

“LESSONS FROM A SILLY CAT”

Matthew 16:21-28

preached August 31, 2008

In the summer of '99 the Sprengle household was very similar to the way it is today. We had three cats, as we do now, in fact we have one of the same cats that we had then. And in addition to the cats, Joe was still at home. We were living at the end of a cul-de-sac with a small wooded area behind us. With very little traffic in the streets and the wilderness of the woods temptingly close, the cats spent a lot of time outside. It was late on a Tuesday night when Nancy, on her way to bed, reminded me that all three cats were outside, and that she heard Puma, the youngest of the three, yelling. I went to the door, turned on the light, and waited for the cats. Two showed up, but not Puma. So I called him. I heard an answer, but saw no cat. I walked out to yell a little louder. I followed the meows around the side of the house. I heard him, but couldn't see him. I went back inside, put on my shoes and grabbed a flashlight to help me in the hunt. Again I went outside and walked toward the feline cries. No cat. I could hear him, but not see him. I figured that he must be stuck or trapped somewhere and needed to be rescued. Finally, I looked up. And there, 25 feet above me, on a level equal to the second floor roof was this silly cat. Twenty-five feet above the ground on a branch half the size of my arm.

What to do? First I just told him to stop acting so dumb and to come down. That worked well. He yelled louder. He turned around on the branch, but he remained at the same height. I knew other steps needed to be taken. I knew that my only ladder could not even get me to a place where I could start climbing that tree, but it would enable me to get on the roof, just a few feet from that silly cat. So I climbed up on the roof. Understand that the ladder is 6 feet and the low roof is 10, so it did require a little bit of an effort. But there I am, 10:30 at night climbing on the roof, flashlight in hand in an attempt to rescue this silly cat. I walked over to Puma, who looked to be both terrified and amused, and I tried to pull the tree toward the roof so the cat could come to me. Puma would have nothing to do with it. Whenever I would pull the branch toward me, he would back away. I was sure that he could jump to the roof without a problem, but he didn't seem to think so.

Something else needed to be done. I scooted down the ladder and went to get a board long and wide enough for Puma to walk from the tree to the roof. So now at 10:45 I climbing my 6 foot ladder with a 6 foot board to crawl onto my 10 foot roof. Puma saw me coming with board in hand and it had an affect. He watched as I carefully placed the board on the branch on which he was standing. He heard my instructions to walk over the board and come to me. And he decided that he wanted nothing to do with some nut who is carrying a board over his roof in the middle of the night. He also knew that he didn't want to go down, so this silly cat went up a little higher.

By this time I was joined outside, not on the roof just outside by Nancy and Joe. Nancy was worried about the cat and what her mindless husband was doing on the roof. Joe came out to see why all the lights were on in the back yard. After they got done laughing at me, they continued to call Puma, to tell him to get down. The silly cat, though, just hung to the tree and yelled.

I then decided to do something radical. I considered using the board from the roof to the tree as my own bridge, but I wasn't sure if the branch it rested on would hold me. It might, but if I was wrong, I would drop 25 feet onto the air conditioner and I didn't want to take a chance of breaking the air conditioner. After all, it was August. And besides, if I actually broke either the air conditioner or myself, I would have to explain to people how this accident happened, and I didn't think I wanted to do that. So, now close to 11:00, I went to a neighbor's house to ask to borrow his ladder. He was quite gracious under the circumstances. He didn't hit me or call the police or anything. Matter of fact, he didn't even ask me why I wanted a ladder at 11:00 at night, but I

guess that it’s a pretty good rule not to argue with someone who gets you out of bed to borrow a ladder. I owed him big time.

Now, armed with a fair sized ladder I headed back to the tree that was holding my cat captive, or my cat who was holding the tree captive. In the dark with limited space and damp, slippery ground, Nancy questioned the wisdom of what I was doing. But undaunted, I struggled to extend that ladder into that tree, working to allow the top to rest on a substantial limb. And I want you to know that it worked. We got Puma down safely. Actually we didn’t. He did. He was so terrified by me bouncing that ladder off the tree that he knew he had to get out of there. He couldn’t go much higher, so in a relatively short time, he ran, clawed, and slid down that tree. I figure that after watching me come after him with a flashlight, a 6 foot board, and now a 24 foot ladder, that I must be serious about getting him down. And he also figured that anybody who would go to such extremes is not someone you want to hang around with. Even after coming down he still wanted to stay clear of me, even though all I wanted to do was save him. Such a silly cat.

After thinking about that adventure, I understood that the cat was not all that silly. He really reacted like most people do. Understand that Puma got into his predicament by following his desires without considering the consequences that might follow. Chances are, he saw a squirrel and instinctively followed it. The problem was that the squirrel knew what it was doing. The cat did not. But suddenly, because of his actions and decisions, he found himself on the edge. He was in trouble and did not know how to get out of it. That is the case of all people. We all come to a time when we realize the dire consequences of our actions. We all cry out for help. We lift up our prayers to God in the desperate hope that deliverance and salvation might somehow come.

In Puma’s case, I heard his cries and came to his rescue. The problem was that when I actually came to him, he wanted no part of me. Even though he got himself into that situation, still he would rather trust his own instinct rather than follow the instructions of one who knows better. And the result was that it just put him in an even more precarious position. Like Puma, we often think that the steps in faith we are called to take toward our own salvation are a bit extreme. We would rather trust our own instincts, even though they get us into trouble time and time again. We stubbornly continue on the path that put us in peril. We continue to follow our own will rather than respond to the call of Jesus. For some reason we are reluctant to cross that bridge to salvation, to deny ourselves, to take up our cross and follow in faith.

