

# Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Today is one of my favorite services of the year. It's wonderful to see all the pets, stuffed animals, and pictures of our pets as we acknowledge these relationships that better connect us with God and each other. After all, if you have a pet, you know how they become part of our family and the ways they help us decrease stress and manage pain. As a hospital chaplain, dogs were often the most loved and important healer for so many with terminal illness and cancer. So too, pets have been shown to have positive impacts on autism, ADHD, diabetes, and may help to protect young children against developing asthma or allergies later in life.<sup>1</sup>

So, it's no wonder that today's reading from Genesis focused on the human-animal relationship. Now, today's creation narrative is not the more well-known narrative where God worked for six days and rested on the seventh. This is the *second* creation narrative where before the animals and birds were created, God created the human's body from the soil. The human did not become a living creature until the breath of life was in its lungs. Then, after the human was created, God made animals to respond to the human's loneliness. It was then that God created cattle, birds, snakes, iguanas, kittens, gerbils, mice, and all the creatures of the earth.

Yet, how often do we creation as something that we can use for our own gain? We look at forests as raw material and riches. We see cattle as a hamburgers and hides. Animals are killed for their tusks, their shells, or for

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<sup>1</sup> <https://newsinhealth.nih.gov/2018/02/power-pets>

sport. Chickens are crammed into cages to produce eggs like a machine. Pigs are heard squealing to warn others as they are slaughtered. So often, we view animals and plants as a means to another end. We rarely see them as something intrinsically valuable. We seldom hold on to the truth we heard in Genesis that all of creation is our companion and friend.

Far too often, it is our own anxiety that causes us to fear the future. We hoard our resources for a famine or a future collapse that never comes. We carelessly say it's not our problem and demand comfort and novelty at all costs. In our fear and selfishness, we mistreat the earth, we take food from our hungry siblings, and we believe the false notion that we are our own savior. This sense of fear and its misaligned worship of money, power, and influence is what Jesus spoke to in today's gospel.

You see, just before Jesus began to speak of lilies and birds, he reminded us that we cannot love both money and God. We cannot love forgiveness and seek revenge. We cannot love others if we only love ourselves. We cannot value service if we only want to be served. You see, in today's reading, Jesus reminded us that the birds of the air and the lilies of the field have been given all that they need. After all, many birds do not store food to keep it for themselves; rather, they trust that God will provide. So too, wild lilies do not wonder how they can cover change how they look with plastic surgery, luxury clothing, or the finest cologne. For, even if a plants leaf is torn or browned, or if their flower becomes distorted, they are magnificent in all their beautiful imperfections.

You see, Jesus called us to cultivate gratitude for what we have. Gratitude for what has been given to us to eat without the desire to store and collect. Gratitude in our body's curves, birth marks, and crooked teeth that make us beautiful.

This is the same essence that St. Francis of Assisi encountered the world. St. Francis was known for preaching to the birds, literally. In one such interaction he said, "My sweet little sisters, birds of the sky, you are bound to heaven, to God, your Creator. In every beat of your wings and every note of your songs, praise [God]. [God] has given you the greatest of gifts, the freedom of the air. You neither sow, nor reap, yet God provides for you the most delicious food, rivers, and lakes to quench your thirst, mountains, and valleys for your home, tall trees to build your nests, and the most beautiful clothing: a change of feathers with every season. ... Clearly, our Creator loves you dearly, since [God] gives you gifts so abundantly. So

please beware, my little sisters, of the sin of ingratitude, and always sing praise to God."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.learnreligions.com/saint-francis-assisi-sermon-to-birds-124321#:~:text=Francis%20Speaks%20to%20the%20Birds%20About%20God's%20Love&text=Francis.the%20freedom%20of%20the%20air>.

This is the gift of God's creation. In companionship with all creation, we are reminded of God's abundance and love. We are reminded that when we only worrying about food and clothing, money and success, the future and famine, we forget to give thanks for all that we have been given. We forget that there is more to life than all of that. As we gather with our pets or call to mind our pets at home (like my two fur babies), they remind us that life isn't only about storing food and finding clothing. Rather, life includes belly rubs and zoomies, life involves games of fetch and long walks, life is about digging and swimming, jumping and flying. Life is a gift, filled with companionship and possibility.

In a few moments, we will bless our pets and to give thanks for their partnership. As we give thanks for our pets, so too we give thanks for all of creation. We give thanks to our God who loves us unconditionally. Our God who runs to greet us with a wagging tail. Our God who says, you are beautiful just like a wild lily.

Later this week, as the worries of the world and the rush of life consume us, I pray that we might remember to look at the birds in the air, to gaze the flowers in the grass, and to hang out with our beloved pets, all as a reminder that our loving God will provide abundantly. Amen.