

BELIEF *By the Rev. Katheryn Barlow-Williams*

Love and compassion themes of this tale of two dogs

Like me, my soul mate loves to eat, swim and run.

I merely intended for him to be a fling, but after spending a few days together, my affection grew into true love.

He is a 100-pound Labrador retriever/Great Dane mix, and my children named him Toby. Coincidentally, Toby means "God is good."

I found Toby at a building site after I locked my keys in the car. It took my husband more than an hour to bring an extra set. In that hour, my heart filled with pity for the dog. Workers said someone dumped him there as a puppy. For months, he had survived on food

from garbage and water from sprinklers.

When my husband finally arrived, I said, "We need to take this dog to a vet. Then I will drop him off at a shelter."

My husband gasped, "You are going to put that thing in your car? You can see the fleas hopping all over it."

"Can you really just leave this dog out here to die alone?" I asked.

Looking at the dog, he said, "Absolutely!"

Toby and I pleaded with longing eyes until my husband acquiesced and helped the dog get into my car.

After a costly visit with the veterinarian, we learned Toby had parasites and heartworm. We

also learned that shelters are not inclined to take a sick big black dog. They are too difficult to place.

So we resorted to Plan B. We would keep Toby until we found him a forever home. That was seven years ago, and Toby is a beloved, loyal member of our family.

Not long after we got Toby, another black dog started wandering our streets. He looked like Toby, so neighbors repeatedly called to say our dog was loose when he was not.

We often saw Toby's twin, and I named him Shadow because he wandered in the evening.

I tried everything to help Shadow. I took dog treats on walks. I left

water and food on our lawn to gain his trust. Still, the dog avoided me. In fact, the more I tried, the faster he ran.

Shadow lived in a nearby drainage ditch. One winter night when the temperature fell below freezing, I took blankets and food to his ditch. I even crawled deep into the tunnel to place the blankets far from the bitter freeze.

Have I mentioned I hate enclosed dark spaces? Still, a dog's life was at stake. I powered through my fears. Despite my effort and sacrifice, Shadow rejected my friendship. He was a proud homeless dog who had no use for my middle-class values.

One day, Shadow left our neighborhood, and we never saw him again. A friend speculated that animal control workers got him. Another surmised he had died. I like to believe he sought adventure elsewhere.

Even dogs have free will. Like people, some choose to be saved and some not.

We can put the food out and offer blankets of warmth and love. In the end, we cannot force anyone to accept compassion. If Jesus could not save everyone he met, then neither can we. It is heart wrenching to watch someone choose a path that leads to self-destruction. Nonetheless, we must

strive to provide life-giving choices to those who have been deprived of them.

When we share and receive compassion, divine love grows. Even if our efforts are rejected, we still participate in love and proclaim God is good.

A soul mate isn't just one person with whom you spend a lifetime. Whether they have four legs or two, a soul mate is anyone who gives and receives love to unleash God's miracle of healing and new life.

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