

***Poplar Ridge Meeting for Worship
November 7, 2021
Jesus, The Cross, and The Sum of Us***

Prelude

Welcome and Invocation: Jesus, the Cross, the Paradox, the Mystery

Readings: Romans, 1Corinthians, Matthew

Interlude

Reading: Richard Rohr

Joys and Concerns

Interlude

Prayer

Message: The Sum of Us

Benediction: This is my beloved son.

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Welcome and Invocation

Good morning Friends. Welcome to our first worship of November. I am Rebecca Schillenback, and I'll be leading us through worship together this morning, along with Mary Jo Granger, who was very patient with me as I tried to discern today's message, and will be offering us her beautiful music ministry today on the piano.

Today's message began as questions about how to offer authentic prayers and useful ministry with integrity to the people in my care as a hospice chaplain whose beliefs, particularly about Jesus, really, centrally, deeply important to them are not just different from my own but perhaps even in some ways directly opposite of my beliefs. Those questions that began the process of finding a message this week were urgent, because I was asked by a family to officiate at the funeral of someone who died on hospice services, someone whose first words to me were 'We've accepted Jesus as our Lord and Savior, have you?'

So today I offer the message that came as the result of this pointed question directed at me, and the questions that followed thereafter about Jesus and the cross, about differences and dualisms, how it all adds up, and where God is. To begin, here is a reflection from the meditations of Franciscan priest Richard Rohr as an invocation:

The genius of Jesus' ministry is that he embraces tragedy, suffering, pain, betrayal, and death itself to bring us to God. There are no dead ends. Everything can be transmuted, and everything can be used. Everything. It seems that everybody wants to take easy sides. It's so consoling ...to have an answer; to be sure that my position is the final and only true answer. Yet, as (the writings of Paul) (say), on the cross Jesus becomes the sin and the problem. He identifies with the wound, the pain, (the evil done unto others, the fate of criminals) and the suffering ... He does not stand apart from it but enters into it. What a paradox, what a mystery!

Readings: With ears tuned to this paradox and mystery, I'll offer now three short scriptural readings. Then Mary Jo will play a reflective interlude and I'll share one more longer reading.

Romans 7:19-25

¹⁹For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.²⁰Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. ²¹So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. ²²For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, ²³but I see in the parts of myself another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in all these parts. ²⁴Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? ²⁵Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

1 Corinthians 1:18

¹⁸For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Matthew 3:17

¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

~First Interlude~

Readings, continued: This last, longer reading is also from the daily reflections of Franciscan Richard Rohr, whose words I shared for our invocation. This is the meditation that I received in my email inbox this Wednesday, the day after I officiated the funeral for my born again Christian friend. Father Rohr writes:

I do not think it is overly dramatic to say that Western civilization appears to be in a state of spiritual emergency. For religion to be effective in linking us with the Something More, it must create a hopeful, symbolic universe that both settles and liberates the human soul. When “God reigns,” the many disparate parts are held together in one coherent Totality, the Way-Things-Work is clear, even if demanding. But we no longer live in such a world. The cosmic egg has broken.

In the practical order, the result is polarization at every level. The rifts and chasms between even good people sometimes seem impossible to bridge. Groups are unable to respect one another, engage in civil dialogue, act in service and justice for the common good, or basically honor what God is apparently quite patient about: the human struggle and the essentially tragic nature of all life.

Catholic Christianity proclaimed this symbolic pattern mythically and brilliantly as the Paschal Mystery: “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again!” The Eucharistic ritual continues to name this pattern as the mystery of faith, but a people obsessed with progress, consumption, and the quick-fix no longer has the appropriate software to decode the message. The hardware, I believe, is still waiting in the vast unconscious.

The breach is no one’s fault in particular, but now it is our responsibility together to mend it. I cannot imagine what else would please and honor the Creator of us all. When we no longer know how to constellate a symbolic universe, all we have left are private pathologies and storylines to explain ourselves. Each group proclaims and protects its “rights” and moral superiority to the other. A common life is no longer possible except in an ever-shrinking enclave of folks who think just like we do. While quite appropriate for protection of the ego, such self-insulating ideas usually have little to do with the daring and wonderful search for God. Mere credal or civil religion does not give us access to the rich and revelatory world of Spirit. In

fact, it blocks the journey into grief, into the Mystery, into the Paradox, into ecstasy, into Universal Compassion, into the Universal Christ.

