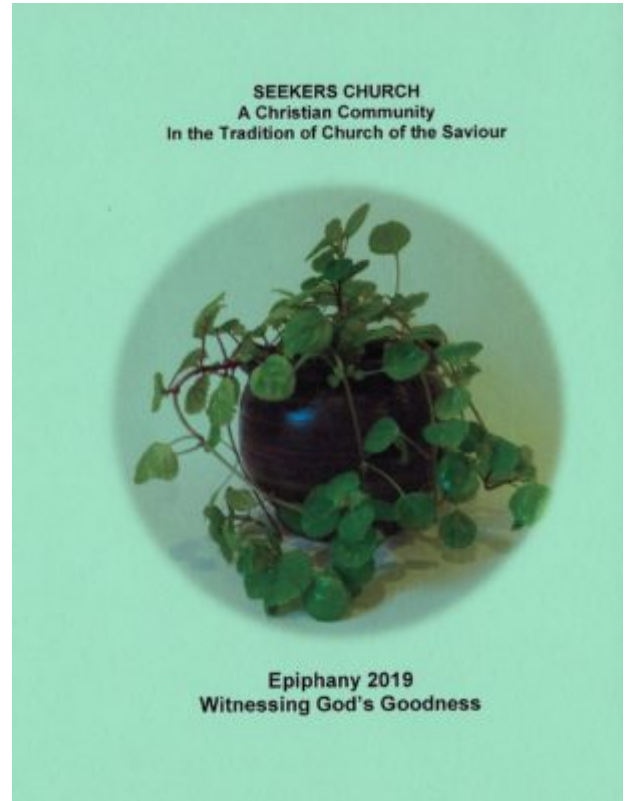


“Indispensable” by John Morris

January 27, 2019



The Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Saturday, January 19th

Our cat Lula is dying. The vet can't find anything specific wrong with Lula, though she suspects liver disease or possibly a recurrence of a malignancy that resulted in her having one eye removed last year. Mainly, she's old – at least she acts old; we got her from a shelter ten years ago, so we don't really know her age. Now she's all but stopped eating, has lost close to half her body weight, and doesn't have much interest in anything besides dozing on my lap, or Katie's. But she's not in any pain as far as I can tell, nor does she seem uncomfortable. She's just dying; her flame is turning down lower and lower.



This all came on quite suddenly, and I was not prepared to start thinking about the loss of my beloved companion. As I write this, I'm not sure whether I ought to try to find words to express the love and connection that exists between a human and an animal who have shared

their lives for many years. Last Sunday, Larry brought this home to us, talking about the wonderful dog, Ripken. I think it's probably either unnecessary or useless to try to explain this bond. If you've loved an animal, then you know, and you know what a dreadful prospect it is to lose them. And if you haven't had that experience, I probably can't really describe it, but trust me, it's a deep, fearful pain.

So, what do we do when we feel deep fearful pain? Well, as a recovered alcoholic and addict, even after a lot of years sober, my first instinct is still classic: How can I *stop feeling* this pain, how can I turn the negative emotion into a positive one? Isn't there some spiritual button I can push? Maybe if I pray hard enough . . . ?

But I've learned that spiritual solutions don't work that way. I have to go past my first reaction, and truly ask God to show me, not how to avoid the feeling of loss and grief, but what I can do with it. By leaning into the feeling, more is revealed. So with Lula . . . when I contemplate her death, I feel deprived of her company, of the imagined future time with her. But I can also turn that same feeling into an awareness of gratitude, a contemplation of how fortunate I've been in having those years with her. The feeling doesn't change a bit, but now it's directed to remind me of the gift

I've been given rather than the gift I thought I was going to get – more time with Lula. Does this “help”? As I say, it doesn't change the feelings. I dread her leaving me, I will be lonely, my life will be poorer. But I can keep turning my attention to the deeper feelings that these feelings of deprivation signal. What really matters here is love, trust, companionship, gift. That's where I find God in my relationship with Lula.

So let's think about First Corinthians Twelve for a minute. Paul gives us a great image: the body of Christ as composed of all the individual Christians, each with their special gifts and abilities. No one person is more important or more needed than any other, just as the eye needs the hand and the head needs the feet. Here's a riddle: What do you call a body that is made up of many other bodies? A community. We Seekers are a community, and we are part of the body of Christ. A complete, healthy body of Christ is a community.

As I say, this is a great image, but it's only an image. And the picture we imagine is, naturally, of a human body with all its parts and organs. But we know that “the body of Christ” is not actually a single physical body at all. It's *like* a physical body, but only in certain ways, the ways Paul so articulately describes. We don't really picture – nor should we – Christ as having a real body that somehow uses human beings as organs and limbs. Not even a small child would be that literal.

My question is: That being the case, can't the body of Christ include non-human animals as well? Why must it be limited to homo sapiens? Let me say at once that Paul would have an answer to that one, as suggested by verse 13: We humans have been baptized in Jesus' name, and have drunk the blood of salvation. That is what qualifies us to be part of the body of Christ. But I have a feeling that we Seekers imagine the body of Christ to be more inclusive than Paul did. In one sense, it's useful to limit Christ's body to professing

Christians, because it emphasizes our common tasks and duties to each other. But in another sense, does God really mean to exclude anyone from this body? Would it follow that a non-Christian can be treated differently, that the “care” and “rejoicing” and “suffering with” that Paul talks about should be withheld from non-Christians? It’s hard for me to imagine. And so it’s only a small step for me to include animals in the body of Christ.

