

The last week in July may not be the best time to resume a serious practice of walking for exercise. It was, Bishop Goff told me, the hottest July ever recorded in Richmond. I'm still learning the weather patterns, so I asked if August is hotter than July, or the heat starts to taper a bit. "Well, it doesn't get hotter. But. . . it does get more humid." Well, no matter, I said to myself. I'm from the place that invented humid heat. I wasn't so sure, though, when it became clear that my laundry load was going to double if I went out walking every day. I was warned out of the woods (copperheads!), so I've been walking the track of the open areas. It has been hot, when it hasn't been raining, and so humid after the rain that you can barely see where you're going, and the steam has brought -- no, not rainbows and roses, but gnats and mosquitoes and, oddly, a bumper crop of spiders (Go U of Richmond!).



But then, one morning when I slowed down and looked around a bit, just off the nice, flat, safe pavement, I saw this.

Hard to capture in a photo -- the colors and textures of the moss and the lichens, the unexpected berries from a tree, the subtle blue-green sticky cone of a conifer -- Christmas in July. Maybe I need to choose what I'm focusing on a little more carefully.

Carrick and I lived in the countryside outside Austin for a long time, on land fitted out as a migratory songbird sanctuary. That means that we spent ridiculous sums and hours on several dozen bluebird houses and many "squirrel proof" birdfeeders, among other things. For over twenty years, Carrick cleaned and logged the houses and filled the feeders and never saw a single bluebird. (The county assessor said that was okay for tax purposes, but we were disappointed.) The baffles did keep the varmints out, though. This morning I looked up from the breakfast table here in Richmond and saw this:

That's right, the raccoon is standing on the raccoon baffle, enjoying the woodpecker's lunch.



I decided that the only way to deal with this aggravation was to re-read a favorite book, and it turned out to be just the medicine I needed. You may know the story about the man who finds himself on a bus going through a grey city where everybody argues and fights all the time. The city is indescribably vast, because when you can't get along with your neighbors, you simply move. The new neighbors are disagreeable too, so you move to a newly built place on the edge of town - and since everybody does this, the place constantly expands exponentially. The bus takes the man to a place where he learns that the grey city is, in fact, Hell. And it turns out that to change your address and move to Heaven, the main thing you have to do is -- want to go. You have to want joy -- more than you want revenge, sulking, rage, victimhood, fame, intellectual superiority, status, control, domination, and all your appetites and grievances. You have to be willing to ask for, and accept, forgiveness. You have to choose joy, and nobody can do it for you. For the joy of the Lord is love, and the love of the Lord is joy. Oh, yeah. . . (Thank you, CS Lewis and *The Great Divorce* -- I needed that.)

And then I looked out the window again and I saw this:



I know it's small -- but there are bluebirds. Real, live ones. One eating the bluebird food, and one posing opposite the metal bluebird finial. Looks like the raccoon came back and finished off the woodpecker food, and I forgive her. I'm going to choose joy. It's all over the place.

There's plenty of hellishness all around us these days, plenty of anger and fear and rage and stuck-ness. We can choose to squabble and cut each other off, moving further and further apart, or we regroup, look closer, forgive and ask for forgiveness, and choose joy.

What will you choose?

Blessings,

A handwritten signature in black ink on a light gray background. The signature reads "Jennifer Brooke-Davidson" in a cursive script. The first letter of "Jennifer" is a large, stylized capital "J" that loops around the first few letters. The rest of the name is written in a fluid, connected cursive style.

Bishop Jennifer Brooke-Davidson