

## **“FOR THE BIRDS” ©**

Sermon Notes for The Rev. Joyce Kelly

Supply Minister of Worship and Pastoral Care

Bloor Street United Church

FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST - May 30, 2010

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*Readings:* Based on Job 12: 7-9 and Matthew 6: 24-27

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This sermon is “For the Birds.”

Wherever Bruce and I went these past three weeks of holidays – Canterbury, Brugges, Stockholm, St. Petersburg, Tallinn - there they were - seagulls in our ship’s wake, pecking pigeons clustered on sidewalks, and in Copenhagen, particularly aggressive (and very large) magpies that scared away (squawked away) little dogs - and their walkers.

Birds: Spring migration is sprinkling Toronto with blessing every day, if we stop and listen and look. Birdwatchers wait where these incredible creatures find rest after their long flight north - High Park, Leslie Street Spit; some are off to birders’ paradise, Point Pelee, Canada’s most southern point.

One early spring morning 13 years ago, Bruce and I arrived at our little cottage on Lake Joseph for the last time. In the spring stillness, we heard odd noises coming from the boathouse. Quietly down the path to the dock, there before us was a sight we’ll never forget. At least a dozen loons doing a magical dance - skirting across the water 1, 2, 3 at a time, trilling cries in harmony and in discord that only a loon knows. And they didn’t stop when we arrived, but gave us the privilege of seeing this private spring ritual for quite a while.

And as we left that day, a great blue heron (who nested there every year) was standing at the side of the lane as we rounded the first of many bends that would take us back to the road. This tall beaked harbinger of God’s Grace flew on down the road ahead of us, a few meters at a time, stopping at the side of the road, watching us, until we were

almost beside her. Then off she's go, again and again, leading us out the road – saying good-bye, I guess.

## I

Birds: In the beginning, God says, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly across the dome of the sky." God sees (says Genesis) that this, like all that had been created before, is good, and for the first time (it says) God blesses creation, "Be fruitful, fill the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth." Not until God's next 'day' do we human creatures arrive, made (it says) in the image of God. Yes, we are blessed, too, (second to be blessed). And then we are charged to name and care for God's created world – including first-blessed creatures, birds.

A Sufi poem, *The Conference of the Birds*, says that all religion leads to divine truth, which always lies beyond any or all religion. The birds' pilgrimage (the Conference) is a quest - in which the 'self' must merge with God - through integration with one's own divine nature. Genesis calls it, "Made in the image of God."

The Phoenix bird, in Greek and Egyptian mythology, lives in Arabia, near a cool well. Every morning at dawn, the sun god in his rising stops his chariot to listen to the bird sing while it bathes there. Only one phoenix exists at a time, and when it feels its time is spent and death is near (every 500 to 1,461 years) it builds a nest of aromatic wood, sets it afire, and allows the flames to consume it. A new phoenix rises from the pyre, embalms the ashes of its predecessor in myrrh (the same Magi's gift to Jesus, same ointment women brought to the tomb), and the newborn Phoenix flies to Heliopolis, the "city of the sun," and lays the egg on the altar of the sun god. Life, death, resurrection, life after death!

In Jewish mysticism, the Kabbal says that when God was creating the world, something got broken. Vessels intended to hold God's glory were shattered, and the world was strewn with holy shards. So every person has a sacred task to gather up divine sparks wherever we find them, to repair the world. Watch the birds; they will lead you to holy things, and the broken puzzle will someday be whole again.

Wherever we find them, birds touch our souls and draw us upward and outward, and inward to that God-image in all of us.

Jesus says, "Look at the birds of the air. They trust God to feed them."

A Poet says, "Birds sing, not because they must, but because they *are*."

## II

Birds, closest living relatives of dinosaurs, had been around for over 150 million years (a long creation 'day'), before humans appeared on the scene. Birds already had a life of their own.

In Australia, friends gave us a rare sight - the nest of a Bowerbird, so named for its unique nest, its Bower. The male bird clears a large circle in the grass (about 10 feet round.) Then he piles twigs in the center, like an altar, setting the stage for a large elaborate colourful structure that he will build - all to attract a female! Bit by bit, he flies in a glorious collection of carefully chosen objects, most bright blue - bits of glass, plastic, flowers, shells, feathers, stones, berries. He spends hours sorting and arranging - until he feels that every one is in the perfect place. If a visitor (feathered or not) moves one while he's away, he'll put it back exactly where it was. At mating time, female bowerbirds go from bower to bower, carefully inspecting every detail, while the proud builder of that love-nest dances an elaborate mating ritual. Often, several females select the same mate, leaving others without. Is that what Charles Darwin called 'natural selection'?

Humans came to self-awareness surrounded by birds, so it took eons for birds to fear us. Darwin, not quite 200 years ago (since he turned 200 only last year) said, "Birds were so trusting they could have been knocked off their nests with a stick" - no doubt, our first fast food.

In Toronto, every night, 1000s of birds crash into windows of lit office towers. Every morning, volunteers pick them up, lots from Lights Out Toronto, and from FLAP (Fatal Light Awareness Program). For some birds, there's hope of recovery, for most, there's burial.

John James Audubon spent most of his life naming and cataloguing birds - some exotic, some common, every one beautiful.

He wrote about riding all day under a sky filled with migrating wild pigeons (now extinct); he figured that a billion had flown past by nightfall. When he died in 1851, many birds had still not been named. Adam is still naming God's creatures, also trying to capture them – like on film.

Who can think of the “Birdman of Alcatraz” without seeing Bert Lancaster feeding that little sparrow through prison bars?

Remember Jacques Perrin's “Winged Migration”? He follows dozens of birds - some more than 2000 miles. Within minutes, he has us flying with them, mesmerized – birds large, small, elegant, comical, faces determined, wings relentless, following an inner sense that urges them to fly hundreds (even 1000s) of miles, to fulfill their innate life's calling.