Tuesday, January 22nd

Lula is thinner and thinner. No more food, and when she drinks water, she often can’t keep it down. She still seems to appreciate a lap, but even when she settles in, she doesn’t stay settled, she shifts every few minutes, as if trying to find a comfortable position. No purring, very little sleeping. Katie and I have “the conversation,” the one every animal lover dreads. Then I call a vet who lives nearby and who makes house calls. We arrange for her to come over tomorrow, examine Lula, and – barring some miraculous new development – euthanize her.

Lula is certainly not one of the saints. As Marjory can attest, my cat has engaged in highly un-Christian behavior, such as literally biting the hand that feeds her. What sort of spirit lives within her? That she has an interior, a subjectivity, a self, I have no doubt. She lacks language (though she can give and receive communications). She probably lives in an eternal present. I know she remembers things, but it’s not clear to me that these memories are, in her mind, tagged to something called “the past.” Likewise, “the future” for Lula doesn’t have any meaning; her expectations and hopes, such as they are, occur in that eternal present.

Can such a creature share anything like equal status within the body of Christ? Can we truly say that we need her, just as the eye needs the hand? Well, I haven’t mentioned two

other ways of being that Lula shows. One is the ability to enjoy pleasure and suffer pain. Here she is as human as you or me – or perhaps the better way to put it is that you and I are as animal as she is. One would have to be willfully deaf and blind if, watching Lula demand “scritchies” and purr ferociously while receiving them, one refused to conclude that she was feeling pleasure. And of course, the sight and sound of an animal in pain is also irrefutable, and atrocious.

The other ability I have in mind is the ability to love. Here we have controversy, especially where cats are concerned. When Lula seeks me out, jumps onto my lap, gets herself tucked in, looks into my eyes, and begins her ecstatic purr, she’s definitely loving *something* – but is it me, or her own pleasure? This is a mystery I can’t resolve. Let me try to put it another way. I am certain Lula feels connected to me. I’m certain she knows who I am, trusts me, depends on me, asks me for help, and in years past wanted me for a playmate. Is it possible to feel all those things without love? In fact, what else does “love” amount to, if not that? Surely human babies are also enigmatic as we try to fathom what might be going on inside them, but as soon as the infant is old enough to communicate, we learn to our delight that we are loved.

I hope we can picture the body of Christ as composed of all beings who can love and be loved. And I’m not picky about the Pauline image. Maybe it would be better to reserve the image of “the body of Christ” for the community of Christians. As I said earlier, there’s definitely some use to that, since it reminds us of our specific Christian obligations to each other. But then we need another image, another concept, to help us picture this enormous interconnected community of life, one that is as big as creation itself. Our planet can’t do without its animals, any more than the body can manage without a head or a heart. Maybe we Christians are the body of Christ, and life on Earth comprises the body of Gaia, the Earth Mother of Greek mythology. Since humans evolved from

other animals, why not think of our non-human ancestors as the womb of Gaia, and what would an Earth Mother be without a womb?

Wednesday, January 23rd

Doctor Carol arrives promptly at two. After telling us what everyone tells us upon first sight of Lula – Oh, she’s so beautiful – Doctor Carol examines her. “I can feel a large, hard tumor on her liver,” she tells us. It’s probably grown very quickly. Doctor Carol explains how all of Lula’s symptoms are likely related to this liver cancer, and assures us that it’s definitely time to let our cat go. I’m having trouble talking at this point, but I nod. Katie agrees too. Doctor Carol administers the first, sedating injection, and Lula, true to form, manages to rouse herself enough to bite the doctor quite effectively on the sleeve of her shirt. No blood drawn, which surely disappointed Lula, but at least she got in her last licks, a little extra treat before going off to be a good kitty in Heaven. I keep her on my lap as the final injection goes in. She dies quickly and calmly. It seems impossible that her fluffy soft body has experienced this unfathomable change, but it has. Lula was there, and now she is gone.

In the next days, I find *myself* diminished without Lula. There were certain parts of me – ways of feeling and thinking and acting – that only came out with Lula. So without her, I don’t have those experiences. It is a bit like missing a part of myself, my spiritual body. I move around our house, and everywhere I go is a place where Lula is not. Of course I can’t stop looking for her – that’s a habit that will take months to break. But I look inside myself too, and feel smaller and less alive. Until . . . I find a memory of Lula, the exact feel of her fur, the girth of her belly, her tufty black paws, the way she refused to quit the field as she confronted her enemy, the vacuum cleaner. Now I feel more

alive, more grateful to have loved her. Katie prints out a number of photos of Lula through the years, and we position them around the house. It's a great idea, because every time I see one, I smile, and remember this uniquely insane and lovable feline.

Well, I don't know if this makes sense, or if I've convinced anyone that a cat deserves to be considered a Christian, or whatever I was trying to convince you of. Maybe this is just one person's witness of the meaning of love, connection, and community. I don't know how much more I'd have to love Lula in order for her to qualify as part of Christ's body. That seems the wrong question. Let's not get seduced by Paul's otherwise useful image. Instead, we can affirm with him: If one member suffers, all suffer together with him; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with him. Thank you for suffering with me this morning, and for honoring my memories of one small but indispensable vessel of God's infinite love.