

**Matthew 12:1-8**  
**June 2, 2024**  
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Some of us more experienced folks remember the pre-Google times. We remember the days of asking our parents how to spell a word only to be told to look it up in the dictionary. I remember being so frustrated...how do you look it up if you can't spell it? The age of Google has changed us in many ways. We have access to a lot more information now. This week, a member of the congregation who wasn't feeling well, and was "drowning in her own drainage," Googled her symptoms and was knee-deep in articles about tonsil stones and what to do about them before she remembered she doesn't have tonsils. We laugh, but we all do it (we just usually remember when we've had key body parts removed). The physician I saw in Illinois was so accustomed to me Googling my symptoms before coming to see him, he would ask me what Google's diagnosis was. It was almost always a life-threatening tumor. With all of those close calls, I am lucky to be alive at this point.

In some ways, having access to all that information hasn't helped us. Certainly, walking into every doctor's appointment, sure death is imminent, is not helpful. But also, having so much information just a few keystrokes away has discouraged us from wondering about or pondering anything. Human beings are naturally curious about the creatures with whom we share this planet, but we don't have to wonder about them or use our imaginations much anymore. The hummingbirds in our backyard don't hold the mystery they used to. We don't have to watch them for hours to learn about their habits. We don't have to debate what kind of hummingbird that is at the feeder. All we need to do is type "hummingbird habits" or "hummingbird images" into the search bar and we have everything we ever wanted to know about hummingbirds right there in front of us. We could know all about them instantly without stepping outside. And I am not sure this is an altogether good thing.

Long before the internet, dictionaries, encyclopedias, and TV, when our ancestors saw a dog yawn and wondered why they do that, they observed dogs and waited for them to yawn. Then, after watching dogs yawn hundreds of times, the observer might conclude that dogs yawn when they are tired, hungry, scared, bored, or anxious. In medieval times, these observations and their conclusions based on observations were collected in bestiaries. Bestiaries are illustrated manuscripts that describe various creatures and their habits.

The common belief was that all the beasts and birds and bugs had something to teach us if only we would pay attention. The descriptions and illustrations in the bestiaries usually included some type of moral lesson that was based on observation or imagination...sometimes both. Medieval Christians understood every element of the world as a manifestation of God, and so bestiaries largely focused on each creature's representation within the Christian narrative. Bestiaries were even sometimes included in Psalters and prayer books.

Having the benefit of hundreds of years of observation and scientific research, we might be tempted to declare bestiaries worthless at this point. We've come a long way when it comes to understanding the world around us. Google will tell us why dogs yawn and what hummingbird nests really look like. But before we discount bestiaries, we should appreciate the attention these early observers paid to the creatures with whom we share this planet, even if the conclusions they drew turned out to be incorrect. And while we are appreciating, as followers of Jesus, it is also worthwhile to try to understand the impact these early sources have had and continue to have on our Christianity.

And this brings us to the pelican. Pelicans are huge and heavy waterbirds. Unlike our ancestors who didn't have the benefit of National Geographic, we know "There are more than half a dozen species of pelicans, but all of them have the famous throat pouch for which the birds are best known. These large birds use their elastic pouches to catch fish... Pelicans do not store fish in their pouch, but simply use it to catch them and then tip it back to drain out water and swallow the fish immediately. The American white pelican can hold some 3 gallons of water in its bill. Young pelicans feed by sticking their bills into their parents' throats to retrieve food...They are social birds and typically travel in flocks, often strung out in a line. They also breed in groups called colonies, which typically gather on islands."<sup>1</sup> Some people think pelicans are ugly. I happen to think they are cool. They are incredibly graceful when they fly and have a prehistoric look, which I enjoy.

