

Feeding a Curious Flock

The painted bunting arrives each May at our birdfeeders, famished from his long journey north. He is resplendent in his tropical apparel of red, green, yellow and blue. His consort is arrayed in silvery mint green feathers so transparent you wonder if you might see right through her. Embarrassed, the cardinals, usually so predictable at the feeders, stay away for a spell. Their bright reds and oranges are no match, they think, for their rainbow Latin cousins. But the cardinals return and set against the visitors, they become brighter still.

Each visit I make in and out of our kitchen, I pause to see who is taking their repast at the feeders. In the early spring, we are overrun with sparrows. Brown, messy, and greedy, these furious eaters appear so uniform that I cannot fathom how God keeps track of each one. The doves arrive in the late afternoon in pairs, eat quietly on the ground from the crumbs tossed from the feeders, and then sit together on a low limb, wing to wing, watching the others. Titmice and chickadees are fickle. They come to the feeders one day and not the next. The mockingbird wouldn't degrade himself by feasting on an artificial perch, so he defiantly sings out in protest.

When an itinerant Texas goldfinch or Mexican jay stop by, Kay creeps into the other room and summons me with a whisper. We both know they will not stay the night. Only the cardinals and the two sets of painted buntings remain at our feeders all through June and July when the heat beats down and the long grasses budge not an inch for want of a breeze.

I watch the feeders far more than I do the T.V. I know from experience what birds should be there and those who I hope will return soon. I know, too, the look of the brown squirrel when he is contemplating an attack on the feeder, and I know when it gets too dry the doe will rise up on her hind legs and lick out the seeds with her long, pink tongue. When I catch the thieves, I run them off. These seeds are for the birds.

"Look at the birds of the air," Jesus invites, "they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" (Matt. 6:26) Bird feeding is God-work, so I am only too glad to tag along and give him a hand. "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?" Jesus asks, "Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father" (Matt. 10:29). Bird watching is God-work, too.

The parish I serve is full of colorful birds. I love watch-

ing them. It did not take me long to recognize the peculiar songs each one sings and the places they like to perch. Each one is an interesting bird. Together, though, they take on the luster of one another and the church becomes a spectrum of iridescent color. For sure, the sparrows maintain their frenzy, the mockingbird makes lots of noise, and there are a few who would steal the joy right out of the room rather than leave it for others. But neither the noise, nor the busyness, nor anything else can despoil the multihued collage on Sunday morning.

I can tell you almost to a person who is present at worship and who is away. I couldn't do that in my first 12 years in the ministry. I spent more time eyeing myself in those days. It matters if we're together at church or not.

A friend approached me to say, "Pat, I can worship God just as well on a golf course as I can here on Sunday."

"But I can't," I replied.

I've made my peace with those who come once a month, those who take the summer off, and even those who fly in at Christmas and Easter. I'm glad to see them when I see them, like the titmice and chickadees who alight on the feeders when the spirit moves them.

When I first turn around in the chancel each Sunday, I am awestruck to see the curious flock of folks the Spirit has moved to worship. I'm a little scared, too, that I may not have the food to

relieve their hunger. I feel a little bit like the New York farmer I've read about who receives a box of chicks each spring, only to find that some do not even yet know how to drink:

My experience handling babies is invaluable. A farmer, usually adept at fitting and mending tractor implements and pounding stakes, must also learn to hold a fuzzy head the size of a thimble and dip its tiny beak into the water. I cannot be sure, but following the course of instruction I believe I have sensed gratitude in the bearing of certain Buff Orpingtons. (Scott Chaskey, This Common Ground: Seasons on an Organic Farm).

I, too, am adept at things — Bible reading, theology, liturgy, music, parish management, and church growth. But it is my time spent peering out my kitchen window that proves invaluable.

Our guest columnist is the Rev. Patrick Gahan, rector of St. Stephen's Church, Wimberley, Texas. This is the fourth in a series of personal reflections on the life of a priest.



The painted bunting