Life Lessons at the Bird Feeder

House finch, purple finch, sparrows: song, siskins, white-throated, house sparrows; Carolina wren, common grackles, crows, black capped chicadees, tufted titmouse, White-breasted nuthatch, Blue jay, Downy woodpeckers, morning doves, red-bellied woodpeckers, rabbits, and chipmunks, and squirrels....lots and lots of squirrels...and a family of Cardinals, and a homeless woman in a canoe...

Now, I confess that I have favorites among this household of feathers, and some that I rather dislike: the grackles are shimmering in the sun, but they are meanspirited and drive off the little birds; the Blue Jays think they own the place, they're so much bigger; the woodpeckers are into serious display; the little chickadees have taught me to sing, and the tufted titmice are adorable with their little grey hats on. The white breasted nut-hatch has taught me a thing or two about exploiting one's habitat by thinking outside the 'feeder': they run DOWN the trunks of trees and catch the insects in the bark that other birds miss by running UP the trunk. The sparrows—now there's a diverse crew! They come in together and working as a group they can afflict the fattest squirrel or drive off a grackle, crow or squirrel—but only when they work together! Otherwise, as single sparrow gets nowhere and has to get in the queue like the other small singers.

But it's the Cardinals that call to me, I think! Not only do I love the Creator God's artist's touches that make the orange beak sit next to a dark maroon/black before blending into bright

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Isaiah

Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for the LORD has spoken: "Sons have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me. 1:3 The ox knows its owner, and the ass its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people does not understand." 1:4 Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, sons who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the LORD, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged.

Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomor'rah! 1:11 "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of he-goats. 1:12 "When you come to appear before me, who requires of you this trampling of my courts? 1:13 Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and the calling of assemblies -- I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. 1:14 Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. 1:15 When you spread forth your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. 1:16 Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, 1:17 learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow.

red, I love their little hats. I love their bravery: they are SUCH sitting ducks, so visible, so ...vulnerable for their visibility. But it was when I saw the Cardinals pair-feeding that I succumbed to them with utter delight: the fancy bright male takes a seed or piece of millet in his mouth and goes to the female, they bow their heads together as the male touches the seed to his mate's beak and then she takes it from him and eats. It can happen as many times as 4 x a minute.

Wow!

And I love the way the Cardinals manage their high visibility: you can tell that the way a young male Cardinal gets to be an old male cardinal is by learning a degree of cunning: the old fellows fly in at dusk, when their colors are muted in the low light and they are far more able to blend in. They come first and hang back in other trees, checking out the scene. Then the boys fly on in and take some food for a bit; then their girls come in and the pair dance begin. Overall, the Cardinals seem timid: they won't fight like a blue jay, or gang up like the sparrows; they won't hang back, visible, like the chickadees and woodpeckers, they'll fly off to Prof. Pazmino's picnic table, hide underneath it and wait until the right moment to make their move.

I've learned a lot about timing, about wisdom, about the way the world works from watching the group negotiations at the bird feeder.

This is the story of how I wound up with four birdfeeders:

A UU student once chided me, 'who are you, God, that you think you can feed only one set of creatures and not another?' An interesting point: all creatures must eat! Why do we favor some and not others, and on what basis do we make that judgement?

My first feeder was a platform and it was touted as 'squirrel proof': one could screw down a knob that separated the food from the squirrels by a wire mess that meant that the birds could peck for the food but the squirrels couldn't reach.

Yeah, right. They either sit on the platform, aggressively scaring off the birds until most of the food is gone, or they unscrew the knob and simply have their way with the feeder.

Next, I tried a metal tube with little perches extending. It's wonderfully convenient: The squirrels simply open the top of it, and remove the food at their leisure.

Ok, I thot, let's try something with much more of a wire cage about it, so that the birds can go inside of it to get the food, but the squirrels can't. Hang it by a long rope so the squirrels can't just sit on a branch as with feeder #2.

Uh-huh: not only can the squirrels run down the rope for 3 feet with no problem whatsoever, but they can also leap straight up from the ground, flinging themselves onto the feeder like a homophobe on the constitition! No, they can't get inside the top, as with feeder #2, but they can sit on the top and swing it so the food falls out, and the little metal cage offers little by way of

challenge.

My husband, as tender a soul as ever played tight end for Auburn (go, Teagles!), says we have a Social Contract with the squirrels. He says it would be wrong to play god and put cayenne pepper, harsh to the squirrels but harmless for the birds, into the bird food, because the squirrels are not expecting it (does he think we're obliged to make a declaration of war?). He's even named the squirrels as a nuclear family of all males: Bucky, Marvin and Seymour. Bucky has great mouth skills; Marvin is the jumper in the family; and Seymour....well, my husband says the other squirrels make fun of Seymour because his skills are so scattered that he lacks focus. One day I noticed that Bucky was humping Marvin (and Seymour was VERY confused), and upon reporting this as a problem for the gendering of our menagerie, I was told that Marvin was a willing participant, and that Seymour needed to deal with his identity issues and stop being fearful of a variety of domestic arrangements.

Sexual preferences aside, the squirrels on the hill prevailed: My fourth feeder was simply a total metal cage into which one inserts a mix of suet, nuts and berries...good for those cold days when the birds need high energy. Ah, yes: this one the squirrels simply removed from the tree and dragged away to their nest, full. Once they finished the suet, they dragged it BACK to the tree, so I could refill it again for them.

This time I declined, and bought a bag of critter food: seeds, corn kernals, peanuts, the occasional dried fruit. I gave the squirrels Feeder #1, the platform, and I also opened my front door to them: I lure the squirrels and chipmunks, sometimes the bunnies, up to the porch so my young and restive kitties can look outside and enjoy the critters while the critters are eating me out of sunflower seeds et al.

Now a funny thing happened, aside from my kitties making a firm friend of the mailman who looks for them each day behind the screen door: once I started feeding the squirrels as part of my routine, all of a sudden a few things happened.

The squirrels now allow more access to the feeders for the birds.

The birds, while waiting their turn at the feeder, turned their attention to my garden, feeding on insects, including Asian beetles which are the bane of my carefully tended lilies.

The carpenter ants infesting my front vestibule disappeared entirely, as did all bugs coming in my kitchen windows, where the screens are loose.

When I accepted the squirrels into my life as part of the scheme of things, I reckoned that I did not need to be at war. I could, for example, learn from them: those fine bushy tails, so good for balance; those clever little hands, so like mine; that mammal brain in a body which such a high

metabolism that they do actually have to eat constantly to maintain themselves. I learned to hear their chatter as song, to think of their depredations as natural, and to recognize that if I was serious about feeding the birds, I would have to learn to live with the squirrels. Yes, they are bullies; yes, they chase the birds....but they also amuse my cats and pleasure my husband who marvels at their ingenuity.

There are lessons to be had here—lessons about life, and love, timing and tenacity. A whole lot of tiny sparrows can tame a much bigger, fatter mammal and succeed in finding strength and nourishment by banding together; males and females can bond in true mutuality; learning to look at the tree trunk differently can lead us to different sources of sustenance...

And if none of that works for you, you can always fly in under cover of dusk, find what you need, and fly away to safety....knowing that the food will reappear tomorrow and you will have another chance to celebrate the circle of life.