The pelican, or a bird like a pelican, is mentioned several times in the Hebrew Bible, although in the New Revised Standard Version, the Hebrew has been translated as "desert owl." Aside from these scriptural references to the pelican, the Christian tradition has embraced symbolism rooted in how the pelican was represented in bestiaries. This symbolism is expressed in a hymn composed by 13th-century Italian priest, Thomas Aquinas. It was used as part of communion liturgy, specifically after drinking from the cup. The hymn included these lyrics, "O loving Pelican! O Jesu Lord! Unclean I am but cleanse me in Thy Blood; Of which a single drop, for sinners spilt, Can purge the entire world from all its guilt." Catchy, huh?

Of course, we are accustomed to talking about Jesus as the Prince of Peace, Light of the World, or the Good Shepherd, but Jesus as a pelican?

In her book, *Consider the Birds*, Debbie Blue writes about the information on pelicans included in ancient bestiaries. It is a story of devoted mothers who sacrifice themselves (piercing their own breasts) to feed their babies with their blood.<sup>2</sup> This image of the pelican and her piety is everywhere in ancient Christian iconography....jewelry, stained glass windows, and today even in tattoos.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/birds/facts/pelicans>, accessed 5/31/24.

<sup>2</sup> Blue Debbie, *Consider the Birds: A Provocative Guide to Birds of the Bible*, (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 2013), 26.

Here's the thing, though. Pelicans don't do that. They do not wound themselves to feed bloodthirsty babies. Who knows what the ancient observers saw that caused their imaginations to conjure up this story? Perhaps someone observed the species of pelican with pouches that, in the spring, turn a reddish color and they mistook that for blood. Perhaps that fueled the story or maybe medieval Christian thinkers just needed to connect the pelican to a moral lesson and sacrifice was high on the list of virtues. It isn't hard to see the parallels between the traditional Christian teaching of Jesus' activity on the cross and the imagined story of a mother who willingly hurts herself for her babies. Jesus' sacrifice...a mother's sacrifice.

Sacrifice is something we value...to the point that we have elevated it and, in some respects, made it the gold standard of faithfulness. Whether it is Jesus' sacrifice or the sacrifices parents make for their children or soldiers who make tremendous sacrifices for their country, sacrifice is highly honorable. This isn't a new thing or even a Christian thing. Human beings have been offering crops, animals, and even children as sacrifices to their gods for thousands of years. Why? Because they believed the gods required it. Their understanding of things like earthquakes, famines, and floods was that the gods were ticked off and the only way to appease them was to give them something. Their sacrifices made them feel like they had checked all the boxes; it made them feel safe.

Sacrifices kept the status quo the status quo. Sacrifices kept things peaceful...until they didn't. And when they didn't, human beings sacrificed more. The relationship between the gods and the people was very much transactional. The gods received their sacrifices and in exchange the ground was fertile, the livestock thrived, they had babies, etc. And when bad things happened, it was because the gods wanted more. We like to think we are smarter and better than our ancestors. We know about weather patterns and biology. We know that we don't need to bribe God to fix them. Nevertheless, the sacrificial system lives on, even within Christianity, even though our sacred text tells us that the God we serve does not desire sacrifice.

And that is what Jesus reminds us of in Matthew 12:1-8.

At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. <sup>2</sup>When the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, "Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath." <sup>3</sup>He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? <sup>4</sup>How he entered the house of God, and they ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests? <sup>5</sup>Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and yet are guiltless? <sup>6</sup>I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. <sup>7</sup>But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. <sup>8</sup>For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath."

At this point in Jesus' ministry, some of the religious leaders were deeply suspicious and afraid of Jesus and his message. They were watching him and his followers as they walked through the fields on the Sabbath. There are rules about what the faithful can and cannot do on the Sabbath, which is supposed to be about rest. The act of plucking the heads of grain to eat violated Sabbath law and the Pharisees jumped on it. Not because the Pharisees were bad people, but because their job was to protect the faith and its tradition. Jesus, who knew a little something about the Hebrew Bible, answered their concern with two examples from their sacred texts of Sabbath law being set aside for legitimate reasons.

