

August 20 –A Bit of Independence is a Good Thing

Romans 12:1-8

Cats are known for their sometimes aloof, finicky personalities. They don't run in packs, they have their wants and needs and expect you to meet them. They are not easily conformed to your life but expect life to be transformed to whatever they want. They live out Romans 12:2 to perfection.

There are several cat characters from film and literature who we could list in this group. I think Si and Am the two Siamese in Lady and the Tramp most represent this category with their song, "We are Siamese if you please. We are Siamese if you don't please." They are independent and willful. The little dog Lady tries to keep them from doing naughty things. They don't listen and ultimately Lady gets in trouble instead of these two.

Today I want to celebrate the independence of a cat. A person who studies cat behavior says the following: "It is very difficult to force a cat to do what we want. This seems to be one of the main reasons that many, men in particular, do not like cats: they cannot be controlled. They will not obey. Even the best-natured cat has an agenda of her or his own at almost all times. I call, she looks back, and then she continues on her way, not the least bit embarrassed or in any other way concerned that she has not done what I have asked. They hear us, they see us, they take in the request, and then they do what they want to do." There is a reason we have the saying, "Trying to do something with this group is like herding cats!"

While I want to lift up the positives of an independent nature, anything, if taken to an extreme, is a bad thing. Si and AM are classic examples of this. But a streak of independence is a good thing. We too often strive to conform to the world around us. To use a translation of Romans that I particularly like for this verse, "we let the world squeeze us into its mold." We go along with the crowd, trying to fit in. This causes us to say and do things that are not true to our core values. This is why Paul warned his listeners to be careful and not to be conformed by the world. A person of faith needs to resist these temptations. Instead of letting life dictate their responses they need to be faithful to God and let God's transforming power change them and direct them. Another way to say it is that we too often want to be more of a dog running with the pack than a cat who continually reminds you that they are not going to let anybody or anything force them to do anything they don't want to do!

So, how do we keep this cat-like spirit of independence alive in our lives without it taking over? We need to understand our faith values and what things are the non-negotiables in our lives. Where we get into trouble is when we react to life instead of having a plan. I recall a story I recently read where a young man found a bank deposit bag with a lot of money in it but no identification. He immediately turned it into the bank so they could return it to its rightful owner. It was the receipts from a small store. He had placed the bag on the top of his car as he unlocked it and then had driven off. The man notified the bank in the vain hope that it might be turned in. He was overjoyed to get a call informing him that this is exactly what had happened. When praised for his honesty, the young man looked a little surprised. He said, "You don't take what isn't yours." See, stealing for him was a non-negotiable. When he found that money he wasn't even tempted.

When was the last time you took an inventory of your actions? What I mean is: Have you looked at your life and the ways you interact with family, friends, and strangers and asked: "Is this the way of Christ?" How did you talk to the waitperson at the restaurant? What did your face show when you waited in line for checkout when it took too long? What was your response to your beloved when what they said or did got under your skin? How did you evaluate choices you needed to make? Did you ask, "What do I want? Or What does God want in this situation?" When you do this kind of evaluation you see where you have let the world squeeze you into its mold. Clarity of action and purpose is a good thing. We need to be like a cat, know our mind and not be easily swayed.

Yet we all know that too much of a good thing ends up being bad. One of the things that sometimes frustrates us about cats is they are so darned independent! The other night I had to stay up late because my guy decided to not to come in. It wasn't that he didn't hear me calling for him. He chose not to let me dictate his actions.