Birds evoke what is urban in us, and what is wild. They knit these things together in our soul and lift us into new possibilities!

### III

Jesus says, “Look at the birds of the air. Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life?” Jesus points us toward the birds of the air, not just to get our minds off our worries, but so we may catch a glimpse of the larger purposes of God.

Five years ago, days after our 17-year-old grandson Patrick died in a tragic toboggan accident, some strange birds were acting in strange ways. Birds we'd not seen before (or since) came to the big windows of Patrick's home in the country, and hung upside down from the top of the window, craning their necks to look inside, catching the attention of us, his family, from an angle that was totally different, presenting things/life to us in a new way.

Birds are all around us, wherever we live, but they also inhabit an alternate universe. Jonathan Livingston Seagulls fly ‘with’ and ‘above’ us, and spark our highest aspirations, and connect us with heaven.

Birds have no boundaries. If you watch a simple feeder in your garden, or wander the world with camera and notebook, you're onto a seductive truth: paying attention to birds is being mindful of Life itself. Observant novelist Henry James, says, "Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost."

Emily Dickinson (1830 Amherst, Mass) says:

*A bird came down the walk -*

*He did not know I saw -*

*He bit an angle-worm in halves*

*and ate the fellow, raw.*

*And then he drank a dew*

*from a convenient grass,*

*and then hopped sidewise to the wall*

*to let a beetle pass ...*

*Some keep the Sabbath going to Church -*

*I keep it, staying at home -*

*with a bobolink for a chorister -*

*and an orchard, for a dome -*

*Some keep the Sabbath in surplice -*

*I just wear my wings -*

*and instead of tolling the bell, for church,*

*our little Sexton - sings.*

*God preaches, a noted Clergyman-*

*and the sermon is never long,*

*so instead of getting to Heaven, at last -*

*I'm going, all along.*

#### IV

Three years ago, my first winter as minister at a nondenominational Chapel on Captiva Island, Florida, a pair of Great Horned Owls (magnificent stately birds) nested in the tall Australian pine in the churchyard. He presided on Sunday mornings from the open branch behind the Chapel, visible to the hundreds who sat out under the palm trees for worship. She kept watch from another tree by day. Together, they hunted in the cemetery by night - the soft hoo-hoo of the male answered (in its final vibrations) by his mate. Much photographed, a parade of hundreds every day, on this island of celebrities, they were the greatest.

When I first announced to the congregation that a pair of Great Horned Owls had taken up residence in the old osprey nest, there was a lovely "Ahhh."

On the Sunday morning when I said there were babies, "Ohhh" came from the heart of the congregation.

A few weeks later, when I had to announce that the two half-grown baby owls had succumbed to a hawk attack in the night, AUGH came from a deep place of anguish.

Birds bring back to us an aspect of ourselves - for we are all part of nature. They evoke our innate sense of pleasure, as well as our innate sense of pain - for the harsh reality of nature. Big fish eat little fish, strong-winged red-shouldered hawks kill little owls - even 20" tall babies who've not yet developed flight feathers. But then, when they choose, Great Horned Owls take over osprey nests, babies at home, or not.

To the day that we left Captiva last spring, people were still looking up into that old tree, hoping. One day, I saw Papa Owl sitting on his old familiar branch high in the pine tree, just looking around. Maybe he was hoping, too, like Emily Dickenson: Hope is a thing with feathers on. Hope - that, this time (as far as our little lives, our little circumstances, can grasp) the cycle of nature will be kind!

So fly high down all your days. Trust the holy instinct with which God has blessed you - your whole migration through. Attacks will come at you, just as they did at Job - illness, death, despair, lostness. But, says Jesus, "Ask the birds of the air; they will tell you." God holds the life of every creature in holy reverence, so gather up all the divine sparks you can find (they're scattered everywhere) that you - and this world - may be whole again. Instead of getting to Heaven at last - you'll be going all along.

One more story, this one from Jane Goodall.

On the first of May, all the birds get together for a competition, to see who can fly the highest. They come from all around, from bars and treetops, from Don Valley ravine, your back yard, to see who can reach the highest of heights and win the Great Prize.

"I will fly the highest," says Swallow, "for my wings are finely shaped."

"No, it will be me," says Sparrow Hawk, "for I am quick and strong."

Of course, it is Eagle who boasts the most, showing off his impressive wingspan and powerful feathers. "I will fly the highest. The contest will be won as soon as I take flight."

While Eagle is standing there boasting and preening, lovely little Jenny Wren gathers up her three small children and lifts them up one by one, onto Eagle's enormous back. Then she carefully climbs on herself. Eagle, terribly puffed with pride in the sure win doesn't notice at all.

Hen (whose spirit remembers the flight for which she was made, but who, now, can't get over the barnyard fence) starts off the competition with a loud cluck.

The birds take wing and fill the sky. Eagle climbs steadily higher and higher, his mighty wings swooshing while Jenny Wren keeps her children still and quiet by softly singing to them.

Up and up Eagle climbs, until he can't fly any higher. He calls down, "I win; I win. I have flown the highest."

It is then that Jenny Wren gently slides off Eagle's back, her children with her, not the least bit tired. She flies together with them, higher and higher, glorying in the great sky.

The little ones twitter excitedly to one another, "We've won, we've won!"

Unassuming little Jenny Wren says to their astonishment, "Let's keep it to ourselves, shall we?"

"But mother, we so want to collect the Prize," says the youngest.

Jenny Wren simply smiles at each of her children as they circle round her on the updrafts of the great sky. She says, "Look down. Look around. The world is yours and this flight together is the Prize." Amen