

**Consider the Birds: the Pelican**

Matthew 9:9-13

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There was no pelican in that story. You didn't miss it. It's not there. There's actually not a single pelican in the entire bible, which might make you wonder: why are we talking about pelicans? It's not in the bible, but the pelican is one of the most dominant images for Jesus throughout history. No lesser a theologian than Thomas Aquinas wrote a hymn that includes the lines, "O loving Pelican! O Jesu Lord!" No lesser writers than Dante and Shakespeare used the phrase and image, "Jesus our Pelican." It's all over Christian art and graces the stained glass windows in many a church, including our own. It's in the Sower's Chapel, tucked into the top corner of the Prodigal Son window.

For hundreds of years, a pelican was one of the most ubiquitous images for Christ. It started in the Middle Ages. Medieval Christians had books called bestiaries, that listed all kinds of animals and their spiritual meanings. People carried them around for personal contemplation. Wild creatures, they figured, had something to teach those who were faithfully paying attention. The most pure and loving animal listed in the bestiaries was the pelican. The books always showed mother pelicans piercing their own side to feed their young — giving away their own lives, so to speak. But the thing is, pelicans don't do that. They never have. There is no consensus around where the idea came from, but it's wrong.<sup>1</sup>

Wherever the idea came from, though, medieval Christians believed pelicans sacrificed themselves in order to feed their children. And because of this belief, some of the old bestiaries took it a step further, including a

story in which the pelican lovingly raises her children, but when the children are grown, they rebel and lash out. The mother pelican strikes back and kills them, but three days later pierces her own side again, this time laying over her perished children, shedding her blood over them, until they are restored to life. I promise you I am not making this up. It sounds like it, I know, so much so that it's tempting to just shake our heads and dismiss it all, giving thanks that we are so much smarter, than our ancestors in the faith. That, of course, would reek of arrogance, and the truth is, when Christians centuries from now look back on us, I suspect there will be plenty of things that cause them to shake their heads with a similar sort of bewilderment.

The fascinating thing about all this, though, is that while we don't know what to make of this story when it's about birds, we tend to accept it when it's about God, don't we? God, like a mother pelican, loves us. But humanity, like the baby pelicans, rebels, and there is death and destruction and violence and pain, and it takes an enormous sacrifice to save us. The pelican sacrifices her own life. God sacrifices God's own son, God's own self.

The story about pelicans, we cast it aside because we know it's ridiculous. But what about when the same story is about God? Is it true? Is it helpful? Is it faithful?

God loves us. We mess up. God grieves our sinfulness, and in order to make things right again, someone has to pay the price. We can't possibly pay enough, so God sacrifices Jesus. Just like the pelicans. Because there has to be a

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<sup>1</sup> The information about pelicans throughout this sermon comes from Debbie Blue's book, *Consider the Birds*.

serious intervention. The scales have to be rebalanced.

That's the story many Christians live by. Theologians over the years have developed a variety of atonement theories, all of them oriented around the idea that Jesus dies on the cross to save us from our sin. It's not the only story Christians hold onto about how we are reconciled to God and one another, but it is the predominant one, especially in the West. It's certainly the understanding I grew up with, and I'm guess the same is true for many or even most of you, too. The idea that we had become so bad something terribly bad had to happen to Jesus in order for anything good to ever emerge from us or for us again. Especially as a kid, I wondered about this. Am I really that bad? So bad that someone else had to die? How does that help?

To be honest, no one ever had a good answer for me. I'm not sure I would have a satisfactory answer even now. Why does Jesus have to die for my mistakes? Why does the pelican have to sacrifice herself? Why does someone always have to pay? Does that even work?

Hal Taussig, who taught New Testament at Union Seminary in NYC, always maintained that the hardest thing about reading the Bible is actually reading it. We tend to assume we know what it says, so we don't read it to find out what happens next. We already know the arc of the story. So sometimes we look past things that should seem strange.

In today's passage, for example, and it's surrounding verses, Jesus walks around offering forgiveness, healing, and dinner invitations to everyone he sees. But did you notice? No one asks for forgiveness. No one admits to any wrong-doing. And some of them had done some genuinely bad things. Tax collectors collaborated with the empire, and often actively harmed people, amassing their own wealth in the process. But Jesus meets one and his only response is to suggest a dinner party. Bread is

broken, wine is poured, and no lectures take place. No accounting or reckoning. Jesus just eats dinner, as if it's just any other normal evening meal.

In the gospel of Matthew, there's only one bible verse that Jesus quotes twice. It's from the book of Hosea, and it's what Jesus says to the Pharisees at the end of today's reading: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice," he says. "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." He says this to the Pharisees. The Pharisees have a bad reputation, but most of them were good citizens who knew that it wasn't entirely okay to be a tax collector, and it wasn't entirely okay to hang out with them and act like everything was fine, as if what they did during the day didn't matter when they came home at night. The Pharisees figured there ought to be some accountability. Someone ought to pay for the wrong they've done. That's what's fair, and that what kept the world working.

