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Ransomed?

I recently bought a puppy, a miniature long-hair dachshund. We had a couple of dachshunds when I was a kid and it's sort of returning to my roots. Of course, we need a third dog in the house like the proverbial hole in the head, but what the hay, you only live once. Brought this eight week old bundle of need home from the breeder yesterday and we've all been the throes of adapting. The other two dogs, the corgi and the King Charles, both rescue dogs from the pound, are having nothing to do with the newcomer. Stand-offish is a mild way to describe their avoidance. But we shall persevere and soon the newcomer will be integrated into our household.

I've been a Christian now for over fifty years. I had a conversion experience when I was fourteen and have spent the last fifty years intrigued by Jesus, both who He is and what He means. In this, I'm like every other Christian for the past two thousand years, to one degree or another. The early church struggled with Jesus, knowing Him, understanding Him, loving Him. Their struggles echo down to our own day. The Nicene Creed that we recite every Sunday as a summary of our church's (and our own) faith is the result of early church councils of thinkers and leaders trying to hammer out a human way to understand a divine mystery, the union of God with creation in Jesus Christ. It's not been easy, it wasn't then, it isn't now.

In all the past fifty years, I've never been a fan of the theory of ransom in all its forms. This was a favorite of Reformation theologians and it sounds down through the centuries to our own age just as roundly as the Creed. We all have heard it in one form or another: the human race was in bondage to Satan because of our sin, racial and personal. God bought (ransomed) the human race back from Satan by His own death in Jesus of Nazareth. The triumph of God was the resurrection of Jesus into new life and the attendant promise of the same new life to the newly ransomed human race. It's a nice theory, makes a hero of God and certainly of Jesus, but it always seemed a little forced to me. Why couldn't the omnipotent God, Master of all creation, just decree that humankind are now free of sin and are Her very own children?

So I have liked other theories of the meaning of Jesus' life and death, His love and His sacrifice, much better than ransoming. There are many of them, and each has its own merits and weaknesses. My favorite is that the incarnation is the way that God fashioned to be a part of human life, creation's life; it is the way the God found to live *with* us, as well as *for* us. While I give intellectual assent to the idea that I am helpless to save myself from my own and our racial sin, it's pretty much that, an intellectual concept rather than one that lives in my gut. (Maybe I need a truer understanding of just how weak and needful I am.) What does live in my gut is the wonder that God in Jesus lives *with* me and every human being. No matter where your life and mine go, no matter what happens to us, no matter what we suffer, no matter the ecstasy we walk in, God accompanies us every second of the day, every breath we draw, and every beat of our heart. That is what the love of the Father means, that is what the union of divinity with humanity in Jesus means, that is what God's Spirit living in us and with us and for us means.

What all of the theories about the meaning of Jesus share is a boundless confidence in the love of God for Her human children. When all is said and done, that is where I end up, that is what I rest in. And dogs and puppies are for me a sacrament and a symbol of that love. I find God in dog. Their unquestioning love is a sign for me of God's unquestioning love, for each and every one of us.

Even the idea of ransoming has been redeemed by my dog experience. When I paid the fees of the dog pound and brought the rescued dogs home, I saved them from literal death, if they had not been adopted by someone. They were going to die and with my intervention now they could live. Seems pretty close to what ransoming is about. If we trust the scientists' teaching that our universe is running down, that it will end someday in cold embers of the energy and life it now exhibits, then God's intervention to give resurrected, eternal life to His loved ones looks very much like a purchasing. We could conceive of it in other ways, but this is one way.

Buying the puppy, by the way her name is Emily, adds another dimension to ransom. I took something valuable, a fair amount of money, the result of time and energy on my part, and gave that to the breeder in return for her skill in breeding, her care of a pregnant mother, her nurturing of vulnerable life, until I could become a part of Emily's life. It isn't so much that I bought Emily as that I bought *into* her life. Maybe that is what God ransoming us is all about. God has bought into our lives. And He did this by living a human life, dying a human death, and bringing all of that into a new dimension by Jesus' resurrection.

One of the more difficult parts of this puppy adaption process is not being able to relieve Emily's distress at losing her mother and littermates. She is moaning a lot, as all puppies do, and eventually this will end. What she doesn't quite yet understand is that she has a new life, new loves, a new destiny, that is going to last for years (we hope). I can't talk her language to communicate that to her. It will just have to come with time and experience of love and belonging. Maybe that is what God was trying to do in Jesus, communicate to us in ways that we can understand a life and destiny that is completely beyond what we could naturally expect.

One of the curious things about this process is how comforting to Emily my talking to her is. She, of course, doesn't understand the words, but there seems to be something about hearing a voice that is comforting to her, that stops her crying. I suppose we could do a little exploring some day about the meaning of Word, both for God and His Word Jesus, and for ourselves and even our dogs. There seems to be some mystical power in the nature of word and talk. No wonder the New Testament writers picked up on that as a powerful metaphor for the Christ experience.

Well, anyway, there we are. You can't keep a good theologian down. Everything that comes into his or her life is grist for understanding that Infinite Reality, aka God, that sits at the heart of our lives and experience. God is in everything, if we but have eyes to see and ears to hear.

O God, you have ransomed me out of the inadequacy of my merely natural life. You have re-made me into a supernatural creature by your love and word. Thank you for your kindness. Amen.