

*Hummingbirds Just Aren't All That Faithful...*

Dr. Bob Hawkins

Radar has been locked on our two resident hummingbirds for the last several weeks. The feeders haven't been frequented as much with autumn's arrival. I assume that whatever clicks in those bird brains will send them South rather soon, also hoping that their hard-wired instincts will schedule their departure sometime after Hurricane Ian has moved on. Hummingbird authorities suggest that whatever triggers their departure is predicated on changes in weather, temperature, and food. Yet there are the few hearty hummingbirds who choose to remain in South Carolina; the ones in our yard don't belong to that group.

The irascible little hummers – always a pair - have been a welcomed addition to the local fauna for a good number of years. Yet the same bird scholars assure us that while hummingbirds do, in fact, tend to return to the same yard, the same feeder, even on occasion arriving on the same day each year, they are not always the same two birds – go figure. Unlike bald eagles, swans, sandhill cranes, Atlantic puffins, barn owls, Marconi penguins, and vultures who all marry their childhood sweethearts “until death do them part,” hummingbirds don't give a rip about long term relationships. We did host a female with one black feather on the crown of her head who returned for several seasons, but whether the sporty male with his brilliant green coat and flashy ruby cravat was the same..., who knows? Their table manners further underscore their fickle nature. In a yard fitted with two or more feeders and flowers, each one defends whichever feeder they've stopped at, chasing off the other with great displays of tail feathers and aviator's daring. Like the legendary radio show, *The Bickersons*, the antagonistic birds remain together at least for a season. Their idea of parenting is, moreover, worse than their habits at table and socializing.

Truth win out; they are birds. Hard-wired, operating by instinct, they also are highly curious, remembering not only the location of feeders, nearby shrubs, and the folks [me, in this case] who seem to be in their immediate vicinity when the feeders are empty, needing to be refilled. They expect the food that I set out simply because Mother Nature has formed them to search for it. They find no predatory tendencies in my presence [always slow moving or still when they are around] and thus tolerate me from a distance, usually on a powerline safely out of reach. On occasion one will hover a foot from my face, giving me the once-over before moving on. The bottom line is this: the birds and I are decidedly NOT in a warm, sharing relationship. Hummingbirds don't DO relationships with others, and hardly with each other. They move, live, and have their being guided by instinct and what they have learned about the locale.

They do provide an important insight, given Sunday's second reading and the gospel, both addressing faith. Faith is not instinctual. Neither is it simply a matter of “expecting” God to provide like a vending machine – which is how I suspect the birds view me. Yet sadly, that is how we often relegate God. We may well go about our business with little concern for what the Almighty and others are up to until we feel the crunch of need, of fright and fear, of sensing we have lost control. Then, feverish prayer is offered up much like quarters dropped in a vending machine slot.

My beloved feisty fliers have helped me understand the distinction St. Paul makes between “earthly” and “spiritual” bodies. “Earthly” existence is likely on the same instinctual plane as the hummingbirds' expectations. The birds live by fixating on their

individual, private needs. They understand well the art of self-gratification and self-fulfillment, for that is what it takes to survive as an instinctual creature. Yet we, who bear the “image and likeness” of “the man of heaven,” Jesus, live in union with God in Christ to whom we have been joined through the waters of baptism. Transformed, renewed, and redeemed by God, we now understand ourselves one with a loving, caring community of faith who supports, upholds, and encourages us in this life. God’s faithful people form Christ’s body wherever they gather, and each of us are a part, members with specific gifts and insights. Even more significant, we are imbued with holy, trusting love, not only for each other but for God who created us in the first place. This love is played out, rehearsed, and becomes a trusted part of our abiding relationships. The family and friends we love, our ready inclination to be hospitable to strangers, and a wondrous bond of affection and deep love for the one with whom we are blessedly called to spend this earthly pilgrimage are reminders of why God fashions us anew. Faith is not instinctual, but is learned already *in utero*. The newborn already knows the intimate presence of mama’s heartbeat, the uproar of family, even the pet dog’s bark long before it is born. The newborn gazes with intense wonder at those in its immediate circle, putting face, voice, expression, along with whatever its senses reveal together to begin the life-long crafting of loving, trusting relationships. Formal initiation into God’s much larger family through baptism continues that process, no matter the age when baptismal waters soak us. Faith is living into the reality that God has invited us into abiding relationship.

Sunday’s gospel reminds us that faith can be discovered in the smallest of packages, but regardless of its wrapping, it begins the necessary moving beyond ourselves into abiding, trusting relationship. This is also why we humans, declared to “have dominion” over God’s good creation [that is, to have the same mind and inclination toward creation as the Creator], are to care for and delight in God’s creatures who may live their days instinctually, or have evolved some astounding ways of discerning lasting relationships. Even though my pint-sized, fierce hummingbirds may not ever realize it, they need me as much as I need them. Thanks be to God for that!