

Prpr 6 June 16, 2024 Open Hands

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Are you familiar with the legend of St. Kevin and the blackbird? It's a lovely story, one of my favorites. It is very old, originating from Celtic Christianity sometime in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Not much is known about St. Kevin, except he lived a long life, was a monk and a priest, and founded Glendalough, one of Ireland's famous monasteries. His legend does not lift him up as a revolutionary or progressive leader, neither did he stand against invaders or threats. Instead, his legend reveals him as gentle, a person of prayer, who experienced what it means to be part of God's Kingdom as Jesus described it in the parable of the mustard seed in today's Gospel.

According to the legend, early one morning, St. Kevin was praying, as was his usual practice. Over the millennia, the physical posture of prayer has changed many times. While we are familiar with a penitential prayer posture on bended knees, with bowed heads, and folded hands, there were times when the posture of prayer was more open to receiving what God has to give us, and looked like sitting or standing, heads turned upward or forward, arms outstretched with open hands. It was this posture that St. Kevin used when he prayed.

That morning, as St. Kevin prayed, a blackbird flew through an open window into his open, outstretched hand. In its beak was a small twig, which it dropped in his hand, then flew off, returning soon with another twig. It didn't take long for the blackbird to build its nest in St. Kevin's hand, and then laid its eggs there. St. Kevin is said to have remained in that prayer position for weeks while the bird tended to her eggs, waiting for them to hatch. Some versions of this legend like to imagine his physical discomfort and loneliness. I prefer the versions like Jenny Schroedel's illustrated book that include compassionate details like how the blackbird fed St. Kevin berries, as if she was aware of his need for support in holding her nest and babies all that time. It makes me wonder how the other people in his community might have helped or supported him while he patiently held that nest in his hand.

Eventually, the eggs hatched, and St. Kevin watched the blackbird care for her babies, who grew fast, and then watched the babies fly away, followed shortly thereafter by the blackbird who built the nest. Only then did St. Kevin finally lower his arms.

Of course, a legend that is so old has many interpretations, and has been used to illustrate all sorts of things like the importance of discipline and prayer and suffering for the sake of others. Those are not bad interpretations and there are occasions when they are appropriate.

Today I cannot help but see the resemblance to Jesus' parable of the mustard seed in this legend: the story of something small growing into not a huge tree but a large shrub or bush with many branches reaching out to receive the birds who find it a good place to make their nests. Perhaps God's Kingdom is not always big and powerful, above the world, but smaller, fierce in perseverance, and like St. Kevin, open and safe and welcoming of the beauty and delightfulness of life.

You can see iconographer Kelly Latimore's version of this parable on the cover of today's service booklet that highlights the beauty in the diversity and variety of birds nesting in the mustard bush growing from the tiny seed. Kelly's interpretation also suggests the community such diversity can create and support among the branches of the mustard plant and suggests God's Kingdom of Heaven is not a place, a tree, or shrub any more than it is a building of stone, wood and brick but is instead what happens in and around those places when God's love is received and shared. Like St. Kevin's prayer that accepted what life brought to him, and was able to wonder and delight in the blackbird, her nest, her eggs, and her babies, and perhaps be fed by that experience in more ways than one that he carried into his community after the blackbirds flew away, which could be why the legend is still told to this day. St. Kevin did not have to work to attract the bird, or care for its young, or teach them how to fly, he just had to be present while she was with him, and perhaps found joy and delight in being part of the bird's life.

As followers of Jesus, we can sometimes forget that life, beauty, joy, and delight are already part of God's Kingdom and we do not have to create or force them into being. Instead, we are invited to be open to receive them. It is fortunate for us that we have stories like St. Kevin and the blackbird and Jesus' parables to remind us of this, especially on days like today when – in just a few minutes - we will welcome Darion and June into the Body of Christ by baptizing them. It is also fortunate for us that Darion and June are father and daughter, and baptizing a father and daughter on Father's Day is probably sermon enough, as it reminds me of God our Father who holds us in the palm of God's hands, like those birds nesting in the branches of the mustard plant.

In my favorite prayer I will pray immediately after baptizing Darion and June, we will ask God to give them the gifts that are not only signs of their new life as followers of Jesus, but what they need to live new life in Christ. Specifically, we will pray for God to give them “inquiring and discerning hearts, courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love God, and the gift of joy and wonder in all God's works.” Inquiring and discerning hearts that are not afraid to ask questions, to be curious, and learn to recognize when God is at work even in something small like a seed, nesting bird, and diverse community. Courage to choose God's will and to persevere even when it is difficult for others to recognize the importance of doing things like gently holding a bird in your hand. A spirit to not only know God through prayer and study, but to love God and your neighbors. And, my favorite, the gift of joy and wonder at God's works in the world. Joy and wonder are perhaps two of the more mature practices of faith, for they how we can feel closer to God and delight in all that God is and all God has made by letting God be God instead of trying to force our own way or agenda.

Whenever we say this prayer for the newly baptized, it is also a reminder for those of us who are baptized these same gifts are for us too. They are how we share in God's Kingdom, which is much wider and more diverse than doing good works or good liturgy, it is receiving God's love in whatever way God chooses to give it, even if it means doing something like holding a birds nest in our hand; learning to recognize God present and at work in the world even if it is in something as small as sharing delight in a double rainbow stretched across the sky that some of us saw a few days ago; recognizing when God calls us to persevere and when God calls us to change or adapt to a change we can't control, making room for each other, and supporting and caring for each other.

When we say this prayer for Darion and June in a few moments, I invite you to pay attention with your heart, mind, and soul and notice if a word or phrase jumps out at you. If it does, that might be the Holy Spirit inviting you to embrace that part of your life a little more deeply, and reflect on how you can accept that invitation to grow into that part of your life, and closer to God.

I also invite you to consider, the next time you pray, to open your hand to God, and lift it up. I don't think you need to worry about a blackbird building a nest in your hand, but then, you never know. That is the reason for the invitation, and perhaps the legend of St. Kevin and the parable of the mustard seed: we never know what God will give us, but we can be open to whatever it is because we have been given the gifts of inquiring and discerning hearts, courage to will and persevere, a spirit to know and love God, and the gift of joy and wonder in God's works so that we can all grow closer to God and each other and God's Kingdom here on earth.

Thank you Darion and June for these wonderful reminders, for being part of this life we share, and making today and God's Kingdom more delightful for being part of it.