

Pentecost 21, Proper 24
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

October 17, 2021
Rev. Paul Moore

Redeem the suffering

The other day Karisse and I were going somewhere when we passed a couple with two large black lab mixes. One had a red collar on and the other had a blue one. Karisse immediately got a hitch in her throat and started to tear up. Being the clueless male that I am, it took me an instant to figure out why. This past year our eldest son and his family had to say goodbye to two large black lab mixes—one who wore a red collar and one who wore a blue one. They had been with the couple since before they were married, and were not only part of the extended family, but when one had to be put down because of advancing cancer, it was not long before the other followed her sister. They have not even begun thinking about more dogs yet, the hole is too deep and the pain of loss too raw.

I often get asked if animals have souls, If by "soul" you mean eternal value in the eyes of God, then unquestionably yes. Franciscan sister and theologian Ilio Delio writes about animals,

Love makes us something; it makes us alive and draws us in to the dynamism of life, sustaining life's flow despite many layers of sufferings and disappointments. . . . If God is love, then the vitality of love, even the love of a furry creature, is the dynamic presence of God.

. . .

El amor nos convierte en algo; nos haga sentir plenamente vivos y nos recoge en el dinamismo de la vida, manteniendo la corriente de la vida a pesar de muchas intensidades de sufrimientos y desilusiones...si Dios en amor, la vitalidad del amor, aún para un animalito, es la presencia dinámica de Dios...

If you mean a self-consciousness, I really don't know. I'm not even sure that is true of all human beings. Self-consciousness requires spiritual development, growth and a modicum of maturity. But I would not be surprised if it were so.

If you mean creating a space in the community of the living, such that when that space goes vacant others who knew them remember them and mourning, undoubtedly. They certainly seem to exhibit emotions we recognize, and attachments to others like and unlike themselves. Many of our Native American siblings talk about human and non-human people.

But love is inseparable from pain. I tend to get the question of animals and souls when one is particularly aware of one's attachment to one's non-human companions, as in when they pass, as if perhaps being a man of the cloth I should know something about this. I

think the question is really about how to deal with the pain of the loss of someone you loved. If our beloved pets have souls, then somehow their loss is more significant, and the pain is more understandable—not less intense, but more understandable, and if more understandable, then potentially redemptive.

This idea is reflected in our readings today. The passage from Isaiah is usually taken out of context by Christians. This is a Jewish text, meant for a Jewish audience, outside the perspective of the death and resurrection of Jesus. We Christians borrow some of this language to talk about how we understand Jesus' death and resurrection. Yet clearly the theme of the suffering servant who redeems others through that suffering is central. In and through the suffering servant God redeems the suffering.

In the passage from Hebrews, Jesus is named a priest after the order of Melchizedek. Melchizedek is a shadowy figure from the book of Genesis who receives a tithe of the spoils of war from Abraham and blesses him. He is called a priest of the Most High, long before the Hebrew priesthood of Aaron, Moses' brother. He becomes emblematic of the one chosen by God, not by human design. Here, Jesus, like Melchizedek, is chosen by God, formed by his suffering, transformed into our High Priest, capable of empathizing with us because of what he has endured. Everywhere there is suffering, human or otherwise, Jesus' ministry as High Priest redeems the suffering.

In the Gospel lesson we see a reflection of Washington DC. Here are James and John, whom Jesus nicknamed "Sons of Thunder," that speaks volumes, doesn't it? (We have our own "sons of thunder.") These two seek positions of power in the coming Kingdom. Of course, we're not told who was going to get the top seat on the right hand. That would be a civil war fought later, to be sure. But Jesus seizes on the teachable moment. Are you able to drink the cup I will drink, and be baptized with the baptism I will undergo? In other words, "I'm about to go to the Cross. Are you willing to do the same?"

