives both animals and people to share the journey. We honor their presence in our lives. Here, this day, we come to recall that we are not alone - for our God promises to be with us, to love us, and to send us creatures of the earth to bring us life. Amen.