I believe that Jesus-who-became-the-Christ still stands as (a) perfect mediator of all that is human and good. The cross stands as the intersection of opposites between heaven and earth, divine and human, inner and outer—revealing at the same time the price of that intersection. It seems that the universal law is that something must always die for something else to live. ... Such is the (paradoxical) “pattern that connects” all things.

~Joys and Concerns~

~Second Interlude~

~Prayer~

Holy God, we come to you again in this time, set aside from ordinary time, stepping outside, for a moment, the noise and the fighting and the ever deepening crises...we come to remember again the common life we all share in you. In silence, in melody, in words that reach for you, we find our way together to the intersection between heaven and earth, divine and human, inner and outer ~ and here we pray. We pray with our presence, pray that with our practice we may bring this presence to bear upon the world that presses in on us. We pray with our presence that you may be present in us, to us, with us, through us. In the paradox of good and bad. In the mystery of grief and love. In the gift of life and death. We pray to be present within these paradoxes, and to feel your presence here among us.

Amen.

Message One morning this fall, as we were all scurrying to get ready for work and school, my ten year old son Cazimer came to me in great distress, with something like panic in his eyes. In conversation with his brother he had used a word that was in the forbidden, hands-off, high caliber, punching- down category of offensive, mean-spirited, derogatory words. It was an accident, he said, his face stricken. It just came out. He knew he had said an ugly thing, a word with a sorrowful, mean history, and now he was really afraid. Afraid that that ugly word let loose in the world had shown to the world the ugliness where it had come from ~ in him. He feared that he was as bad as the use of that word had proven ~ as mean and crass, as ugly and unkind.

I recognized the sickening feeling of regret in his teary face, as well as the nauseating realization that something unkind was a constituent of his self. I saw his desire to distance and disengage from this inner meanness, ugliness and ignorance. And I recognized too the convicting Light of the conscience within him, the moral distress that propelled him to seek me out, and called forth in him the need to confess, to find a witness, and to have reflected back to him the assurance that he is more than the ugliest, meanest and most ignorant parts of himself, that they are nowhere near the sum of him, as a boy, as a human being. He was so sincere in his distress, and so pained by his momentary failing. And he proved, to his mother, who loves him infinitely, his infinite goodness ~ just by his response to the existence of the bad. All of this, I said to him.

I have been thinking ever since about the existence of the good and the bad parts of ourselves, the mean-ness *and* the kindness, the ugliness *and* the beauty. I've been thinking about the need to be seen and loved in all our parts, in the sum of us as human beings. That evocative phrase, 'The Sum of Us' is the title of a book I've just gotten out of the library this week, written by American political commentator and strategist Heather McGhee earlier this year. Her book 'The Sum of Us' has the subtitle 'What Racism Costs Everyone And How We Can Prosper Together.' I've only just begun to read it, but what strikes me strongly so far is her compassion. She's clear-eyed and compassionate in her analysis of the moral and spiritual failings of the

collective American democratic experiment, and the cost to everyone of the zero-sum socio-political-economic frameworks and ideologies that divide and pit us against each other, keep the parts of the whole fighting. I'm struck also by her optimism -- by her belief in the possibility of the sum of us, the possibility of meeting each other in the places of creative potential where all our differences come together and aggregate, add up -- the places where we together are greater than the sum of our parts.

In my new job, as hospice chaplain for Cortland County over the last four months, I have been present with people as they reflect on and take a final accounting of the sum of their lives. I have listened to people who are at the end of their lives, and I have listened to the ones accompanying them -- their caregivers and their vigil keepers. Many people ask questions about the sum of Life, when its end is near. They ask: have I done my best? Have I done this -- this living, dying, caregiving, vigiling -- have I done it as well as I could have? Have I been good? What is the sum of me? Sometimes, like Caz, they make confessions, they seek a witness, they confess the things that prick their conscience, and convict them in its Light. And sometimes, like Caz, they seek assurance ~ assurance that, in the final accounting, they are more than the ugliest, meanest and most ignorant parts of themselves.