The idea of sacrifice was not a new one. In prehistoric times, even, people offered the gods their first crop or their best animal, because they believed the gods required it. Sacrifices were made so the gods would not be angry, and bring about famine or flood, or so the gods would be happy, and make the land to flourish. This helped people feel safe and secure. The world has always been full of challenge and threat. So people negotiated with the gods to make it less scary, to suggest that some semblance of control was possible, to make it seem like life really could be fair, if we just played our cards right. That idea, in some form or another, has kept humanity going for a long time.

It's little surprise, then, that the idea of sacrifice finds itself at the center of so much of our theology. But Jesus says, I desire mercy. Not sacrifice. Atonement theology says God sacrificed Jesus in order to make things right again between God and humanity. But if Jesus is what God looks like walking around, it doesn't seem like anyone needs to die in order

for any other life to flourish, in order for anyone to find favor with God. In today's text and all throughout the gospel, when confronted with the worst of us, Jesus, the incarnate son of God, consistently says, "You are forgiven. And while you're at it, scoot over. Make some room, share the bread, and for heaven's sake, pass the wine."

If I am being honest with you, I am more instinctively a Pharisee. I'm an oldest child. Rules and guidelines and boundaries — I'm pretty good with all that. They either tell me exactly what I have to work with, or, when appropriate, they allow me to be very intentional about when and how I step outside the lines. Jesus doesn't seem very concerned with that sort of structure or system. He just wants to make sure everyone has enough to eat.

A friend of mine went away on a retreat. When she came back, she wrote to a few people saying, "It turns out that the God that I say I believe in, and the God I actually believe in aren't the same. I profess faith in a God who is infinitely generous, merciful, loving, kind, and gentle. I say I believe in that. But really I just believe in that for other people. When I drop my guard and imagine myself in God's presence, the God I see is rigid, demanding, and strict, holding me to the same sort of expectations I hold myself." She said, "It turns out I believe in one God for other people, and another God for myself."

My friend is just the most recent one to say it. You'd be surprised how often I hear this exact thing. Or maybe you wouldn't be surprised at all. "I desire mercy, not sacrifice."

Is it possible that we've gotten it wrong? The pelican, God, the way we believe the world is pretty strict, the idea that someone has to pay the price? Is it possible there are other ways of understanding God, and the world, and how we're reconciled all together again? Maybe the cross wasn't God's demand, but just a terrible consequence of human violence.

What if God didn't require Jesus to die in order to set things right? What if Jesus just came and loved, truly, powerfully, mercifully, refusing to hold anything back? Maybe what happens on the cross isn't cosmic sacrifice, but divide solidarity, God wanting to be with us in absolutely everything we experience, even death. Maybe it isn't judgement and demand that puts Jesus on the cross, but mercy so unending it embraces all that we are, including the worst.

If scripture is any indication, and we trust it is in fact deeply reliable, Jesus seems to think that if you drink deep enough from the well of mercy, what you find is living water and eternal life. I believe this: it's not so much God's sacrifice that saves us so much as it is God's mercy. And I woke up thinking of something this morning I haven't been able to shake (so once again you get a little extra that didn't make it online). I woke up wondering how different things might be if over decades and centuries the theology of one of the world's most powerful religions didn't center around the necessary sacrifice of a man with brown skin.

To be clear — I am not questioning the saving power of Jesus' death. I am wondering, though, in my own life, if we might benefit from questioning the way we've traditionally framed it. Because do you know how pelicans actually feed their young? They soar over waves, in beautiful, stunning lines. They are gorgeous when they fly. They dip down into the water, and when they come up, they have fish gathered in their enormous beaks. Pelicans have the largest beak of any bird, with a neck pouch that holds a tremendous amount. The pelicans go back to their nests, and the baby pelicans stick their whole heads in the parents' necks. It sounds as strange as the earlier story, I know, but this one has the luxury of being true, and the parents don't seem to mind. It's not a sacrifice for them to feed their babies this way. It doesn't hurt them at all. It's the way they

were made, the way God created them.

Mercy, not sacrifice. Jesus, our pelican. What if we're like that, too? With our own tremendous capacity for mercy? What if this is actually how God always intended for the world to work? What if there really is mercy far wider, and deeper, and more powerful than we have ever tapped into? What if that kind of mercy is what we're made for? Not to pierce our own side and give until there's nothing left. And not to expect that from anyone else, either. But rather to receive God's mercy, and extend God's mercy. As far as any eye can see far. As far as any ear can hear. As far as any bird can soar.