Jesus' point wasn't that laws are nonsense and shouldn't be followed. His point was that, according to the Torah, the Sabbath was God's gift to the people. God did not intend for people who were hungry to go hungry on the Sabbath. God did not intend that if someone needed help, they should not be helped on the Sabbath. Jesus reminded the Pharisees of the words of the prophet Hosea, "God desires mercy and not sacrifice." The Sabbath was given to remind God's people that we were not created only to work. Observing the Sabbath helps God's people prioritize family and relationships. Sabbath is to be a gift, not a sacrifice.

We human beings have this idea that something must die or hurt or suffer for something else to live or be made whole. Blue refers to this idea as "the father of all lies."<sup>3</sup> We think everything is either/or. For human beings to live fully, the planet must suffer, and creatures must die. Sacrifices must be made.

For the world to live in peace, we must inflict violence on our enemies. Sacrifices must be made. For humans to live fully in the presence of God, Jesus had to die. Sacrifices must be made.

And yet, our sacred texts tell us that God doesn't want sacrifice. It turns out, it is only human beings who think these sacrifices must be made. God on the other hand is a god of life and love, not death and suffering.

We've sacrificed rainforests, water sources, sacred land, too many species to count, ozone, and glaciers---thinking that was the way to living life fully. We sacrifice human life all the time and we justify it with the Second Amendment or bad theology. Our children doing active shooter drills is a sacrifice we will make. It turns out, we are willing to sacrifice a lot more than that on the altar of the Second Amendment. June is Pride Month, so it is a good time to remember that every day in Oklahoma, the anti-LGBTQIA+ laws on the books sacrifice people God loves, people we love, especially our trans neighbors and LGBTQIA+ youth. We have to do better. Sacrificing life leads nowhere but death. And let's not forget, that the people with money and power decide who or what is sacrificed, just like they did 2000 years ago.

Blue writes, "It's hard to imagine a world without sacrifice, without something having to die in order for something else to live. It is outside any economy we have ever known. But might it be worth imagining: some crazy/beautiful flourishing of life and

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<sup>3</sup> Blue, 32.

more life---eternal life---God giving with abandon.”<sup>4</sup> What if we tried harder to understand and live into Hosea’s words that were so hard for the Pharisees to understand? God desires mercy and not sacrifice.

How would life be different if we rejected the sacrificial system which truthfully has never served us anyway? What if we taught our children that life is about love and not sacrifice? How many of us have heard our parents say that they sacrificed everything for their children? What if we stopped telling kids that? What message does that send? It sounds very transactional. I sacrificed all of this for you...the least you can do is (fill in the blank). I am a parent...here’s my truth, I didn’t sacrifice one single thing for my children. I just loved them. The money I spent, the sportsball I watched, the Harry Potter books I read, the tears I’ve shed, none of it was a sacrifice, it was all love. I did not suffer for them. I loved them. And isn’t that a better message to send our children or our partners or our friends? Everything we do, we do for love. Loving people is not a sacrifice. It is a gift.

I think one of the reasons the Church clings to this sacrificial rhetoric and doctrine is that the Church benefits from people feeling like sacrifice is what being faithful is...I mean, Jesus gave it all, right? The world indulges, but good Christians sacrifice. We tell people to give sacrificially. What does that even mean? Give until you are miserable? Give until you suffer? Give up that Starbucks coffee. Give up every minute of your free time. Making people miserable is not a good way to increase giving or help people live into who they were created to be. Making people feel guilty if they aren’t suffering is a good way to have a whole bunch of people acting like disgruntled pelicans in the congregation, though. Wouldn’t you rather give your time and your resources to something you love than something that just makes you feel bad?

Jesus did not live to teach us how to sacrifice. He lived to teach us how to love. We are not here to sacrifice. We are here to love. Maybe paying attention to the planet and the creatures we share it with, maybe paying attention to our neighbors’ needs, maybe these are not sacrifices. Paying attention to the world around us is not putting anything to death...it’s loving, it is life-giving. Again, sacrificing life leads to death, not more life. And loving people makes us better lovers. So, let’s do that. Let’s love this planet and its creatures, including each other, bigger and wider. That is the way of life. That is the way of God. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Blue, 35.