

“Watching Birds Mate”

A homily by Stephen Martz for the people of St. Nicholas

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Genesis 22:1-14 + Psalm 13 + Romans 6:12-23 + Matthew 10:40-42

Can you believe I'm 56 and until recently, I had never seen birds mate? This is embarrassing to admit because I've kept birds as pets much of my life. Either I had a lot of celibate birds – or I was pretty clueless. Whaddya think?

In any event, looking out a kitchen window earlier this month, I was captivated by two birds mating. The female was planted firmly on the bar of a flower stand in front of my garden, which was full of whites and reds and pinks. When the male flew to her, she hunched down. Landing on her back, his wings beat rapidly while she moved deliberately from side to side.

After a few seconds, he would fly a few feet away, catch his breath -- or whatever it is birds do at such moments -- and then return. This ritual of life continued, over and over, for many minutes.

I was spellbound. I thought: *This is what the Garden of Eden must have been like, teeming with beauty and energy and life.* The moment felt holy and I felt privileged to witness it.

I thought at the time these might be the sparrows who live in a nest in the bend of one of our gutter downspouts -- about 12 feet above the place of their encounter. Now I am sure of it, for about a week ago, while sitting in the living room reading, I heard a clamor of insistent peeps.

Returning to the same window, I saw a little more of Eden, as four little beaks poked up above the side of the nest, cheeping and tweeting raucously for attention as mom and dad returned repeatedly to the nest with food.

What a distance there is between the magic of that accidentally witnessed afternoon tryst -- and its consequence -- and the Christian view of the body flowing from today's second reading.

In this passage, and in the chapter from the letter to the Romans from which today's reading comes, Paul is seeking to do something of utmost spiritual importance. He seeks to express the difference between a life governed by Sin and one governed by God.

With eloquence, the apostle describes how believers, through faith and baptism, are drawn to live in Christ. Despite his unfortunate use of the metaphor of slavery – he urges us to exchange slavery to Sin for slavery to God – Paul's' profound intent is to call believers to live in the righteousness and holiness of God.

Surely, he is insightful and original when he speaks of living from the obedience of the heart to the forms or patterns of teaching to which we have been entrusted.

Yet just as surely, there is a gulf between the teaching of Jesus, who seldom is occupied with the sins of the flesh, and the teaching of Paul. Paul and especially his interpreters often seem preoccupied, even obsessed with mortal bodies, their use and misuse.

Today, he begins by locating sin in our *mortal bodies*. He urges us not to *obey* the *passions* of our *members* lest they become instruments of *sin* or *wickedness*.

(Member should be understood here as a limb or organ of the body, not as a reproductive organ.)

He goes on to speak of things of which [the Romans] now are ashamed. Most scholars identify those things as the sins enumerated in various Pauline vice lists, which inevitably include a liberal dose of sexual sin.

Now, of course, in one sense, Paul is right. We are embodied beings and sin will always occur in, and with, and through our bodies – whether that sin is

- sexual violence toward another,
- a failure to offer a cup of cold water to a little one,
- the physical and emotional abuse of one's son or daughter,
- the greed and financial sin so prevalent in our American economy,
- the war and violence so rampant throughout the world.

I could go on, but you get the point. Paul is right. All sin is embodied, has consequences for the body. But sin also resides in the spirit, issues from it, and has consequences for it. Paul and his followers – and ultimately institutional Christianity – do us a disservice when they seem so often to locate Sin in the body and God in the spirit.

As David Schimmel reminded us in last week's workshop, God lives within us; our mortal bodies are home to the Divine. There is a long mystical tradition, across many religions, which attests to this.

In our time, we are perhaps more aware of the connection between body and spirit than were our ancestors in the faith. But we remain their heirs, imprisoned still by the reflexive distrust of the body -- of the feminine, of the earth -- that was so ingrained in the faith of our fathers.

That old Christian faith is now giving way -- thank God! -- to a new dispensation. God is hatching something fresh in our faith, giving us new appreciation of our flesh -- though sometimes we seem clueless to those new things God is doing in our midst.

Maybe the best way to recognize it, maybe the surest way to appreciate that new thing God is doing, is to watch the birds. After all, no one is ever too old to take a peek at the Garden of Eden.