

Feast of St. Francis
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
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Once more, listen to what 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. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?” // Now, imagine hearing this in disaster-struck areas like Florida, Mexico City, or Puerto Rico. Do Jesus’ words apply when clean water is absent, food sits in shipping containers, and clothing is destroyed?

When we hear Jesus speak, context is important. In today’s reading Jesus was talking to prosperous Galileans. They have access to an abundance of basic necessities – food, water, and clothing. Access is not their issue. So, it would be contextually inaccurate and, indeed, spiritual malpractice to apply these teachings to any context where basic necessities are not present. Jesus is not instructing the homeless to power through their hunger. Jesus is not telling Puerto Ricans to embrace the cliché “don’t worry, be happy.” You see, worry in the moments when destruction, disaster, and desolation grasp our existence is expected, and it is not helpful for you, me, or any follower of Jesus to explain away that kind of worry by our privileged platitudes. So, be careful. Jesus’ instructions were not for them. Rather, his instructions were for most of us here - those with access to clothing, food, and drink.

You see, when Jesus spoke of “worry” in this periscope he’s was not talking about anxiety in disaster or turmoil; rather, he’s was talking about being preoccupied and absorbed by our basic needs. He’s saying that it’s easy for the most stylish of basic needs to become an idol or fetish.

At first read, this teaching can feel vindicating. After all, we don't worship a golden calf, like the Israelites did. We're not pantheists believing our water *is* God. Those thoughts are for primitive cultures, and not for us educated, urban-dwelling Christians. So, we're okay, right?

Well, often the most dangerous idols are the ones we fail to recognize. Like, when we believe our worship service is more about receiving than expressing thanks to God through acts of service. Or when we believe one political party or political candidate will save us. Or when we are engrossed in revering the newest technology, worshiping our individuality, pining for the next promotion, exalting our country's flag, or venerating the superiority of humankind. These are modern forms of idolatry that we struggle with and succumb to each and every day. When you look at it like that, we realize that idol-worship is what we humans do best.

But, why do we slide into idolatry so easily? Are we afraid that God's approach seems illogical and improbable? Do we live in fear because we might have to give up our rights, or because we dread being vulnerable, or perhaps we're anxious that we are too skinny, too fat, too queer, too straight, too white, too dark, too feminine, too masculine, too different, too eccentric, or too much to handle? Yes, to all that, yes. We're terrified by all of it. However, our central fear is attached to the cost of trusting in God's way. Think about it. If we follow Jesus' command not to obsess about the best food, drink, and clothing our life would change. So then, what would brunch look like? Instead of being at the newest, most expensive restaurant, we might be home, around a table, with our friends, sending that saved money to Mexico or Puerto Rico. Or, how would a day of shopping change? Maybe we'd buy sweatshop free clothing instead of the more expensive brand or logo, and then be comfortable with the greater cost without the flashy label? You see, trusting

in God might just change our whole lives, and, do we really want that? Then, what would we do with our time? Where would we look for meaning?

Jesus implores us to look one place: up. Not up at some fictional place where God “lives,” but rather up at the birds in the air. There, soaring through the air are birds with no obsession with flashy clothing, birds with no blogs pointing them to the best food, and birds with no reviews flocking them to the best drinks. There, in the sky, are the birds reminding us that God has provided for their every need. These birds do not search for the newest way to package necessities, but rather these birds recognize that our God has provided, and will continue to provide, our basic needs.

So, what will we do with our time if we stop fixating on food, drink, and clothing? Well, Jesus reminded us to seek first the kingdom of God and its justice. God said, fill your time with justice work - work to care for creation, work to protect refugees and immigrants, work to support the poor and the sick, and work to transform natural destruction into life. We spend this time responding to the provisions God provides not out of fear or obligation, rather out of thanks to God for all we have received. We respond because, in that work, we begin to see the kingdom of God on earth. Or in other words, in our efforts we begin to see God’s justice and peace on earth, we begin to see something that cannot die, we begin to experience everlasting life.

One person who looked to the birds and the lilies as a reminder of this everlasting life was St. Francis of Assisi. Although he was born in Italy to a wealthy clothing merchant, he left this lavish lifestyle giving up everything for the birds, so to speak. As he encountered beggars and the sick, his passion to embody a life of simplicity grew. Instead of fine food, drink, and clothing, he led a simple life so others could simply live. Francis’ best tutor in this way of life was nature. In

nature, he felt God's presence. In the forest, he witnessed God's provisions. Among the birds, he devoted himself to work for God's justice in response to God's love.

So too, on this Sunday, we give thanks for St. Francis' witness and we bless our pets in thanksgiving to God. We pause to remember that our pets are our teachers. With their presence, they help us move outside our narrow-minded desires and pursuits. They encourage us to exercise and play, they become catalysts for new relationships, and they help us appreciate the pleasures of life. The simple pleasures of a warm sunny spot, an open car window, or a mid-day nap.

As we bless our pets today, we are reminded of God's abundant provisions. Their presence encourages us to recognize our idols. Then, with that awareness, we look up at the birds in the air. And as those birds fly off into the distance, we allow them to shift our focus – to shift our focus toward God's justice for, and presence in, all living things. Amen.