

Feral Christians

When we moved to rural Oregon, we discovered that our urbane, spoiled cats, while athletic at kicking their kitty litter around the bathroom, took no interest in the mountains of molehills accumulating in the yard. The day came when we said, "Sorry, folks. From now on you are going to earn your keep. Out you go." It worked! No more strange smells under the bed, no more hairy chairs – and, within a few weeks – not a mouse or mole on the property!

Our lady cat quickly struck up friendships with the neighbors – Tom Gray, Tom Black, Tom White, Tom Tabby. We now fed eight to fifteen grey and orange tabbies. The original cat still climbed on us and purred; her children sometimes came by for a quick rub; but with the grandkittens it's a different story. They were feral, or part wild.

I had imagined that, through stroking their backs while I fed them, I would tame these critters. I'd be the Cat Whisperer, the friend of all 'fraidy felines. No such luck. The slinky little ingrates dance just out of reach, eyes fixed on me like a boxer's. They will watch with interest while I give a complete massage to our one remaining tame cat - but when I come close to do them the favor, they jump away! They serve me and I feed them, but they are no fun.

Just out of reach. As feral cats are to people, so people are to God. We perk up our ears at the sound of His voice. We delight in stories of blessing; yet when God wants to get close, we squirm away. We enjoy the "good square meal" - music, fellowship, the Word, visits when we're sick. We may even experience healing or emotional release at the altar. When we sense the holy, we feel transformed - yet when God comes close, to touch us, to tame us and to enfold us in His arms, it's *too much!* -- we zoom off into the forest, in terror of the Giant Approaching Hand. So we have cats that don't purr, fig trees that don't bear figs, and people that won't dance when the piper pipes a merry tune. Why?

Jesus had a follower named Paul, who wrote about this anxiety. He wanted so much to do the right thing, to have God's approval; yet he kept goofing up. Just like the cats who scatter if I make one false move, Paul wrestled with his irrational fear of being condemned for a single error or bit of foolishness. It's a sorry, painful picture of the Feral Christian:

For in my inner being I delight in God's law; yet I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war...making me a prisoner of the law of sin...what a wretched man I am! (Romans 7, 22-23)

We so much want to be like happy House Cats. We have fled from wild immorality and given up disgusting legalism to be tamed by the Spirit; but have we really left the old life? Toss some raw meat into our kitty dish and see how tame we are! We think we're Purebreds, but really we're pretty feral when it comes to God's spirit. We have to be coaxed with music and promising words to spend much time in God's house. We act confident, but under our fur we are Hurt Kittens, leery of the church, unsure if Jesus is as good as he is billed.

Jesus himself had a hard time with House Cats; He seemed to prefer the company of Strays. They would come and sit at his feet for hours. There is a great deal of commotion today on how to attract such "wild" people - the unchurched, the cultural strays - to our churches. We are a fat-cat generation, lost in the pursuit of video games and glamor and money, with little interest in Jesus the Christ; but there are plenty out there silently desperate for God. I am no expert in gathering crowds; but I do know what has always been known. It is the gentle, personal, loving Christ spoken, sung and lived by genuine believers that will cause scared, suspicious, wounded people to come to Him and desire His company forever.

There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. (Romans 8:1-2)

I finally caught one of the ferals eating. Before it could flee, I gave it a quick scratchy rub on the back. It turned, looked at me puzzledly, and fled. But the next time it lingered with the scratch. It must have thought, "so that's what it's all about – why didn't they tell me?" Soon I had two "tamed" cats. Sometimes I wonder why! When I tried to do my gardening, or read a book in my lawn chair, these loving, nosey cats were always winding around me, purring, getting in my way. But that, my friends, is outreach!

