

Pentecost 19, Proper 22
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

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Kin

A long time ago in a faraway place I had a parish administrator who had three dachshunds. She also had a husband, but since her own kids were grown and gone from the house, the household really revolved around these three dogs. The story goes that one time she made a chocolate cake and left it safely in the center of the table while they went out. When they returned, one of the dogs had hopped up on a chair and then to the table and consumed enough of the chocolate cake to be in dire distress when they came home. Appropriate attention was given to the dog, and measures were put in place to make it so the dog *couldn't* get up on the table, but measures were never contemplated to make it so the dog *wouldn't* get up on the table. "Spoiling" the dogs doesn't even come close. Her husband was often heard to say that when he died, he wanted to come back as one of her dogs!

We do love our animals, and I do not know of a culture around the world that does not intentionally develop relationships with non-human companions—and I mean more than just as sources of labor, sustenance or wealth, or even symbols of the same, or of God's provision for humanity. A National Geographic picture a number of years back of an Amazonian Indigenous child with a baby monkey perched on his head really captures it all. Humans have always had ties to non-humans.

Our tradition has recognized this in the stories that gather around St. Francis of Assisi whose feast day is tomorrow. The iconic phrase attributed to him, "Brother sun, sister moon," the story of the wolf and the townspeople, pictures of him with animals gathered around, may represent a rather romanticized idea of the saint's life, but captures a deep-set human desire to be at harmony with the world beyond our species.

Harmony is elusive enough within our species, and yet we seem to have this deep, inner drive to push the boundaries of our communities beyond the limits of our kind, and rightly so. Catholic theologian and scientist Teilhard de Chardin said that the fabric of the universe is love. Love draws together in harmony and mutuality. We believe that God is healing and restoring the world and that we are recipients of, and participants in that healing and restoration. That healing and restoration is God drawing the whole cosmos back together in love.

That's a big idea, and it's big in Scripture. The first lesson from Sacred History talks about relationships in creation. Adam is called upon the name the animals. Back when I first got to Washington Karisse stayed behind in New Mexico to finish out the school year. She came to visit over Spring Break. I went to SEATAC to pick her up and the time came when I saw her walk through into the public area. She immediately scanned the crowd and our eyes met in recognition. I had one name on my mind, "Karisse," and she had one name on hers, "Paul." For that moment the rest of the people disappeared, for we were once more together. Naming recognizes someone or something as present

and significant. All the animals were present and significant to Adam, and that is important, but a suitable companion was not found because none of them were human, and so, woman is created. This passage has been used to put men above women, but that completely misses the point. The point is relationship. Adam declares, "Here at last is bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh." In that intimate recognition of oneself in the other, the first human community bursts forth. They are two, but they are also one. They are kin.

In the lesson from the Apostolic Tradition, the author argues that in Jesus, God the Son has created the world, and then has come into the world and tasted death for the world he created, bringing together all of us under one Name. One time while in Honduras, I was standing with Fr. Dagoberto as he oversaw the digging of the foundations of the Episcopal church building in the town of Yuscarán. One of the workers said something to him about me, and understanding what he said, I replied. He looked at me with the classic deer-in-the-headlights look and blurted, "I'm sorry, I didn't know you were Honduran!" I admitted I really wasn't, but Fr. Dago put his arm around my shoulder and said, "Oh, yes, for us he's Honduran." In an instant, my fellow priest and friend, crucified the distance, and made me kin.

In Christ, God is saying, "Here, in humanity, is bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh. We are kin."

Interpreters of today's Gospel lesson too often get lost in the weeds. The Jews have come to challenge Jesus with a question that is sure to trip him up. "What about divorce? Moses commanded that a man could write his wife a certificate of divorce and send her home to mama. What do you say?" (Note: this passage is not a treatise about divorce as much as a power-play between the Jews and Jesus.)

Jesus, in classic form, goes to the root of the matter rather than getting lost in the weeds. He quotes from this morning's first lesson. Remember that marriage is first about relationships. "Bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh."

Let's look at what Jesus is NOT saying. I had someone in my office once who told me about how her ex-husband had hit her so hard, she lost her front teeth. He told her she would never be attractive to anyone else. This was not a relationship that built up, but tore down, a perversion of what God is doing in the world, the opposite of the relationship of love that creates true human kinship. I also knew a woman who divorced her first husband to marry "someone she could control." In Jesus' day people were using lax divorce rules to slip out of inconvenient marriages, cheapening the profound relationship of "bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh," disposing too easily of kinship. The question is not rules about divorce. It is about relationships that build up or relationships that destroy. Love is the relationship that builds up. Jesus calls them to recognize the significance of "bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh," the kinship of human community.

The language of this passage is exclusively man-woman, reflecting the thinking of the day, but not necessarily reflecting what we know to be relationships that are deep, godly, lifegiving, "bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh" kinship among same-gender loving people.

"Bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh." Perhaps we have such a universal fascination with pets because we know deep in our bones that this phrase extends beyond the human species.

The other day I took my dogs to the vet for their annual checkups and shots. Aldo, the mini dachshund, is 14 and feeling his age. He is grey around the muzzle, he has hardly any teeth, and he is getting a bit confused about things. He prefers to sit on his little cushion and bark at the other dogs when they go out to bark a greeting to a passing dog—or person. I have had him since he was 10 months old. He's been a great dog all these years. However, dogs age faster than humans do. He long ago passed me up. But I am aging, and the day will come when I, too, feel my age more acutely than I do. All of my hair will have migrated to my ears and my nose. I'll probably have fewer actual original teeth. I'll get even more confused about things, and I'll be content to let the young bucks do ALL the heavy lifting rather than most. In a way, this dog is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh. The same life process he lives is what I live. The arc of his life is the same arc as mine. We both live and die on this earth. He is kin.

The other day I was using some spray paint on something in the front yard, rather than in the garage, to avoid the fumes. 30 feet away my hawk, Aelrod, sat on a perch. Now, birds' respiratory systems are highly tuned oxygen delivery systems to highly specialized animals. They are much more sensitive to toxic fumes than we are. I made sure the wind was not blowing his way. Maybe I could add to "Bone of my Bone and Flesh of my Flesh," "Breath of my Breath." The air we breathe is the same air. The same pollutants challenge him as they do me, but even more so. His well-being is tied up inseparably with my well-being. He is kin.

When I was a young man in Ecuador I often took to the mountains. Laurie was my most frequent companion, and we would camp, hike, hunt and fish in the shadow of some amazing Andean snow-capped peaks. Antizana was the closest and on a clear day dominated the horizon. Sitting on a hillside one clear evening, we watched the sun light up the snowfields of Antizana and set them ablaze with pink light. The mountain came alive to the physical eye, and gave expression to something my spirit had known since the first trip to the mountains. The mountains are a presence, drawing their being from the Great Presence from which I draw mine. The warming earth is melting Antizana's snowfields and glaciers, even as it wreaks havoc with weather around the world. Antizana and I are caught up in the same drama. If the dogs are bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh, and the hawk is breath of my breath, then the mountains are spirit of my spirit. We are kin.

How do you care for kin?