

**Catholic Church of the Beatitudes  
Santa Barbara, CA**

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A – Sep. 13, 2015

**Suzanne Dunn, RCWP**

Is. 50:5-9; James 2:14-18; Mk. 8:27-35

**T**he readings this Sunday introduce the theme of suffering, dying and rising. The first reading and the Gospel feature two figures who were willingly defined by suffering, for it was through their suffering that they were able to show their true face to the world.

In the first reading, Isaiah describes in vivid detail the suffering the *prophet* endured for the sake of his ministry. To bring healing and wholeness to the blind, the deaf and the lame, the prophet did not shield himself but gave himself over to the wrath of those he had come to save. And in our gospel reading, as soon as Peter proclaimed that Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus began to define himself as the Christ in terms of suffering. He would be rejected, would suffer greatly and be killed. And indeed, in spite of Peter's protest, that is exactly what happened.

So how do we explain this suffering unto death, so central to our Catholic belief system?

In the past, we understood this mystery in terms of a salvific event. This suffering and death led to our redemption. And in addition, Jesus insisted that his followers should be identified in the same way. Through their suffering for being his disciples, Jesus' followers become who they truly are—living and breathing reflections of him in the world. Disciples do not choose suffering for suffering's sake; rather, they accept suffering be-

cause of the unity with Jesus that suffering creates and the redemption it helps to effect. In this theory, this is how we participate in the mystery of redemption. But this theory of redemption was predicated on the belief that we were born with original sin and needed to be saved.

What happens now when our understanding of cosmology has changed and broadened our understanding? What happens to the concept of suffering, death and redemption when we begin to see and understand differently?

This morning, I would like to present some ideas from Ilia Delio—from her book, *Making All Things New, Catholicity, Cosmology, and Consciousness*. This Franciscan woman looks at death and dying into love with fresh eyes. She states that Jesus's *catholicity* was a new consciousness and a new cosmos, a living banquet of life empowered by God. Jesus' program of life was not only to be attentive to the whole, of which each one of us is a part, but to create a new whole by receiving the Spirit, the life-giving energy of God. We might call the way of Jesus not only the gospel life but *creative catholicity*.

For too long, Elia states, we have interpreted the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as the reparation for sin. Medieval theology focused attention on original sin and the fall of Adam and Eve. The need to repair

fallen creation and restore humanity to God became the reason for the incarnation. This was a way of explaining evil and death in the patristic era.

Thanks to Teilhard de Chardin, today we are growing and evolving in our understanding that we live not in a static, fixed cosmos, but in an evolutionary and self-organizing cosmos, where each person is co-extensive and co-creative with the entire universe.

Ours is not a “fallen” humanity but a “deep” humanity, embedded in nature from the Big Bang onward. What a difference this makes! While original sin no longer makes sense as an act of disobedience in an otherwise perfect creation, Ilia says we might interpret the “Adam myth” as the power to say “no” (I will not obey). The human “no” is the act of symbolic self-assertion and independence that disrupts nature’s catholicity. In this understanding, the death of Jesus is significant. His “yes” to the immanent love of God was a result of a life lived in fidelity to the demands of love.

Denis Edwards, in his book, *Jesus and the Cosmos*, writes: “Jesus so identified himself with God and God’s concern for humanity, that he accepted the consequences: the experience of profound failure, desertion by most of his community, and even seeming abandonment by the God in whom he had trusted.”

Jesus’s suffering and death was the final expression of his life lived for others. His mission of creative wholeness restores humanity to its integral nature within the whole of evolutionary nature. The radical nature of

death can frighten us—and Jesus feared for his life at the end—but we also see in his surrender to God that death is part of the fullness of life. Death is not due to sin or evil; it is not the opposite of life. Rather, death is integral to life. Without death, there can be no new life. The wisdom of the cross reveals the wisdom of God; it shatters all other forms of knowledge and opens one up to a depth of life that is lasting and true.

Elia states that the paradox of Jesus’s message still eludes us. In the Christian view death is not the end but the beginning of the absolute wholeness of life.

To refuse death—even the “little deaths” of personal differences, career disappointments, or loss of loved ones—is to die. Every time we grab and grip, holding tightly so as to control completely, we kill the whole by snuffing out the Spirit. To be willing to die by surrendering to the freedom of the Spirit is to live forever.

And so, my friends, we have a choice. We can embrace the Spirit in our lives and say YES to the on-going process of death and resurrection or we can exercise our right to say NO and hope for redemption.

When in the depth of your being, you hear: “and you, who do you say that I am?” Will you answer—You are my Lord and redeemer? or will you, rather, exclaim: You are God’s in-breaking love calling us to be part of God’s creative Spirit through prayer, community, and prophetic action!

Your choice will make all the difference in how you choose to live your lives.