Naively, (or because they really don't have any other options,) they say, "Of course!" (Things are looking hopeful. If they can't get it by assignment, maybe they can earn it!) And then the zinger! "You *will* indeed drink of my cup and share in my baptism. You *will* walk the way of the Cross. And you *will* learn what true greatness is in the Kingdom." History plays out Jesus' words. Herod martyred James in the early days of the Church. John survived to inspire what became the Gospel that bears his name. But in the end, that's not what this is all about. Discipleship is not about being great in this world's eyes. It is about following the one who is the "ransom for many." A ransom, it has been pointed out, frees someone from slavery. Jesus ransoms us from the slavery of sin, and calls us to live into a ransomed and ransoming way of life. We affirm that commitment when we declare that we believe that God is healing and restoring the world, and that we are recipients of and participants in that healing and restoration.

Redeem the suffering. How do we do that? Redeeming the suffering requires sacrifice; sacrifice of our time, energy and resources for the sake of others. This weekend Karisse is in Palouse, spending 3 precious days with the Archangel. It was by invitation—the kids had an outing they wanted to go on, but the pain of driving over and back for such a

short time was nothing compared to being able to spend time with them and the grandson. This is a small version of what we sacrifice for our family all the time, in measure great and small. But family is flesh and blood—and they say blood runs thicker than water. How about others that we do not recognize as blood? Are they really so alien? Are they not of the human family? Paul Fuentes, our OPOP Releasing Friend, is part of the human family. The person who believes opposite you politically, is part of the human family. How far does “blood” go?

Then there are those who are kin but are not part of the human family—not just our pets, that’s easy—but the rest of the created order who have the same source and end, who breathe the same air, drink the same water, and walk the same earth.

More difficult is the sacrifice of our own desire for significance. Catholic monastic, author and teacher Henri Nouwen spent some time in Bolivia and Peru. He went to explore the intersection between faith and justice, and to discern his own role in it. When he returned, he wrote a book titled, *Gracias, Thank you*. This great spiritual teacher found that the humble poor in Latin America gave him such huge gifts that all he could say in response was, Gracias! Thank you! This bright light of our Christian faith shone the light on others rather than on himself. We talk about Jesus as the Son of God, an equal member of the Trinity, through whom all things were made, and rightly so. But if you look at what Jesus does, he always points back to the One he called Father. He has come to serve, not to be served. Redeeming the suffering means actively finding ways to honor others, to lift them up, to recognize them, to give them prominence, without a thought about your own position.

Redeeming the suffering happens in the Beloved Community. In a recent sermon I mentioned a woman whose ex-husband had knocked out all her front teeth. She told me over and over again how abusive he had been, and when she got false teeth, she was so proud to come and show me. She’s with Jesus now, so the pain is fully redeemed, but every time she rehearsed her pain it weighed on her just a little bit less, until the day came when we talked, not of her pain, but of her future. One of the most powerful things this brave woman taught me was that I, too, have un-named pain. We all do, and when we have the attentive ear of someone we trust, the pain is redeemed, its wisdom mined, and its energy redirected into good things. But this only happens in community. Jesus’ death on the cross did not happen in a corner. All kinds of people were there, including the bravest of the disciples. The resurrection would mean nothing if Jesus had not appeared to his disciples afterwards. Redemption happens when we gather to form the Beloved Community around the risen Christ.

Redeeming the suffering moves us outward. Last Monday evening I attended a rally hosted by One America. Similar rallies took place around the state and the nation, each of them naming one pain: The desire for citizenship for people who live here, work here, raise their families here, pay taxes here and want a life here, but who do not have legal standing. The rallies focused on lawmakers who have promised a path to citizenship, and asked that they live up to their promise. I attended because I, too, believe they should have a path to citizenship.

It wasn't much, to stand with these people and share in their slogans, to listen to their stories, but it was something rather than nothing. I even wrote our senators an email using their online link, making my citizen's voice heard. How can we say we believe in redemption if we don't do something to help it happen? How can we say we believe we are recipients of the healing and restoration of the world if we aren't also participants in that healing and restoration?