

## CONSIDER THE LILIES

A Sermon for the Sunday of the annual congregational picnic, August 1, 2010.

Text: Matthew 6:25-33

*“Look at the birds of the air”*

I went to the woods last week. Several of our young people were attending Lutheran Hills camp, and I had the opportunity to serve as Camp Pastor. This summer, fourteen of our children attended church camp!

While I was there, I did a little research. I did not have my usual resources for sermon writing, such as my library or the BibleWorks software and the online concordance. So I tried actually doing what Jesus told us to do today: “Consider the grass.” “Look at the birds.” I even thought about the trees. I looked at the sky. Watched the moon rise. Etc.

And, you know, maybe it’s from lack of practice? But I didn’t hear much. And I didn’t see much. They weren’t telling me anything that special. Just that I was not in Indianapolis any more.

Apparently, nature was not disposed to speak to someone whose mind was possessed by things I need to do, and things others need to do, to make everything right. Your list is not my list; but I’m sure you have one. We joke sometimes about having conversations in which we “solve all the problems in the world,” but yes, we’d like to.

I took it all with me to Brown County, to our church camp. When I stepped out of my cabin each day—in which there were these big black ants—I would notice things like: scaffolding against one cabin whose siding was not complete. The grass was certainly scraggly. Need more gravel on this road. Why is the bell not being rung—is it broken? I was pleased with things that were in good shape (*finally!*); but I was preoccupied with what needs to get done. Way too much.

What in the world was I thinking? All around me, God’s creative goodness was gushing forth upon our planet. God was raising trees, feeding birds, doing his St. Francis thing, and I was monitoring the things that were wrong.

After a day or so I got better. But even then, the *best* thoughts I had when I looked at the beauty around me were evaluative. For example, I thought it was lovely when I watched the moon rise through the branches of the trees, as we sat around a campfire in the middle of the forest. *I liked that.* It pleased me. It was special, unique. I felt happy to be there.

As though it was all about me, and what I like, and not something more. I was not meditating very well, if all my thoughts centered on my being pleased. Who am I, to be a critic of creation? God yelled at Job once: “Where were you . . . when I laid the foundations of the earth?” Is this really the most profound thought we can have, when we see the grandeur of creation? That we like it? That it meets *our* high standards for perfection? That it would make a good desktop background?

Of course, why shouldn't we look at nature that way? Isn't that how we look at everything? "I don't know much about x (whatever)," we say, "but I know what I like!" Isn't one of the most important facts about other people whether we like them or not?

Yet Jesus says "Do *not* judge. Stop it!" "For you yourself will be weighed on the same scale you use to judge others."

And does it make it any better if we are just as hard on ourselves? Why should we do that? If God forgives what is wrong with us, and still loves us, why can't we?

I think I'm ready to propose a thesis: What Jesus is getting at in today's Gospel; and the reason we need to stop what we're doing and watch the birds, and maybe have church outdoors once in a while, is this:

*Don't miss God's love for you. See the grace and favor of God at work in the world, in animals, in the grass of the field, in the meal before you, in other people, in your own life, in yourself. Don't be superficial. Don't be slaves to the surface of things, the data. And above all, don't override God's judgment.*

Our beautiful planet is full of trouble caused by people who have arrogated to themselves the right to be pleased. They will be pleased no matter what trouble they cause others in the process. Because their being pleased is the most important thing they know. They dine sumptuously while Lazarus lies at the gate, because they possess no yardstick for their existence except that they be pleased.

Well, they get a great comeuppance with Jesus.

He harshly condemns their self-infatuation. They have detached themselves from the love of God. They don't care about that any more. They even perform their pious acts in order to impress other people. They want to take the speck out of someone else's eye, when they have a log in their own! They condemn others, yet they themselves are guilty. They are quick to pick up a stone and throw it at someone else. St. Paul says to them, "Who are you to judge?"

If and when we are like that, Jesus promises that through the renewal of our minds, through coming to love God again and letting God be God, we can change. We can stop being the problem with the world and start being God's answer. We can become salt of the earth. We can be light. We will have to stop living just to be pleased, though, and start living to please God. Then, we can have life that is full and free. We can enjoy the deep pleasures of the world no longer as squatters or renters but as owners, for we will inherit the earth.

But perhaps I should not be so hard on myself for being slow to see God when I watched the birds. After all, it says here in Matthew 6, God "is secret." When Jesus talks about praying, he says not to do it in public. Do it in private, and God who "*is in secret*" will "*see in secret.*" Do your alms that way, too. The way God does. Don't let your right hand know what your left hand is doing. And God who "*is in secret*" will "*see in secret.*" And when you fast, pretend you're not, so nobody can tell. And God who "*is in secret*" will "*see in secret.*"

God “is in secret.” God “sees in secret.” God gives in secret. God works in secret. So, isn’t God’s love, too, a secret?

When Jesus sounds vexed, and that is a lot of the time, often it is for just this—that we don’t see God’s love and mercy, so we live superficially. For the moment. For what we can see. For what we already have.

But listen to Psalm 104:

O Lord, how manifold are your works!  
In wisdom you have made them all;  
The earth is full of your creatures.  
These all *look to you* to give them their food in due season;  
When you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled  
with good things.

Sometimes Jesus told us to look at children to learn how to have faith. But here in Matthew, he tells us to learn faith from animals! And grass! *They* look to God to give them their food! They understand what James says, that “Every good gift comes down from above, from the Father of lights.”

Well, here is a sacrament which should help. We are gathered this morning to enjoy two meals: Communion, and a picnic. The first should help us with the second. When we take Communion, we see and hear and taste that God has given himself in Christ, not for people who see everything the right way but for people whose anxieties tend to crowd out our appreciation of the Creator. We have sinned by not recognizing what God has done for us; and God has forgiven us. As we are fed the explicit and precious gift of a self-giving God, we give thanks. Not only for his Son, our Lord Jesus, but also for this picnic, the hamburgers, the jell-o (I hope there is some), the shelter, the Dulcimer Society, our friends who are also sitting on these uncomfortable seats, the grass around us, the sky above, for all things bright and beautiful. We see, and we give thanks for, the love of God, which surrounds us all our lives. We look to God to give us—and all his children—our food in due season. Amen.