

St. Thomas  
Proper 21B/Season of Creation  
September 29, 2024

## Birds of a Feather

“Birds of a feather flock together.” An old adage, one I remember my grandmother saying. And we do see this – flocks of geese or pelicans flying in a V formation; the flocks, or more exactly, the murders, of crows that swarm and land in the trees around here. Flying in a flock is thought to have an aerodynamic factor; energy is saved by flying together. And flocks provide safety in numbers and ways of finding food more efficiently.

We usually assume that a flock is all the same – birds of a feather. But some flocks are heterospecific, that is, made up of different kinds of birds. A flock of some 6 different species might fly around together, then land in an oak tree. They spend 10 minutes or so devouring as many insects and spiders as they can, then take off to find another tree. Each species in this group is usually targeting a different prey item. One might eat spiders, another caterpillars, another insect eggs. So there is less competition among the individual birds than in a single-species flock. It has also been noted that even if more than one species in the flock eats the same prey, they might search for it in different microhabitats. Picture a flock landing in a large fig tree. While one species is scooching around on the tree’s trunk, probing into bark crevices, another species is peering into curled up clusters of dead leaves. A third species is gleaning bugs from green twigs.

In addition to this feeding advantage, mixed flocks may provide predator defense. The smaller birds in the mixed flock are protected by the larger, “watchdog” species, and so can spend more time eating. The Downey woodpecker is the smallest woodpecker species. When foraging alone, the woodpecker stops and cocks its head frequently to look around and listen for predators. When the woodpeckers join other species, chickadees and titmice, in a mixed flock, their rate of head cocking decreases and their rate of foraging increases. Winners all the way round.

We’ll get back to the birds in a minute.

In our Gospel lesson for today, the disciples come to Jesus troubled about someone, an outsider without standing in their community, acting in his name to cast out demons. We have no record in Scripture identifying this person; we can only speculate. It may have been a religious zealot with his own agenda. It may have been a genuine believer, but one not yet fully integrated into the circle of Jesus' disciples. It may have been an imposter or a fraud. We don't know. But the disciples certainly did not put out a welcome sign for him. Like some overeager attorneys defending their company's trademark in the marketplace, they acted quickly to protect their exclusive franchise on the use of Jesus' name and authority. The outsider must be stopped. And to do so, they went straight to the top, confident that Jesus would support them and get rid of this outsider.

But it doesn't work out this way. Jesus does not seem to be concerned that others are acting in his name. There were enough things to worry about in his world: war, violence, hatred of those who were different, greed, to name a few; no matter who is doing it, to alleviate such pain, such division, was a good thing. Jesus assures the disciples that anyone who is invoking Jesus' name to do good and powerful things is an ally, not an enemy. He invites his disciples to see themselves not as a little clique, working in a corner of life, fenced off from others, limiting God's actions to what they know, in the forms with which they are familiar, but to be open to those doing good.

I suspect that we are not much different. We live in a world where there is war, where there is violence and hatred. We live in a world where it is all too easy for us to be exclusive, to assume that God's actions among us are limited to the forms with which we are most familiar, most comfortable. It is all too easy for us to see barriers, to live with an insider/outsider, us vs them, frame of reference.

The history of the church is full of such fence-building, replete with schisms and divisions. But Jesus' words remind us that Christianity is not the preserve of the privileged few. He reminds us that no one seeking to do the Lord's work is an outsider, that we are to welcome all those who are seeking to join the journey, to follow our Lord; that we are to be including, not excluding.

Are we going to have differences? Well, yes. Think of Sunday morning. We have Liturgy, we have a way of doing things – we are, after all, Episcopalians. Does that mean we have an exclusive contract on how God is worshiped? Clearly not; but that does not have to mean that we are right and everyone else is wrong. God’s kingdom is wide and broad, with all kinds of folks and styles of worship and ways of living and believing.

It's kind of like the multi-species bird flocks: each species maintains its own identity; a woodpecker is still a woodpecker, a chickadee is still a chickadee and a titmice still a titmice. But they are able to work together to their mutual advantage.

Maybe something to ponder this week: the whole idea of being welcoming, both here at St. Thomas and in our lives. In probably the most famous verse from the Gospel of John, we read, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.” There are no asterisks with conditions and exclusions, nothing that creates insiders and outsiders, those like us and those different from us. God so loved the world. I love that the “Welcome” in our bulletin each week says that all are welcome here, just as God created you: no matter where you are on your journey of faith, whether you are single, married, divorced, separated or partnered; no boundaries of age, race, ethnicity, culture, gender identity and gender expression, sexual orientation, economic condition, physical or mental ability. God’s love is open to all.

I experienced that kind of welcome a number of years ago. I was in a wheelchair, unable to walk, for six months, having been hit by a car while riding my bike. I was ordained as a priest and celebrated the Eucharist for the first time in that wheelchair. A friend, a priest, practiced with me: it is a challenge to wear a chasuble and celebrate in a wheelchair; you have to be able to lift up your arms, but not catch the chasuble in the wheels. The sexton at the church where I was serving found a small table which he placed in front of the altar; there were stairs leading up to the altar, which I could not do. The people of the parish were wonderful and supportive and found ways to help me get around. They were warm and welcoming, both in words and in concrete ways.

It is challenging at times, but we are called to see ourselves and each other as the beloved children of God. In our thoughts, in our words, in our actions, the beloved children of God. And not just at church, but in our day-to-day lives, with our families, with those at work, with our friends, with those we meet in passing; with those like us, with those different from us, the beloved children of God.