

The cat that resides at our house has full run of the place. Mostly in these winter days she is curled up somewhere warm; preferably near blanket, afghan, or fluffy pillow. In the evenings she jumps up onto my lap, purrs loudly, and persistently pushes her nose and forehead into my chest, until I will pet her. She delights in having me respond to her persistent plea. You can observe many things about the cat, but her persistence is remarkable.

Years ago at a church evangelism retreat a presenter related congregations, their size and behaviors with pets; specifically with cats, dogs, and farm animals. The power point images of adorable cats, loveable dogs, and friendly barnyard animals captured my interest. Graphs and charts explained trends in worship practices, liturgy content, congregational statistics, and societal trends. Her expertise in her field of congregational sustainability was nationally noted. Her research was utilized by Christian congregations around the country. She had neatly identified and cataloged every kind of congregation and placed them in one of three categories; cat, dog, barnyard.

I was then serving a congregation that she lovingly referred to as the “dog.” This was a congregation whose mission it was to exist for itself. The “dog” congregation needed praise by its master, and for the most part followed commands in order to get food, water, a warm place to sleep in the winter, a cool place to sleep in the summer, rubs and pets for doing minor tricks. Mostly the “dog” congregation likes its routine. It needs all of the affection and attention of the master of the house (the Pastor) and would ward off any strangers (guests and visitors) by barking so ferociously that the guest or visitor, would indeed feel like an intruder and make a bee line to the door. The pastor of a “dog” congregation has his or her work cut out for them if they want to grow in mission and ministry.

Similarly Ms. Baxter gave descriptions of the “cat” congregation; these are ones who enjoy sitting in the master’s lap or remaining in hiding for long periods of time, all of course at the kitty’s discretion. It seemed there was little hope for the “cat” congregation. They were persistent in doing that which was necessary to get what they wanted in the moment.

Ms. Baxter then told of the “farm” size congregation, a barnyard with lots of animals doing a wide variety of things all at the same time with the assistance of the farmer and the farm hands (the pastor and the church staff). “Farm” congregations can sometimes be difficult to manage because there are so many who need so much. The barnyard animals know that the farmer is always shorthanded, so they pretty much do what they want for as long or as little as they like.

The information along with the metaphors for congregational life; cat, dog, barnyard were all interesting. Ms. Baxter’s information was unique in that size or type was not the driving force of health, wholeness or longevity for congregations. Nor was it economics and financial matters that were indicators. It was the traits manifest in cats and dogs and farm life that she hoped would be useful to the attendees at the retreat all of whom were working in ministry.

Some things that day were helpful, other components hopeful, some discouraging, and some of theologically not compatible with my Lutheran understandings. She insisted that people in the 21st century do not want to be informed, reminded or told that they are sinners. Nor do

they wish to be confronted with any sense that they are sinners. She advocated deleting the (in her words) the antiquated practice of Confession at the beginning the liturgy. Abandon forthwith any form or rite of public confession and forgiveness.

This didn't sit so well with me. She certainly held credentials, and collated data points, and she may be right that contemporary people do not want to be confronted with the reality that they are a sinner. If this were the case then theology would have to be radically altered. The biblical tradition overlooked. The catholic liturgical tradition is steeped in acknowledging that we are sinners in need of God's gracious gift of salvation made know through his Son, Christ Jesus.

That we are in need of God's mercy and forgiveness and that in God's love made known to us in Christ Jesus we are made: free, justified, righteous. Luther reminded Christians in the 16th century that we are at the same time saint and sinner. Always in need of God's forgiveness poured out to us in the Word and Sacraments. Think of Isaiah and Peter. Isaiah says he is a sinner and so does Peter.

In both the Old Testament Reading and the Gospel Reading we have examples of confession prior to active participation in ministry. The confession in the first situation comes on the lips of Isaiah who by his own confession acknowledges that he is a man of unclean lips. In the Gospel it is Peter who flat out acknowledges that he is a sinful man. But what comes before their confession is their acknowledgement that they are in the presence of the Almighty. Isaiah in his vision sees the heavenly throne of God. There is: smoke and rumbling and singing and heavenly beings doing God's bidding. The whole temple is filled with God's presence. Isaiah's senses are overwhelmed. And with Peter, he has been fishing all night long and his nets remain empty. When asked to put out into the water again, it is as if Peter is humoring Jesus. Peter does what Jesus asks of him. But when the boats nearly sink from the weight of the catch, Peter acknowledges that he is in the presence of God. He confesses before Jesus that he is a sinner.

Both Isaiah and Peter carry out the tasks of ministry assigned to them. Isaiah goes to the people of Israel and will proclaim God's Word to people whose ears have grown deaf to God's call. They are busy listening to what they want to hear. In 2019 we might say that they are so engrossed with their play lists and earbuds that they miss out on God's plea, God's call to help them. They have forgotten their responsibilities in society and have become a people who think only of themselves (perhaps here they are a little bit cat, little bit dog!) The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer and the widows and orphans have no one to take care of them. The general public, in Isaiah's situation, is busy looking out for good old number one. Their focus consists of which party they will go to next, what will be served and who will host the next bash. Needless to say, Isaiah didn't have throngs of people lining up by his side, but he faithfully carried God's word to the people. And Peter along with James and John that day at the lake, left nets, fish, and boats in order to follow Jesus. Their journey took them from the lake shore to the mountain top, but as followers of Jesus it ultimately took them to the cross. Throngs of supporters were not at the foot of the cross on Good Friday. But Peter, James and John faithfully carried God's Easter message to the world.

Each Sunday we gather and enter into this house of prayer. We make our confession in the presence of the Almighty, acknowledging "*what we have done and what we have left*

undone.” We too are called like Isaiah and Peter who went before us. We are called to minister to those who are neglected and overlooked, to those whose feet have not walked with Jesus to Calvary and who have never heard the Easter message. It is easy to forget in whose presence we gather, or to take for granted God’s outpoured love in our lives. We indeed acknowledge that we are sinners. It may not be popular or the “in” thing in the 21st century, for cats or dogs or farm animals, but we are God’s children who confess before God and one another that we are sinful creatures. It is here in this place that our sins are forgiven. Proclaimed in the words of absolution and poured out in the Holy Communion. We are called to lives of service, to follow and to minister where Christ Jesus leads us.

We as Ms. Blair suggests may have grown comfortable, like the dog who is quite content in his or her routine. Or like the cat that would rather remain hiding. Or like farm animals doing a variety of things knowing that the farmer is shorthanded. Or like the people of Israel in the days of Isaiah we are so self-absorbed listening to our favorite tunes that we have grown deaf to God’s call, and block out the cry of people in need. The good news this morning comes not from Ms. Blair who so eloquently presented the need to give up our doggish ways, but from God who so wonderfully gives his only Son for the sins of the world. Yours and mine so that forgiven we faithfully respond “*Here am I, send me.*” Amen.