

A Sermon for Animal Day

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Luke 12:22-31

This homily was preached in the chapel of the Lutheran School of Theology for the weekly Wednesday Eucharist celebration. The overall format of the worship that day was following the Season of Creation lectionary.

About ten days ago I was standing in the kitchen of our apartment on Woodlawn when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a hummingbird sipping nectar from one of the flowers that Rosanne had planted in boxes on our back balcony. I moved towards the back door for a closer look; the hummingbird saw me and moved in my direction. Time froze for a moment, as I tried to keep perfectly still, while the hummingbird, wings beating fifty times per second, hovered within three feet of my nose. We looked intently at one another for a moment, the hummingbird and I; then she lost interest and flew off to the plants on the other side of the balcony. But what a gift that was, the moment with that extraordinary creature, what I might call a “close encounter of the bird kind.”

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus calls the disciples to another sort of encounter with birds: “Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them.” The language used here is full of meaning: Jesus had just told the parable of the Rich Fool, who had sown and reaped with great success, and who decided to pull down his storehouses and barns in order to build bigger ones. The disciples’ approach to life is to be in contrast to the rich man, but in harmony with the ravens. Jesus says to them: “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body what you will wear.”

“Do not worry.” We must be careful in interpreting this saying of Jesus. We must not take it as an excuse to ignore the reality of billions of our brothers and sisters on the planet for whom “What shall we eat?” and “What shall we wear?” are desperate questions, day in and day out. Yet for most of us gathered here, that is *not* our situation. Most of us gathered here are willing participants in a consumer society that has shown itself to be terrifically efficient at providing a huge range of options in answer to those questions, “What shall we eat?” and “What shall we wear?” – and not only that, but constantly bombards us with a host of *other* questions about which we are to be anxious:

- What shall I eat?
- What shall I wear?
- Where shall I live?
- How shall I make myself attractive to others?

- How shall I find friends and lovers?
- How shall I make people think highly of me?
- How shall I become a member of the right group?
- Even within the right group, how shall I assert my individuality?
- Where will I find satisfying work? Uplifting religion?
- How can I get up-to-the-minute information on every subject that I can possibly imagine?
- How shall I keep myself amused – so that I need never, ever, *ever* be bored?
- How shall I stave off old age?
- How shall I secure my place in this world?

The list goes on and on – and there are near-infinite menus of options for responding to each new question. For this society, to be is to consume. To be free is to choose between commodities. To live responsibly is to keep the system going.

It seems to me that in our Gospel text today, Jesus is telling us: You're even *more* foolish than the Rich Fool! After all, the rich man of Jesus' parable, after a spectacular harvest, said: "Enough! The only problem now is how to store it all! I know: I'll tear down my barns and build bigger ones." You see, the Rich Fool actually reached the point where he could say: Enough is enough! But for the societies that *we* have constructed, there is *never* enough; rather, there is always a *new* set of manufactured, focus-group tested and intensively advertised needs and anxieties that have to be addressed through our power of consumer choice.

It is Jesus, in our Gospel lesson today, who says: "Enough!"

I'm struck by the imperatives in our lesson. First, the negative imperatives: "Do not be anxious" "Don't constantly strive after food, drink and clothing." "Do not keep worrying" – and here St. Luke uses a word from which we can invent the cognate "meteor-ize": Don't get hung up there in the sky like some shooting star, in some dream castle of the ego – or, perhaps better, in some dream shopping mall of the ego! Come back down to earth – where God has promised to take care of you. You do not need to invest your life in an unending quest to somehow justify your existence: that's God's work, and God in Christ has provided all the justification you need. So don't be anxious. Don't squander your energies seeking for things. "Don't be all up in the air."¹

INSTEAD (and here come the positive imperatives): Consider! Consider the ravens, consider the lilies. Consider the hummingbirds, and consider the dodo, and the passenger pigeon, and the ivory-billed woodpecker as well. I find Jesus' word "Consider!" in itself to be a great gift. We live lives in which we are so bombarded by questions and demands, so torn in our multi-tasking, so beset by distractions, so numb before huge menus of choices, that we often don't know what we're thinking. That Jesus says, "Don't be anxious, but consider ..." is a gift. The possibility of considering, of centering and focusing one's attention – it does exist! And Jesus gives some advice as to *where* to center that attention: consider the creation!

Consider the creation and – here’s the other positive imperative – seek the Kingdom. Again, this is good news: our energies, so consumed in seeking to secure our own place in the world (even though it doesn’t work, and the world suffers as a result) – those energies and aspirations have a proper goal: the great reconciliation of earth and heaven, of human beings among themselves, and of the human and non-human creation that is evoked by the mention of the Kingdom or Reign of God.

In my Church History class on Monday evening we were talking a little about the Egyptian desert fathers and mothers, people like Saints Antony and Macarios and Syncletica. While they did not know the kind of consumer society that we have produced, they had a deep understanding that true “consideration” – of God, of the neighbor, of the natural world – was both a gift of God and something that was constantly under attack. In an age before television and the internet, before cell phones and BlackBerries, they were aware that human beings are constantly beset by distractions, including questions such as “What shall I eat?” and “What shall I wear?” as well as “How shall I deal with my sexuality?” and “How shall I deal with boredom?”

They developed a list of the Eight distracting Thoughts: gluttony, fornication, avarice, sadness, anger, the restless boredom they called *acedia*, vainglory, and pride.² (This list later developed in the West into the Seven Deadly Sins, but in the fifth century in the Egyptian desert these are not sins, but rather the ways the demons try to distract would-be disciples from the free and joyful consideration of God, the neighbor, and the creation. Rather than as “deadly sins,” we might think of the Eight Thoughts as a basic checklist for modern advertisers: for a successful advertising campaign, make sure you appeal to some or all of these eight things!)

It’s a great part of the witness of the desert fathers and mothers that it is possible to fight distraction (even in very harsh circumstances, where there is little food or clothing); it is possible to *consider* – the ravens and the lilies, the hummingbirds and the hoopoes. It’s also part of their witness that they were seeking that Kingdom in which the human and the animal world were reconciled. We see it in the iconography. In Western art, St. Antony, the patron saint of domestic animals, is regularly accompanied by a pig. St. Jerome has his lion. St. Paul of Thebes is pictured with the two lions that guarded his body upon his death, and with the raven that regularly brought him food. Recently, I’ve been studying the 14 th century Egyptian saint, Mark of the Monastery of St. Antony: in his icon he is pictured standing in a lush garden, with fruit trees and flowering plants – and among their branches, a beautiful bird, with a pattern of stripes down its neck, looks in the direction of the saint.

Consider the birds.

Seek the reconciled Kingdom.

Thanks be to God, who delivers us from anxiety.

1. Luke Timothy Johnson’s translation of Luke 12:29b in *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina Series 3 (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 200.

2. See the *Praktikos* of Evagrius: Evagrius Ponticus, *The Praktikos & Chapters on Prayer*, trans. by John Eudes Bamberger, Cistercian Studies Series 4 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1981), 16-20.