

God's Dance Party
Rev. Dr. Brooks Berndt
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Second Scripture Reading—Matthew 6: 19-24

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

It is easy to think of songbirds as representing the beauty of God's creation. Their colorful feathers and melodious music give simultaneous delight to our eyes and ears. Yet, could it be that songbirds may also be the harbingers of the greatest challenge humanity has ever faced? Over the course of thousands of years, songbirds have developed migration patterns that have had an impeccable timing. They have arrived at just the right spot at just the right moment so that their flocks might feast and flourish. The feast is a fuzzy feast. Songbirds arrive when caterpillars are most numerous. The result is that these birds are then able to provide plentiful, healthy meals to their young, so that their numbers can thrive.

All of this is changing, however. With global warming, their timing has been thrown into disarray. Frequently, spring comes earlier. Caterpillars hatch earlier. When the songbirds arrive, their food supply is no longer plentiful. The newly hatched chicks have less to eat. Survival becomes more perilous and difficult. Scientists have given a name to this ecological phenomenon. It is called "mistiming," and it is a phenomenon not

confined to songbirds alone. Similar trends are found among a number of other species ranging from caribou to pied flycatchers.

In a recent commentary, Naomi Klein noted that humans have suffered from a form of mistiming as well, but for us, it is a mistiming that doesn't relate to our biological evolution. It is a mistiming that relates to our social and cultural evolution. While "climate change is a collective problem demanding collective action" on a daunting scale, climate change has arrived at a period in human history during which we have reached the extremes of individualistic consumerism and unrestrained corporate greed. At just the moment when we should be focused on the common good, we are letting the powerful few run the show. At just the moment when we should be consuming less, we are consuming more.

There is a biblical word that describes a core part of the problem. It's called idolatry. Our scripture for this morning puts it in evocative terms: we have been storing up treasures for ourselves on earth when we should have been storing up treasures in heaven. The scripture then captures in a nutshell one of the essential faults behind our spiritual mistiming: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." As a society, our heart has simply been in the wrong place. The problem, however, isn't solely about individual greed for money and things. It's not simply about having a crush on Mr. or Mrs. Wrong.

A fitting metaphor might be that of a dance party. The problem isn't simply that we arrived at the dance and chose the wrong partner. The problem is the whole party. It's the music being played. It's the spiked punch. It's the limited selection of dance partners. Our party is being controlled by a small fraternity composed of the oil, coal, and gas

industries. It has become so much a part of the natural order of things that we sometimes fail to notice it. But did you know that for every member of Congress, a minimum of three and sometimes as many as eight lobbyists are employed by fossil fuel fraternity? Over the span of two years, the oil and gas industry spent \$536 million dollars to influence congress, but as George Zornick noted, congress was actually a cheap date. The oil and gas industry generates “\$271 billion in profits each year.... The money spent on Congress is around .09 percent of those profits.” Moreover, “the industry gets as much as \$52 billion in taxpayer dollars back every year in the form of federal subsidies.” Thanks to corporate welfare the oil and gas lobby gets a big bang for its buck. In fulfilling their legal responsibility to maximize profits for their shareholders, oil and gas companies have some easy decisions to make in spending a small chunk of change on a date that is often all too eager.

This is the moment where one might feel like a college student who has just walked into a party and realized it is a crowd that one doesn't want to be around. I think once one reaches a certain level of awareness it is hard to stay at the party, especially if you know there is a better party down the street. One reaches a point where one has to make a choice—either you stay or you go. Just like you can't serve two masters, you can't dance at two parties. As Naomi Klein points out, the good news for us is that we can make a choice: “unlike the reindeer and songbirds, we humans are blessed with the capacity for advanced reasoning and therefore the ability to adapt more deliberately.” In other words, we have the ability to stop hanging out at the wrong party. We have the ability to join God's dance party instead.

We might think of God's dance party as being the kingdom of God that is in our midst, and perhaps the fitting metaphor for this dance party is found on a small island off the coast of Baja California in Mexico. This island of 148 acres has at times been one of the hottest real estate markets on earth for certain species of seabirds. In 1940, an astounding 1 million birds populated this small island. Unfortunately, that number dropped to around 5,000 by 1973 thanks to the interventions of humans who came either as eco-tourists or as egg poachers. For awhile, the island had been home to the wrong kind of party. In 1979, however, a 25-year old graduate student of biology arrived on the island who would change everything over time. The student was named Enriqueta Velarde, and she realized the party that was happening wasn't for her. She was determined to create the conditions for a different kind of party. This meant defending the island from both human predators and rodent predators. The rats had been having a party too. They had been gorging themselves on bird eggs.

To accomplish the turn around, Velarde worked with college students and locals from nearby villages. They studied the habits of the birds and the challenges they faced. Interestingly, the birds never repeat their mistakes or the mistakes they have seen other birds make. If part of the island suffers from high tides that disrupt their eggs, then the birds won't nest there again. In a corresponding fashion, one could say that the knowledge Velarde and the villagers have gained has led to necessary self-correction on the part of humans as well. The results have been staggering. One species alone has now reached a population of 240,000 on the island. Velarde has even worked with others to improve conditions on 29 other islands in the region. Moreover, "Mexico's first marine reserve" has been created in the gulf region in order to "restore natural ecosystems and

develop sustainable alternatives to egg-gathering for local people.” Mexico has not been the only beneficiary of these programs. Many of the sea birds make their way to the United States when they are not breeding.

A lot of hard work has led to this success, and humans haven't been the only ones working hard. On the island where Velarde has worked for the past 35 years, one journalist observes that the birds are busy “all day and night” bathing, fishing, incubating, feeding, nesting, courting, and squabbling. But in case one thinks these birds are all work and no play, one can also observe “a palpable sense of excitement” among them which admittedly has something to do with their libido. The festive atmosphere that exists among the birds has been compared to the Burning Man festival, a week-long party attended by 50,000 people every year in the Black Rock Desert of northern Nevada.

What if we thought of our church as an island sanctuary where we can each come together for God's dance party? For those who have said they have had enough of greed, enough of the rat race, enough of over-consumption, they can come here and experience a community that values sharing over hoarding and generosity over gluttony. And, what if this dance party is like the marine reserve? In other words, what if our party extends beyond these walls to create other outposts for God's love, other island sanctuaries? We can take our dance wherever we go. Moreover, we can invite others to join our dance and experience for themselves how different it is.

A few months ago Ed Martin talked to us about the kairos moment—that opportune moment for fulfilling God's purposes. Our climate problems may result from human mistiming, from dancing with the wrong person at the wrong party, but maybe our climate solutions will result from our falling into step with God's timing. Let's join the

dance. Let's make the most of this opportunity. Let's make the most of this opportunity to realize our greatest potential. Amen.