

BELLING THE CAT

Aesop once told a fable about a group of mice who lived in a barn. Life was wonderful, except for a sneaky cat. Hardly a day went by without a poor mouse being chased or even eaten by the cat. Finally the head mouse called a meeting. Ladies and gentlemen, youngsters and baby mice, the time is now come to resolve our problems with the cat. Does anyone have any solutions?" The mice were abuzz with ideas and suggestions, but none seemed to solve the problem.

Then a young mouse got up, took the floor, and said boldly, "let's hang a bell around the cat's neck. That way, whenever the cat is near, we'll hear the ringing and safely hide." The crowd applauded loudly as the young mouse took his seat. Once the applause died down, an elderly mouse rose to his feet and said, "Our young friend's plan is simple yet ingenious. Once the bell is on the cat, we'll all live safely. But I have one brief question to put to you all: which one of you will volunteer to bell the cat?"

That's always the question, isn't it? Who's willing to do the hard, dirty, perhaps even dangerous work that needs to be done? Who's willing to bell the cat?

An African-American woman named Joyce Riley tells how she and her neighbors decided it was time to bell the cat. Nineteen young men had died within one year's time on their street, three of them within one week. Two and a half years earlier Riley had lost her grandson in a drive-by shooting. She was angry, hurt, and confused. She asked why, why won't someone do something about all this killing, all this crime going on around the neighborhood? Then she said, God spoke to her. And god said, "Why don't you?" So she took to the streets. She called the police department. She said, "I need some help. What can we do for you and what can you do for us?" The major she talked to answered, "Do what you want to do. Do what you think you can do, and we'll be with you."

And so she and some of her neighbors took to the streets. At last report they had been there two and a half years each Friday night rain, shine, sleet, or snow. They march there continuously. They used to march and have a candlelight vigil every time there was a death on the street. There wasn't anything wrong with that,

says Riley, but it wasn't getting anything done. You do a vigil, and you go home and nothing changes. So there was more to it than just a vigil. If they wanted the crooks, the criminals, the gun-carrying thugs off the street, they had to go in there and mingle with them, show them they would not be intimidated, and that's what they did. They marched in the middle of the drug dealers, the killers, the murderers. They decided the thugs weren't going to run them out. They stayed out there and took all kinds of abuse. They were threatened. The women were harassed sexually in shameful ways, but they weren't going to run. They were there to stay. Joyce Riley says she wasn't simply doing her own thing. She was doing God's thing. This, she says, was a vision from God. God said to her, "Go, Riley. You can do it, I'm there with you.

Because of this they weren't afraid of the drug dealers, the guns, not anything. Looking back she says, "I think we were just too crazy really to be afraid." So they stayed. And it is a good thing they did. There's been only one homicide in that area, on those streets, in the nearly three years since Joyce Riley obeyed the voice of God. Joyce Riley was willing to bell the cat.

Robert Schuller tells about a young woman named Patty Wilson, who had a different kind of courage. As a preschooler Patty had a minor history of convulsions. Then one day when Patty was seven, she had a severe convulsive attack in school. She began to shake so hard that she fell to the floor. Her eyes rolled back in her head. The next day the other children avoided her, as children will often do. Over the years, Patty's attacks increased and the doctors finally diagnosed her problem as epilepsy. But God told Patty to go on and make a normal life for herself despite her handicap. Patty's a young woman of great determination. When she was fifteen years old, she decided to run from Los Angeles to Portland, Oregon, to prove to others that epileptics are normal people and to raise funds for the National Epilepsy Foundation.

By the end of the first day of her marathon, her foot was aching so badly she could hardly stand on it. But Patty would not stop. The pain grew progressively worse in the next few days. Finally, Patty's parents convinced her to see a doctor. The doctor told her that she had a stress fracture and would have to stop the marathon so it could heal. She immediately replied that she had to complete the race. The doctor told her that would be impossible, that he had to set the fracture. Patty suggested that he wait until after the run. She had

made a commitment and was going to fulfill it. The doctor told her that if he bound her so she could run she would get blisters. She said, "What are a few blisters? Nothing more than fluid under the skin. My mother could take a syringe and drain it, so that I can keep going."