So while holding firm in values is a great thing, in our personal life, too much independence moves us from solid, faithful and dependable to stubborn, and that is not a good thing. Too much unwillingness to bend, even in our values, causes us to become rigid. Faith has to be adaptive to life. Some fear this is letting the world dictate our values. I don't know how many times I have heard it said, "We have to draw a line in the sand." Whatever the issue, the person speaking believes that a faithful person can go this far but no farther. To go beyond this point would compromise everything of faith. They are not going to let the world dictate their values. We need to be very careful

about what lines we feel need to be drawn, because there are so many lines that time has later erased. This issue of slavery split the church and nation. Women in ministry still divides with some churches, like the United Methodist embracing the gifts of all people, while other churches say it is wrong and unbiblical. Our denomination is struggling with its response to the GBLTQ population with some again proclaiming that acceptance would mean we are no longer being faithful, that we have just let the world dictate our values. And so the list goes on.

Being adaptive is being open to new revelations from God. After all, would any of us want to only exist with the values of people of the early church who accepted slavery, even if they didn't like it, and saw women as second class citizens, just to mention two. These are Bible-based values we have grown away from because we believe God's love is greater than their limited views. So yes, know your mind, know what are non-negotiable's for you, but be open to, with prayer, being persuaded to change, for God is always doing a new thing.

The other thing this spirit of independence calls upon us to have is a willingness to say no, to risk not being a part of the group, to understand we might occasionally offend someone by our stance. Sometimes it is easy to say no to temptation like the boy and the money. But often the way we end up sliding into the world's mold is we give in a little. We remain quiet when we know we should speak up because we don't want to hurt anyone's feelings. We go along because it doesn't seem like a big deal. We worry more about their feelings than our own. My grandmother use to call it backbone! You got to have some.

Cats have no problem with this. They are going to do what they think is best whether you like it or not. Yet, for all this independence cats show love and compassion. Cats are loving companions but are not easily molded.

This is a good trait to learn. I was watching a movie recently and the young man was in a store looking at baseball cards. He wanted three packs but could only afford two. A schoolmate came by and said, "Just stuff it in your pocket. No one will know." When he hesitated the boy took the cards and put them in his coat pocket and said, "Let's go." He immediately said, "No, I won't" and put all the cards back and walked out the door. The other boy just looks at him like he is the stupidest person on earth. He was being a good cat.

Finally, as much as we have been praising the spirit of independence, keeping us from being easily changed and squeezed into the world's molds or ways of thinking, we need to continually be in prayer, asking when to let go of our independence and go along with the flow of life as other's view it. Now I understand that this is not a cat quality but it is something we need to cultivate. As pastor, one of the things that I see causing people a lot of problems in their lives is that they hold onto their independence too fiercely. Fierce independence in people keeps them from asking for help or accepting help when offered. Fierce independence makes them angry at family or friends when they suggest that it is time to... and you can fill in the blank. Way too often I have conversations with family concerning a fiercely independent parent who needs help but refuses it or who needs to make changes in living situation but rejects it. As life situations change so does our needs and wants. While we don't want the world to squeeze us into its mold we also need to be a bit pliable.

One of the reasons we have cats in our lives is their incredible ability to give love. Let me share a story from Andy and Kathy Pitts. "Casey showed up at our back door 8 years ago when she was only a few weeks old. This was remarkable in that we lived deep in the woods of Virginia, far from any road and certainly not within exploring distance for a little kitten. How did this little ball of fur get to our house, and why? She immediately became pals with our two dogs, Maura and Cappy. She delighted in standing on the back of the couch, batting the dog's tails as they walked by. She was accepted by the dogs enough to allow her to use them as a soft pillow for a nap. Six months after Casey adopted us, Maura passed away of old age. Cappy lost his canine bud, but still had Casey the kitty cat as a companion. The fact that it was so inexplicable that a little kitten could have found our home, and that it was just in time to meet Cappy's need on the passing of his fellow doggie was, we believe, Heaven sent."

Even though we talk about them as being fiercely independent it is within the context of community. They want to do their own thing but only within certain bounds. They love the people who love them and take care of them.

So cultivate a healthy amount of independence but don't let it go too far. What we really need to cultivate is interdependence. Let the community of faith help you, encourage you, and yes, change you when needed. This is not being conformed to the world but letting the spirit of God blow freshly into your lives. So celebrate independence, but not too much!