

One of my favorite birds to photograph is the hawk. You'll sometimes see them perched in a tree, and then dive down to grab a vole or mouse, and they are prolific flyers as well. This time of year, Hawk's Ridge in Duluth can be a fun place to visit, especially when the wind is from the north as it aids hawks in their southern migration.

One place though I've never seen a hawk is in a warehouse.

But years ago, David Mead, writing a short reflection called "Free Flight," where he reflects on some of his own struggles from the past, saw a peculiar sight as he manned his man-lift.

For two days, he had been sharing his workspace with a small hawk. He would fly within 10 feet of Dave and rest even closer, watching as Dave performed his duties.

Somehow, he had become trapped in the large, one-story warehouse that Dave worked in. His heart ached, because Dave knew that the hawk would inevitably die if he did not leave the building.

He did not attack Dave, nor was he afraid of him. He simply could not trust Dave to help him.

Upon Dave's arrival to work the second day, he continued where he had finished up the day before working up in the truss area of the building.

He didn't see the hawk flying around, but his thoughts were on him. Did the hawk get out? Was he lying dead on the floor somewhere?

Dave continued to work, occasionally looking around for the shadows of wings, as the hawk would swoop near the lighting fixtures.

At first, there was no sight of the hawk. Then he noticed something there, resting on a sprinkler pipe. It was the hawk. Dave noticed the hawk seemed to be sleeping, his head tucked under his wing, not moving a feather.

Dave wondered if the hawk would still be there when he finished the task at hand. Dave told himself he'd grab the hawk. But then he wondered to himself how on earth he'd catch a hawk with his bare hands.

He finished his job and maneuvered his drivable man-lift under the sleeping bird. Slowly he raised the lift.

A man-lift Dave notes is no quiet machine, with hydraulic pumps operating, ungreased metal joints squeaking, and his heart pounding. Finally, he was at a point where he could reach the hawk.

There was still no movement from the hawk. He must have expended all his energy, Dave thought, and was growing weaker.

Dave wondered if he was close enough not to miss. He was not sure, so moved even closer to the hawk.

He also wondered if the hawk started to fly, could Dave hold on to him?

Then, it happened, Dave encircled the bird of prey in his hand, and he removed the bird from the perch.

As he held the bird gently but firmly in his grasp, fully expecting to be bitten, the hawk awoke, and looked directly in Dave's eyes with disbelief. It was the same look, Dave noted, that his coworkers had when they saw him with the bird, for they had also seen the hawk's flight skills, the way he would twist and turn, flying unharmed, missing all the obstacles that a large building had to offer.

As Dave walked across the building, the bird did nothing more than stare at him in silence. There was no struggle, no clawing, nor pecking from a beak designed to tear flesh, not the typical high-pitched cry of a hawk.

Dave exited the door and walked out into the parking lot fearing that if he released the bird too quickly, the bird might return to where he was once trapped. He removed his one hand, allowing the hawk to rest in the other.

The bird remained perched on his hand.

Dave wondered why the hawk did not immediately take flight. Surely, he had never been held before. The restriction of his grasp must have seemed uncomfortable in comparison to the free flight.

Then, with a final twist of his head, Dave saw in the eyes of this hawk his own life.

He was like the bird who had known freedom, and then become isolated by his own mistakes.

The bird, and Dave, were able to negotiate the immediate dangers - for awhile. But Dave wondered did the hawk know that death was in his future? Was he so trapped that he almost welcomed it? Did he, too know each and every one of the scars from his misadventures?

Did he know that help was so close to him? Maybe he sensed it, Dave thought, but he did not have the faith, or trust, to accept it. Only after depleting his resources, only after he had collapsed with exhaustion, could he find a way out - not on his own, but with the help of a stranger's gentle hands.

Dave would have helped him days earlier, if only the hawk had trusted him.

The bird and Dave were able to find their way back to freedom, which God had intended for both of them.

Dave closes his reflection by echoing the theme from our Gospel: that when you find yourself trapped, there is only one way out. That way is your trust in a Higher Power. You do not have to wear yourself out until you are near death. Look around, he says. He may reveal Himself to you also, just as he revealed himself to Dave, when he, like that hawk, became willing to be carried in the loving hands of his God.