And that's just what she did. The doctor showed her parents how to wrap her foot tightly with tape. Each day Patty ran twenty-five to thirty miles, despite the pain in her foot, despite two epileptic seizures. Patty ran for forty-two days. When she finally got within a mile of the city of Portland, the mayor joined her. Together they ran into the city under a banner which read: "Run, Patty. Run." Patty Wilson ran 1,310 miles on a fractured foot. Patty had a different kind of courage, but when push came to shove, Patty Wilson was willing to bell the cat.

Most people today are reluctant to make that kind of commitment. They like their freedom too much, their comfort, their leisure. Many other people are good for the short haul, but unwilling to stick with it when the going gets tough. Jesus faced the same difficulty with those who followed him. Jesus had been giving his followers some difficult teachings, too difficult in the eyes of some. They began to turn back from following him. Then Jesus turned to the twelve disciples who had been closest to him. "You don't want to leave too, do you?" He asked. It was a critical moment in the life of this small community of faith. It was Simon Peter who spoke up. "Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." Simon Peter had his faults. He was impetuous. He spoke sometimes when he should have been quiet. But give Simon Peter this: he was willing to bell the cat. He was willing to do whatever was necessary to follow Jesus.

We need people today who will bell the cat. We need people today who are passionate about following Jesus. It's frustrating. People are so passionate about so many other things in our society that are of so little real consequence. We need people today who are willing to bell the cat. Christ is looking for people who will not turn back. He is still looking for people who will put him first in their lives. He is still looking for people who are committed to God's kingdom on earth.

Brian McLaren in his book, "The Secret Message of Jesus," tells about such a man. His name is Carter. He is seventy-five years old. He is an African-American and he drives a taxi in Washington D.C. But Carter is committed to serving all people; he treated the man from Malawi with special respect. The man introduced Carter to some other Malawian friends, and soon Carter the taxi driver was invited to visit Malawi, which he did in 1998. In Malawi Carter saw poverty he had never before imagined. He asked the Lord to help him bring some joy to this village. And God answered his prayer. God did it through Carter.

First Carter realized that there was no road in the village just a narrow path, rutted and muddy. This is something a taxi driver would notice. With a proper road, people could get around better, and elderly and sick people could be transported to the hospital. Carter had brought some money to Africa, so he offered to pay for gas and oil and drivers if the people of the village would do the work. Soon Carter's generous spirit became contagious. Someone provided a road grader and then more and more people volunteered to help. Three days later, they had built a proper road a mile and a quarter long.

A year or so later, Carter returned to the village. Carter met a boy who needed medical care that was available only in a distant city. Carter made it possible for the boy to get treatment on a regular basis by finding and convincing who else? A taxi driver to take him. The next year he went back again and this time helped some young men improve their farming by using money he had saved from his job to buy seed. He also made connections and got twenty-six soccer balls donated to the children of the village.

On another trip, Carter's generosity inspired a shopkeeper in the village to donate money to help some sick children get treatment for ringworm. Soon a Bible School was launched, and it grew from seventeen to eighty-five students quickly. Who could imagine? A seventy-five year old taxi driver from Washington, D.C. and today in Malawi there are roads, rides, ringworm medicine, seeds, soccer balls, and a Bible School. There are signs of the Kingdom of God all over that little village. Carter says "I don't do any of this myself. God is doing it thru me."

Yes, that is true. God is doing it, but God needs somebody to work through. God always needs someone to work through. God needs somebody who's willing to bell the cat, someone who's willing to do the

work of the Kingdom of God, someone who's willing to follow Jesus all the way. Such willingness comes only when we realize what Christ has done for us. We give, first of all, because we received from him. We love, first of all, because we were loved. Jesus never asks of us anything he has not already done for us. He is our Master, our Lord, the inspiration of our lives and the example for our well doing. Jesus gives us a new standard of what life can be like. That is why millions of people two thousand years after his death and resurrection call him their savior.

But here is the critical point: Christ was willing to bell the cat for us. The question we are left with is this: what are we willing to do for him?