

## **August 13 –Don't forget to Purr**

### I Corinthians 13

One of the things we love about cats is their ability to purr. You have no doubt when a cat is happy, if you are petting it in just the right spot, because they begin to purr. Some cats have tiny purrs and other's purrs will sound throughout the house. Yet, in preparing for this sermon I did some research into cat purring and was surprised by what I found out. The cat purr communicates several different emotional states. The one humans are most familiar with is that a purring cat is content and happy but in reality, cats purr for a variety of reasons and not all of them mean contentment. The cat's purr has been compared to the human smile. People smile for a variety of reasons. People smile when happy, nervous, unsure or when trying to make someone else feel comfortable. It's that way with the purr as well. Cats may purr when happy but also they use it for self-soothing. They may purr when nervous, sick, in pain or even when close to death.

Purring is vital for the survival of newborn kittens. The little ones are welcomed into the world by the soft vibrations of their mom's purr. They are born deaf and blind, but they do feel vibrations. These sweet vibrations are perfect homing devices, guiding newborns to the protective warmth of mom's body and to their first meals.

Kittens start communicating back to mom and their siblings through purrs. They start purring when they are two days old. When kittens nurse, they cannot meow, so they show their contentment by purring. Mom purrs back comfort and safety.

People who have cats in their lives are familiar with the relaxing purrs of cats as they cuddle and stroke them. These little purr machines exude contentment, with the added benefit of uplifting the moods of the people who adore them while lowering their blood pressure. Many kitties quickly figure out another basic benefit of purring — soliciting food and attention from their favorite people. Since most cat-parents lavish attention on their cats when they purr, cats often purr when they want affection and treats.

Now this is maybe more than you wanted to know about cat purring so let us move on to what this special attribute of cats can teach us. When I talk about purring from here on, I will focus on the purrs that show contentment and love.

Think about what it would be like if we were all just like cats in this regard. Mark Twain once wrote: "If man could be crossed with the cat it would improve the man, but it would deteriorate the cat." When we did something nice for someone they would let us know by giving out a good purring noise. Wouldn't that make life so much easier? We wouldn't have to guess whether someone likes the gift we gave them, or the meal we made them, they would just let us know with a purr. I guess the downside of this is that if they didn't like what we were doing we would know right away, the silence would be deafening! Since we are not anatomically put together to have this happen automatically, we need to understand that it is important to let others know we are grateful and that they are loved.

But first, one more journey down a side path. I told you I would have a cat character from literature, film or cartoons each week to symbolize our theme. Believe it or not, this was incredibly hard to do for this sermon. Even though we talk about how much cats love us and you celebrated in many of the stories you shared about your cat's purring, this is not what literature lifts up. We instead have the mischievous cat, the evil cat, the aloof cat, and more. But a loving, purring kitten, not so much. I finally settled on Thomasina who was loved fully and completely, and returned that love.

First of all a cat purring reminds us that we should share openly when we are feeling happy and grateful. Society often tells us to mask our feelings. We honor a bit too much keeping a stiff upper lip, whether that is in dealing with tragedies or joys.

How are you doing in letting others know you are grateful and happy? Do you keep them guessing? I recall someone telling me about how Christmas at their house was always a most challenging time. Everyone gave mom presents and she would always respond in the same way, "Thank you, that was so nice of you." There was no emotion. Mom just said the words. You were left wondering if she really liked it. If you saw her using your gift later you would celebrate because you knew it was appreciated.

Likewise, if you never saw it again you assume it was sent to the church rummage sale the next spring. Mom did not want to hurt anyone's feelings so she said all the right words but what they really wanted was some expression of her emotions. What they wanted was mom to purr when happy!

Secondly a cat purrs often, as we learned, for a variety of reasons but mostly to share love. Again we are often taught that love is earned, not given. Many people spend their lives trying to earn their parents love, feeling like they have failed. They strive to earn the affection of a friend or a spouse and often feel they come up short. They believe that this is what is supposed to happen in a marriage so they are always fearful that if they fail, love will be cut off. Others feel love is limited, so they give it out in measured dosages. The Bible says that it should be given freely and extravagantly, just like a cat, with no strings attached.

Story from Kathy Bush. Rudy came to us as we were grappling with our previous cat having disappeared for two weeks. In the paper someone was advertising a nine week old black kitten with extra digits that they wanted to give away. We drove to Port Orchard and found he was being kept alone in a cage in the back yard, a scrawny spidery-looking, sick kitten. He was infested with fleas. I picked him up to take him to our car, he tucked his whole body up under my chin, began to purr. Rudy was with us for 13 years. He grew to be a large cat with beautiful black fur and lovely out-sized paws. Although he grew heavier, our evening ritual continued as he tucked his body under my chin and purred. At the end of life, Rudy was struggling. An evening came when we were in our bed with Rudy in a box next to the bed. I heard Rudy trying to get up. To my surprise, he was conscious and indicating it was time for our evening ritual. He wanted to share. I tenderly lifted him onto my chest, he nestled his head under my chin and began to purr with a deeply satisfying sound and vibration. The atmosphere around us was filled with the peace that is more wonderful than the human mind can understand. I knew he was telling us goodbye. When he was quiet again, as the ritual had taken great effort on his part, we laid him back in his box. He was not conscious again and in the morning we went to the vet where his life force let go easily. The gift of that sweet animal bubbles up in my soul to this day eight years later.

So, how do you give love more freely and unconditionally? I Corinthians 13 tells us some of the ways we are to act. Here are just a few of the actions we are challenged to make a part of our lives. We are to be patient, kind, not boastful or arrogant, not irritable and be willing to bear all things with grace. Think about that entire list from I Corinthians 13 and ask how well are you doing. Do you forgive easily or hold on to resentment? Do you lift another up, or are you stuck on your own achievements? Are you patient with others failings, or do you get irritable?

We all know when a cat is upset with us. They will walk stiff legged away from us, hardly looking at us, oozing disdain in every step. They will often retaliate for slights, such as leaving them too long, by doing naughty things just to remind us they are not happy with us. And, as we have been sharing, we know how a cat responds when they are happy. They nuzzle us and purr loudly. When people look at you do they see a purring loving cat or a haughty and disdainful one? That puts our actions in a whole new light, doesn't it?

In that list of actions in Corinthians from our sermon today we can add, love is grateful for love received and expresses gratitude for that love. Or, we could say, "Loving people purr." Next time someone does anything nice for you, be a cat and purr. You will feel better as will all those around you.