I don't know the definitive answers to any of the questions that people ask in close proximity to death. And I am not, of course, the authoritative judge or the final accountant on the sum of human Life. But I can say that, as with my beloved son, in the confessions and in the questions ~ I have seen proof of the good, proof of the existence of something that calls forth the good, proof of a capacity for the beauty, kindness, compassion, and wisdom to answer the ugly, the mean, and the ignorant. Many of the people I meet live on the other side from me of all the various cultural divides that seem so deeply etched these days, conflicts that are always framed in zero-sum, either/or ways. I've often felt uneasy on my hospice visits, worried that the conversation might veer into the sensitive, zero-sum conflict zones. Sometimes it does. If it does, I do what I can then to listen in love, to listen for the place in everyone where the sum of

us is more than the ugly and mean, where the differences converge, where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

‘The whole is greater than the sum of its parts’ is one of the messages I bring over and over again to this meeting in different ways. Another is listening in love, practicing the faith that there is a presence or a place in all of us where differences converge. Another is the belief in the spiritual capacity of human beings to see the Sacred in dualisms like good and bad, life and death, parts and the whole, failure and learning, to see that these fruitful paradoxes bring with them both pain and growth ~ another paradox.

In some theological strains of the Christian tradition, the cross has been understood as a symbol that distills all these messages. The cross signifies this kind of paradoxical, holy meeting place where differences converge, where opposites meet, where something that is too difficult and terrible to bear brings transformation, resurrection. The symbol of the cross speaks honestly to both the divine pain and the blessed power of the sum of human life. Of course it is a scandalous and terrible and problematic symbol. Of course it’s been used by imperial iterations of Christianity ever since the Roman empire ~ which used crosses as instruments of torture and public execution ~ absorbed the Christian movement that had grown in the centuries after the empire put to death an upstart rabbi named Jesus on one of its thousands of crosses, and after Jesus and his followers proved that love is always stronger than death.

When that happened ~ when the empire’s juggernaut of violent domination coopted the Christian narrative of martyrdom at the hands of that empire ~ then the Christian narrative adapted to accommodate and support the demands of domination. And here we are: in a time that feels as if our species is on the cross of an existential accounting of the sum of human life.

In a literalist interpretation of atonement theology, the cross is understood as the divine apparatus by which God sacrificed God’s one, perfectly, purely, good, son Jesus ~ to satisfy God’s need for atonement for the sins of God’s other bad children (~ which is all of us.) That theological narrative is probably

one that most of us have some cultural familiarity with, because it's the dominant one, enforced as orthodoxy by the domination form of Christianity. We don't talk too much about it here in this Quaker meeting. It's a sore spot. And in my opinion, there are many theological problems and inconsistencies in it. But many of my patients deeply believe and are deeply comforted by this atonement theology of the cross. For them, the cross is an emblem of the literal sacrifice by which they are saved from their badness. Jesus relieves them of it and takes it away. If I too believed this, if I had that kind of theology to offer to *my* beloved son Cazimer, I might have said that the thing to do when confronted by the revelation of some inner meanness, unkindness, or ignorance is to pray to Jesus to take it from him, pray to Jesus to take that sin, that badness, because if Jesus does, then the bad parts will be nailed with him to the cross. And in Jesus' dying on the cross, Caz's unkindness will be transformed. We don't know how or why. We don't understand the divine mechanics. "We just have to believe it," I might say to comfort him. "And then in Christ's resurrection, all that is left in us, and in you, my beloved son, is pure and good ~ no more badness." I could confidently declare.

But I can't give that to Caz because I believe something else. My theology of the cross is different from that one, but I think I can understand its appeal, the fervent need to transmute the things that feel bad inside. and I try to listen from this understanding when my patients give it voice and to think of my distraught son's face when he discovered that he is not all good. I remember how much I believe in his goodness, and how much I love him.

The theology of the cross that most makes sense to me is a mythical, mystical, and metaphorical one, one that sees in all the dualisms the paradoxical cruciform place of pain and power where the Sacred resides. Where God IS. Where God is, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and even the mean-ness, the ugliness, and the ignorance can be witnessed with infinite love. Where God is, death brings awareness of life's preciousness. Where God is, love is always stronger than death. Where God is, mistakes and failings bring wisdom and learning, the differences and dualisms converge, there is both pain

and growth. Where God is, is the sum of our humanity, the sum of our human lives. Where God is, that is the sum of us.

~Silent Waiting Worship~

~Benediction~

Matthew 3:17

¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

May we hear that voice from heaven when we need to know we are beloved, when we need to know the full sum of our human lives.

May we be that voice from heaven when someone else needs to know they are beloved, needs to know the full sum of their human lives.

Where God is, that is the sum of our humanity. Where God is, that is the sum of us.