

Herding Cats
I Corinthians 12: 4-11
October 18, 2009

Last week I began a sermon series that involves pets. I also had a Blessing of the Animal's Service last Sunday. There were three dogs blessed in that service. There was Chester, my Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, a 9-month-old Doberman pinscher whose name is Jet, and a young Saint Bernard.

As I mentioned in my eBugle article, I did a Blessing of the Animals' Service when I was serving the Royal Oak St. John's United Methodist Church. Once we got Chester, Connie kept asking when I was going to have another blessing.

I picked October 11th for the blessing because it was a free day in the calendar. After I selected that day I began hearing about a number of churches having the same service either on the 11th or the week before on the 4th. What a coincidence I thought.

An E-mail from Ken Dowell helped explain all the blessing services. It seems the Feast of Saint Francis of Assisi is October 4th. Besides being the founder of the Order of Friars Minor, what we know as the Franciscans, St. Francis of Assisi is the Patron Saint of Animals.

The Catholic Church encourages its congregations to do something for animals around October 4th. The blessing of the animals is just one way to recognize the importance of animals and our responsibility to care of them.

Without knowing any of this I choose October 11th as the day to hold the blessing. Since I was blessing them, I thought it would be fun to preach several sermons that relate to our pets. Last week it was the dog I highlighted. Those that were here got to meet Chester. Today it's the cat's turn. Though the cat is second in my series they are first in popularity.

According to a 2007-2008 survey by the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association there are approximately 88.3 million owned cats in the United States. Compare the 88.3 million owned cats to the 74.8 million owned dogs in the United States.

Going by raw numbers the cats are number one. Who are my cat owners? Let's hear it for the cats, yeah!

If we look however at the percentage of homes that have a dog verses a cat, the dog wins the contest. Thirty nine percent (39%) of U.S. households own at least one dog.

There is at least one cat in only 34% of U.S. households. So let's hear it from the dog owners!

The National Pet Survey came out with some interesting numbers. For example:

37% of dog owners owned two (2) or more dogs, where 56% of cat owners had more than one (1) cat. On average, dog owners spent \$219 on vet visits, where the cat owners spent \$175.

We have a cat. Since he is diabetic, we spend more than the average on him. For those that do not own a pet, it might sound crazy to spend a lot of money on an animal. If you have ever had a dog or a cat, you know they become a part of the family. When your pet gets sick, it's hard to not do what you can to get them well!

Our cat by the way is named Duncan. Duncan is an 8-year Tuxedo cat. By Tuxedo, it means he is black and white. We owned Duncan well before we got Chester. Though Duncan did not want anything to do with Chester at first, they are now buddies.

Last week Connie was very concerned that we did not bring Duncan to be blessed. We told her that though he is okay with Chester, he would not like being around the other dogs.

Since we did bring Chester last Sunday, some of you might be wondering if I brought Duncan today. Though I would love to show him off, he is at home, probably sleeping.

Unlike a dog, you really can't put a leash on a cat and take it for a walk. I guess you could try to put a leash or harness on a cat, but I can't see a cat wanting to follow your directions.

Last week when Elizabeth brought Chester into the Sanctuary I called his name and he came running to me. If she had Duncan and let him loose, who knows where he would go. If I called his name, he might come to me. There is however an equal chance that when I called his name, Duncan would take off in the other direction.

You see cats are independent. They do their own thing. We may think we have them trained, but that's just a false sense of security they allow us to have.

There is a phrase that is used to describe an almost impossible situation, to do so in so would be "like herding cats". Can you imagine doing that? Trying to get one to follow a command is hard enough, how about a whole herd?

There is a commercial that was made for ads that goes along with that concept. It was shown during the Super Bowl several years ago. If we had our video system up, I could have shown you the commercial. If we can't watch it, we can at least listen to it.

Do you remember the commercial? Do you recall the rugged cowboys herding the cats? There is one with a ball of yarn by the campfire. Another cowboy has one arm in a sling and the other hand is using a lint roller to remove the cat hair. It's a great commercial!

Herding cats! There are some pastors that use that phrase when talking about their experience leading church folk. They say their members all have an idea of the direction the church needs to be headed. Instead of all working together there are pockets of people going in a variety of directions.

Besides the problem with direction there is also the issue of staffing. Churches find there are too many people wanting to do certain things, and not enough folks to do other tasks. I believe this problem stems from the notion that some jobs in the church are more important than others.

The challenge for us pastors is to help everyone identify their special talents. Once these gifts are recognized, we coordinate the efforts of everyone toward some specific goals.

The struggle of getting church folks united in a common effort has been around from the beginning of the church. Our Scripture Lesson today comes from a letter that was written by the Apostle Paul. In that letter he was addressing the divisions that were occurring in the Church of Corinth.

Folks in the church were prioritizing spiritual gifts. You heard the gifts: wisdom, knowledge, healing, prophecy, leadership, miracles and speaking in tongues. What folks were doing was putting more emphasis on some of the gifts. It seemed that speaking in tongues was one of those gifts thought to be more important, more spiritual.

Rather than working together to spread the good news, there was fighting within the church. Some of the members got frustrated and left. Since there was only one Christian church in Corinth, the people couldn't just transfer their membership to another congregation.

The cats were going everywhere. Paul wanted to instruct the cats/members on how to use their talents in a productive way. Those talents, or spiritual gifts, were given to strengthen the group. As Paul states in verse 7, "A spiritual gift is given to each of us as a means of helping the entire church."

As your pastor it is my job to help you be the church. Every one of you has a gift from God. The goal is to know what that ability is and use it to advance God's kingdom.

As the leader my task is not only to help you identify your gift, but to also give you a direction to where we are headed.

As we move forward into the future, it will take all of us together to build up our church. I know we are an older congregation, but God won't let us stop until we are called home.

When a cat has had enough it will just stop. Once a cat has plopped down, no amount of coaxing will get it to move. Sometimes the tendency is to go so long in ministry and then stop. "Let the younger ones, do it!" "I have done my time!" "I don't have the energy!" These are the comments I and other pastors hear.

My encouragement to you is to stay in the game.

The wisdom and knowledge we have in this sanctuary is incredible. If we can get focused on a few specific goals, than we can really make things happen.

When I think about staying in the game I think about June Morford. I was involved in her Funeral Service several weeks ago. June was the organist for the Flat Rock United Methodist Church. She played the organ for the church up until several weeks before she died.

June was 92 years old. She had been the organist for 74 years. June loved playing the organ. June also loved God and her church. Instead of retiring, June used her gifts and served God her whole life.

Right now our church is at a critical time. One can look at our small congregation and see the majority of members being seniors and say there is no hope. How can a congregation like that attract new, younger members?

There is however another perspective. I see this church filled with potential Christian mentors. I see this church filled with people willing to do what it takes to succeed. If we follow June's example and use our gifts to serve the church no matter our age, then this church has a future.

Some may say turning a declining church around is impossible. I'd say it's hard but not impossible. Trying to herd cats, now that seems impossible. If we are being faithful to God and working together with our strengths, revival can take place.