One of the things we need to always remember is how radical God's love and mercy are. God, like Dave seeking out the hawk who was lost, is always seeking us out too. In our Gospel we have the stories that hit this point home; a shepherd who leaves 99 sheep to find the one lost one; a woman searching everywhere and rejoicing over a lost coin that would be about the value of a penny in our day and age, and then perhaps the most familiar of Jesus' parables, the prodigal son. In all of them, what is emphasized is how deeply in love God is with us. It would make no sense to leave 99 sheep behind, or to spend all day looking for a coin of little value; and with the prodigal son, he's so disrespected his father by asking for his inheritance while his dad is still living that at best were he to come back he should be treated like a servant, not a son. But this is not how God operates. We as humans often think I do this, then I get that - but we do not have to do anything to merit God's love. So if we ever have a doubt, all we need to do is to remember God created us out of love, and no matter what happens in life, God will always be looking for us with His love.

On our part then, what do we do to receive this love in the right way?

For one, we get introspective and look at our lives and try to realize when we are lost. The hawk could not quite sort out how to get out of the building, and approached the warehouse and was flying around freely, but in reality was in a prison where he could not survive long term. So it is with us. The young son goes off; and he loses everything. He thinks having it all will make him happy; but it all is a mirage. So it is with sin and bad choices in our life. Happiness - or what we think it to be - is often an illusion. It takes fortitude to say I am sorry; or I have a problem. It's not easy to look at our lives and the decisions we make and how they are impacting ourselves, or others, and to say this is not the person I want to be. We as humans go, go go, but how often do we listen to the voice God gives us - our conscience - and find time for silence so we can look at where we are at in life? When we do, we might just find we aren't being the kind of person we can be, and maybe have lost our way.

When we realize that, we come to our senses like the prodigal son. Again, when we approach God, there is not "look at what you did you should be ashamed of yourself," but just love. So can we, like the hawk, allow God's love to envelop us? Can we also trust that God sends us people like Dave to the hawk who we can turn to and say "help me out of this situation," who we can open up our hearts to, people who will guide us to

freedom? We need to get over our ego and pride and talk about the tough things in our lives if we really want to be free.

Third, once we are out of the warehouse like the hawk, we learn to fly again but hopefully learn how not to end up back in the same situation. Perhaps deep down the father was hoping his son would learn from all this; that by saying "OK, you can have your share now," his son would in fact fall on hard times, and come to his senses, and take his place in the family. Over the years in my homilies, I've shared numerous real-life examples of people who have done just that; Johnny Cash; Merle Haggard; Saint Charles de Foucauld; Saint Augustine; Saint Francis of Assisi, just to name a few. We all make mistakes, and hopefully we learn from them about what went wrong, and how to find true freedom.

And lastly, hopefully we can facilitate this to one another, helping them to fly, and realizing that change is possible. The older brother has done many good things; but he just does not get it. He's working thinking of his future benefits, not of the love that is already there - for all the father has is his too. He also can't see the possibility for change in his younger brother. Inside all of us can be a bit of the older brother; we can become angry at people we know who make bad choices; or think "what is he or she doing here" when we see someone at Mass, especially at Christmas or Easter; or look at someone with disgust. We can - and should - judge actions. But this is not to gossip about the person but rather to help them. Can we see the possibility for change in people? And can we facilitate it like Dave did for the hawk? Can we approach people who are in a bad way, and say we are praying for them. Can we reach out and say "I say this out of love, but I'm worried about you - I want to help?" Can we be there like the father who is always watching and waiting, and when they finally hit bottom help them take the steps needed to recover? God is so in love with us, on our part we also need to respond with an equally extravagant gift of love. As one preacher, Fr. Peter Harries, a Dominican, put it, the goodies must welcome the baddies or they will not be goodies at all.

As Saint Augustine famously put it, "late have I loved you, beauty so ancient and so new," for he, like so many of us, kept chasing that in life which he thought would lead him to where he wanted to be, until his heart finally rested in God; for God, the Hound of Heaven, is always seeking us out. Let us be willing to be found and carried in His arms, so we can truly be free and happy.