

Three Cats and the Whole Wide World

Year C, Proper 8 – Luke 9:51-62, Galatians 5:1, 13-25

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, June 30, 2013

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Anyone who's given her half a chance will have heard from Jenny by now about our cat, Kirby. But our current kitty, who lives her little kitty life exclusively at our home in Clarksville, is only the last survivor of our feline family.

In point of fact, when the boys were, oh, three and five, and we were living in Fayetteville, North Carolina while I was doing my last active-duty Army gig at Ft. Bragg, the pressure was on for the patriarch to finally acquiesce to the addition of a pet to the household. I think the final straw in the camel-back-breaking argument was the birth of a substantial litter to a neighbor's Labrador Retriever, the puppies, which were for sale at a reasonable price, were trotted out for ooohs and aaahs at a get together one afternoon around the Martindale pool. Visions of the complications of training and caring for and moving with the full-grown version of these "cute little puppies" flashed before my already allergy swollen eyes, and, though my allergy to *feline* dander is even *worse*, I consented to the acquisition of an adult, already house-broken cat, *if* one could be found on the "free to a good home" market.

It was the answer my dear fur-loving wife had been waiting to hear! "I will have a cat for us," she promised our progeny, "before the end of the week," and after one remarkably unsettling failure, she brought home Rachi. Now, you might think our little addition had been named for Stallone's entirely too-long-lived boxer, (Yo! Adrian!) but you would be wrong. Rachi was a beautiful deep grey Russian Blue, or more probably given the zero-sum terms of her possession, a Russian Blue *mix*, and her name was short for Rachmaninoff, after the Russian composer. More about her later.

We got Kirby ten years later, only a month after Rachi had passed, as part of a package deal. Our older son had been loath for us to replace Rachi, the pet that he had grown up loving, saying that he didn't want some "second-hand cat." Instead, we ended up with a *pair* of second-hand cats. The part-time youth minister at St. Mark's Cathedral in Hastings, Nebraska had arrived from her home in Tennessee a couple of years earlier with Hamilton in tow, a big, fluffy, Himalayan with very long grey-and-white hair. Debbie was fond of telling folks, that Hamilton had found *her* while she was still in school. But not long after her arrival in Hastings, Debbie found what was left of a feral litter of kittens living under her landlady's porch and managed to save just one, a tabby colored mutt, and named her Kirby.

About the same time we lost Rachi, Debbi announced that she had accepted a new job helping a Lutheran start-up congregation in the Chicago area. As she began to make arrangements for her move, she discovered that the management for her new apartment charged nearly as much for a cat as they did for a people, and a *second* cat was out of the question *altogether*. Not wanting to split up the by now fast companions, and knowing that our family was still grieving, Debbie offered the pair to us, though I was less than fully elated about the two-for-one deal.

Nowadays, a dozen or so years later, Kirby spends much of her day sitting on the back of one of the chairs by the front window, or on the seat of a dining room chair that Jenny insists on planting in front of the French doors at the back of the house. Now, all our cats are strictly indoor cats, but Kirby does love watching the world go by. She seems particularly interested in the movement of birds or squirrels and especially when one of the neighbor cats climbs into our back yard, but she seems just as content to watch the grass grow. She really looks like she wants to be out in the wild, wild, world, but when a door opens, Kirby jumps down from wherever she is perched... and runs the other way. She may go under the chair or into the corner in the living room, she may hunker down on the seat of one of the other chairs tucked under the dining room table, she very often goes to her favorite spot, climbing under the top cover of Jenny's bed to form what we call a "kitty-lump." But against the possibility that any of that *outside* world might make it in to her *inside*, Kirby makes herself practically invisible.

Jesus seems to have encountered such folk in today's Gospel lesson. "Oh, Jesus," they say, "it would be really great to follow you, but my family wouldn't understand." "I really want to be part of the Kingdom of God, Jesus," they say, "but I've got stuff at work that needs my attention." "Follow me," Jesus tells them, "but you're never going to see the coming of the Kingdom if you're looking behind you." "And, oh, by the way, looking out the window isn't going to cut it."

Nobody knew just how old Hamilton was, but we figured he had to have been at least sixteen or seventeen when we had to put him down three years ago. He was a mellow old man by then, and though I had to lay down the law fairly early about my aversion to being walked on by kitty toes while in my bed, and though his long, thick fur retained and shed enough dander to cause my eyes to swell completely shut on those few occasions that I forgot to thoroughly wash my hands after rubbing his head or his belly – he *really* liked his belly rubbed – I still miss him.

Hamilton used to sit at the window and look at the world as well. The difference was that, given the chance, a door left open as packages were carried in or out, or even a door not fully secured (he had some pretty agile paws) unlike his sister, Hamilton would gladly slip out to get an *olfactory* as well as visual picture of that world. The thing is, the moment he gained his freedom, he seemed to regret it. We never had to go looking for Hamilton when he got out, we knew we would find him hugged into the corner of the porch, looking almost trapped by the whole wide world.

I think it is people like *that* that Paul is talking to in today's Epistle reading. They knew they had been set free by the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ. But just as soon as they began to *experience* that freedom, just as soon as they got out there actually touching the world outside the confines of the Law, they allowed themselves to be tangled up again, bound up and tied down by the parts of the world that they were sent out to transform.

Unlike the other two, Rachi-cat spent a good deal of *her* time *away* from the windows. Oh, when everything was quiet, she spent her share of days sitting on the back of the couch looking out onto the front yard and garden of the Deanery. But whenever the activity level in the house picked up, whenever there were the sounds and movements of people preparing for coming and going, Rachi would disappear from her roost to hide under the little table in the front door foyer, or around the corner of the desk by the back door, or, on at least a couple of instances I can recall, just down the first step off the landing at the side door. And if the Mom, or the Dad, or one of the gangly teenage boys was not sufficiently vigilant in his or her going or coming, whoosh! Like a streak of blue-gray lightening, Rachi would be out the door, down the steps, and into the freedom of the whole wide world. Such times were all-hands-on-deck moments for the Martindale clan as we fanned out to find and retrieve the obviously most agile member of the household, usually found at last wallowing in a patch of sun-soaked grass or jumping on some hapless bug among the phlox or the coral bells, having, at least for the moment, the time of her life.

All our cats, as I said, have been strictly indoor cats. But we think Rachi must have at one time lived part of her life outdoors. Somewhere along the line, Rachi had tasted genuine freedom, and she was never fully satisfied with anything less. I think Rachi understood freedom better than the other two. And I think Rachi understood freedom better than a *lot* of us.

"For freedom," Paul said, "Christ has set us free." "For forgiving others," Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "you have been forgiven." "You have been loved," Jesus said on his way to Jerusalem. "You have been loved," Jesus said from the hard wood of the cross. "You have been loved," Jesus said from his empty tomb, "to love the whole wide world."

Maybe we need to understand that freedom just a *little* bit better. Or maybe this is just a story about three cats.