

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Today, as I look out at all the joy and noise and happy chaos of this service, all I can think is “I wish we had animals in our service every week!”

Now if you suggested to most pastors that every week should have a bring-your-pet to worship service, they’d probably laugh you out of the room. That’s because in most churches, the services have a specific pattern they follow, a certain flow and rhythm that you can fall into and come to expect week after week. And bringing animals into that pattern introduces a whole new level of chaos. Maybe a cat will decide she wants to chase a dog in the pew next to her. Maybe a snake will decide he wants to slither out of his enclosure. Maybe a dog will decide he doesn’t like my sermon and start barking in the middle. Who knows? Bringing our animals to service is fun and joyful and allows us to more fully experience God. And yet, in comparison to what our world tells us to expect from a church service, having animals here may feel a little messy, a little risky, maybe even a little foolish.

It feels right to celebrate the Feast of Saint Francis in a way the world would deem foolish, because that’s how the world viewed St. Francis in his own lifetime.

Born the son of a wealthy cloth merchant, with a carefree childhood and the ability to continue living in luxury, many people thought him foolish when he

stripped naked in front of the Bishop of Assisi and renounced his father and his inheritance. And yet he did it anyway, taking seriously God's call toward poverty and humility.

When a wolf was terrorizing the city of Gubbio, attacking livestock and humans, many people thought him foolish when he decided to approach the wolf. And yet he did it anyway, treating the wolf as an equal and making an oath that kept both the wolf and the city safe.

Born in a time where it was common to be repulsed by and shun lepers, many people thought him foolish when he kissed someone with leprosy. And yet he did it anyway, and in doing so began to break down the systems of shame that kept God's people suffering and apart from one another.

When he came upon a large flock of birds, many people thought him foolish to preach to them as if they could possibly understand. And yet he did it anyway, and the birds listened to his sermon and received his blessing, an act which formed the basis of the animal blessing service we're doing today, 800 years later.

St. Francis lived a life that the world deemed foolish. But if we look at his life, all he did was take Jesus' gospel seriously. He lived his life as a beggar, founded an order based in poverty and service, and dared to invert the world's expectations, embracing lepers and preaching to the common people and calling animals his brothers and sisters because he truly believed that we are all siblings, that all of creation — the poor, the marginalized, the animals, the earth itself — are the beloved children of God. He took seriously

that Jesus called us to love and care for one another. He took seriously that Jesus called us to renounce wealth and follow him. He took seriously our Gospel lesson today, in which Jesus said “do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear.”

Our world today would also call Jesus’ instructions foolish. We live in a world where the rich hoard resources at the expense of the poor, at the expense of creation. We live in a world that treats creation as a resource to exploit, instead of as a sibling to care for. We live in a world that tells us the only way we deserve food is if we sow and reap it, the only way we deserve clothing is if we toil and spin it. And into this world, Jesus speaks a word that seems like foolishness: he says “do not worry.” Into this world, God created animals to be our companions, God created abundance, and God named all of creation good. Into this world Jesus says “look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap and yet your heavenly Father feeds them” and “Consider the lilies of the field; they neither toil nor spin yet even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.”

Into a world that says humans should have dominion over animals, that everything must have economic value, that creation is a commodity, God reminds us that there is enough for all—enough grace, enough mercy, enough love, enough justice, enough food, enough resources, enough. There is enough. Jesus reminds us that God loves the lilies and the birds freely, that God loves each and every animal here today and each and every one of us freely and unconditionally. God reminds us that humans and animals were created to be equally part of God’s family, to be in relationship with one another, to share God’s love with one another.

I never feel as foolish or as connected to God and all of creation as when I'm playing with my dog Maeve. I'm sure everyone here who has a dog is familiar with "the zoomies" which for those who aren't familiar is basically when your dog gets so excited they sprint around uncontrollably. And maybe I'm biased, but Maeve's zoomies are truly unlike any dogs I have ever seen. She has a unique ability to fling herself multiple feet in the air in every direction and when we get to chasing each other, I'm sure it looks to anyone walking by like pure foolishness. But to me, it feels like the Kingdom of God.

Soon you'll all come forward to have your animals blessed. And to bless animals, to speak to birds, to dance with dogs in the backyard—the world may call all of this foolish. But God calls it holy, because in every act of love that reaches beyond ourselves, in every moment we commune with God's creation, we see a glimpse of God's Kingdom breaking into our world.

Today, as we celebrate St. Francis, he reminds us that the gospel will always look a little foolish to the world, because it calls us to love without counting the cost, because it calls us to believe that grace and love are freely given, because it calls us to see all of creation as beloved children of God.

And so this week, may we dare to live like St. Francis—to protect creation fiercely, to invert worldly expectations, to trust in God's abundance. May we look for God in the wagging of tails, in the flutter of wings, and in the goodness of creation. And may we be foolish enough to love the world, to love our animals, to love one another as God does — abundantly, joyfully, and without hesitation. **Amen.**