Jesus had just asked the disciples who they thought he was. Peter proclaimed that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God who had come into the world that the world might be saved. As had been the case of the Israelites 1500 years earlier, the cries of the people had been heard by God and the answer, the one who could bring deliverance and salvation, had appeared. Jesus told them what it would take to deliver this grace to the people. It would require an arrest, a trial, beatings, a crucifixion, death and finally resurrection. Peter heard the plan and wanted nothing to do with it. That didn’t fit his thoughts, his idea of who the messiah would be, or what would be required of him for salvation. Even though God’s representatives throughout history had spoken a consistent message of sacrifice and service, the message still didn’t get through. Do you understand?

To be delivered from sin it is necessary for us to put aside what we desire so that we can begin to live as God desires. Following our wants and our will is the very thing that gets us into trouble and yet we would rather cling to our desperate situations, like a cat stuck in a tree, rather than obey the instructions of God. I understand that often we don’t follow God’s path because what he asks us to do doesn’t always make sense to us. In order to live we have to die. That’s not my idea of a good time. Deny yourself. If you are persecuted, beaten and hated

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because you are following Jesus, rejoice. Sorry but that sounds rather extreme to me. And the truth is, the call to follow Jesus Christ is a call to the extreme edge of life. And sometimes it is scary out there.

As Christians we are expected to go to extremes, but not to satisfy our wants and desires. In imitation of Jesus, at his call we are to go out on a limb sometimes, to be bold in our faith, to follow our calling no matter where it leads. Understand that each of us has a calling from God and we each have the authority to fulfill that calling, to take up our cross and follow so that many might touch and see, perceive and receive God’s grace. A man arrives at the pearly gates, and St. Peter looks up his record and says, “Well, you didn't do anything particularly good, but neither did you do anything particularly bad. I'll tell you what: If you can tell me one really good deed you've done, I'll let you stay.” So the man says, “Well, once I saw some bikers menacing a young woman. I stopped my car. I took out my tire iron. I walked up to their leader, a huge, hairy, ugly man, full of tattoos. He had a nose ring. I ripped it right out of his nose, and I said, ‘You leave this girl alone, you hear?’ I stared at all of them, and I said, 'Now get out of here, or you'll have to answer to me.’” St. Peter was impressed. “When did this happen?” he asked the man.”“About two minutes ago.” Sometimes we are to go out on a limb. Sometimes we are to be extremists in our faith.

Often we have promised people a life of ease if they just take that step in faith. But when they take that step, they still occasionally find themselves standing on the brink in a most precarious situation. We have to be realistic with people and tell them that when they come to Jesus, there is a new purpose and a new fulfillment. After all, Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, ‘When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.’ Yet when we come to Jesus we suddenly have a stable foundation on which we stand. It is the rock of faith, the rock of love, the rock of grace. But the struggles in life will not all disappear. We have so many lukewarm Christians or people who turn away from the faith because they've been promised this ease. Coming to Jesus does not eliminate life problems. In fact sometimes it creates new ones as we begin to question what we have always done without thinking - like buying a lottery ticket or taking a drug, or foolishly entering into that inappropriate relationship. But when we are in Christ, there is help. There is a new strength, a new power that helps us to resist, that enables us to deal with all that the world throws at us. Then we can live with joy, we can live in peace even when the world around us is trembling with fear and worry.

Jesus went to the extreme to prove God’s love for the world. Why did he do that? Partly because we often have this idea that God is just a harsh judge demanding obedience. In the ancient world, sometimes even today, the idea that there is a divine being who deeply cares about us, about the struggles in our life, is just a fantasy. But Jesus said that indeed that is true. He showed that love in his willingness to go to the cross. And in truth, the thing that faith in Jesus requires of us is a willingness to enter into a relationship with him, to come to him from that precarious perch on which we cling to life in desperate fear. We are to look to him day by day. To enter into conversation continually. To seek his opinions and focus on his desires daily. God wants us to be in an on going, intimate relationship with him. But we live in a society where relationships are increasingly rare. We lift up rugged individualism. We proudly proclaim that we don’t need anyone or anything. And yet we often find ourselves sitting on a perilous branch high above the ground, clinging onto our problems, crying out for help that, when and if it comes, we often ignore. When are we going to find the wisdom to not only cry out, but to reach out, to leap to the salvation that is provided, to take that step in faith, that we might walk the narrow path that we are shown.

The lessons of life and faith are all around us. All we have to do is look with insight and we will discover that we can even learn a lesson from a silly cat stuck in a tree. The main cause of our problems is us, the choices we

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make, the actions we take. Following our own desires will only leave us out on a limb that is shaky at best. We spend so much energy just trying to exist there on the edge, living in fear and worry, crying out for help and hope and deliverance. We focus on our predicament so much that we fail to look for our Savior; to listen for the way to go; to see the path to take; to reach out to take the hand, to walk the path of salvation.

Maybe it is time for us to do something that’s a little extreme. Something like denying ourselves that we might live; taking up our cross that we might serve. The cat found a way out of that tree because he was scared enough, desperate enough to try something radical. If you want to trade your problems for peace, if you seek joy even in the midst of sorrow, maybe you should try something radical, too. Something like inviting Jesus to come closer, to speak louder, to lead you in faith and grace on the path to salvation, peace, and life. Even my silly cat could figure out the way to his salvation. I wonder when we will figure out ours. Maybe today. In your life may it be so. Amen.