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Larry DeLong

They Don't Know What They're Doing – Luke 23:32-34

Our home is a house of many pets. And many of you who have pets will resonate with the fact that we consider the four-legged, or shall we say *non-humanoid*, residents of our home to be family members.

So, if you get that we consider our pets to be family, you'll understand our House Rule Number One: "Family members don't eat other family members."

Now, that's taken a degree of adjustment on the part of some of our family: our first cat, Lovey, had to do serious re-programming. Watching him look at our dogs when they were puppies, you could practically *feel* him thinking, sizing them up (he's about ten pounds, and our dogs usually arrive at one or two). In the old days, you could tell he was thinking that he'd wait till they were a big enough meal to be worth the trouble he'd get in for eating them; now, he'll actually curl up with one of them every now and then when he thinks we won't see him doing it. (What Mom and Dad don't know won't hurt them... and then there's

the Feline Union representatives to deal with. Gotta keep in good standing!)

But it's not easy being tolerant. Fannie Noel, our little white Persian cat, who by the way considers herself a Wild Jungle Beast, paid intense attention to our canary, Sir Lala. She found great pleasure in finding the perfect space where she could properly luxuriate while carefully observing every move the bird made.

Now, that's *cat*. Cats love motion. Fannie also loves to watch the wind move things around the patio, is an ardent observer of our band of javalina, and even had a crush on a bobcat that saunters through in back of the house every now and then. And, let's be clear here, cats love birds, but it's more a *taste* than an *affection*.

One fateful day, my wife opened the door to Lala the canary's cage to give him a treat, and very unlike him, instead of retreating to the rear of the cage, he flew right out the door and – like white lightning – Fannie was on the scene. Lala flew out the door and into her mouth.

Without even pausing to adjust her grip, Fannie started running, with Valerie shouting, “Fannie! Drop him!” Fannie got about twenty feet, stopped, set Lala down, unharmed, and walked off as if nothing had happened.

It took that long to overcome instinct with the discipline of House Rule Number One.

Here's the point: cats were designed, built, and programmed to catch smaller creatures. That's what they do. That's why we even have cats around to domesticate (although who domesticated whom is an open question: as one wag put it, dogs have owners, cats have staff). In any event, cats are around because their ancestors did such a great job of catching and eating things like little birds, and that's why we originally brought them into our community, to eliminate pests like mice and rats.

Fannie, our delicate little Persian kitty, didn't *know* what she was doing when she grabbed Lala out of the air: she just did what came naturally, what is programmed into her.

We are programmed, too. Which is precisely why relying on your gut or your instincts can be so detrimental to being a perfect child of God. We do and think in certain ways because that's how our ancestors had to – or at least, thought they had to.

In our modern world, where so many of the instincts of survival no longer have much relevance, those same reactions can be bad news – even deadly. The stress, vigilance, and energy spent trying to act like a wilderness survivor are downright detrimental to living long and well in community. Christianity is all about community: community with God, with Christ, with other believers, and with our neighbors. Community is Family Rule Number One for the family of faith.

Which brings us to Jesus Christ, and this amazing event recorded for us from the cross.

The behaviors Jesus taught his disciples – and Christ through the Spirit continues to work at getting clear to us – are not behaviors designed to ensure the survival of human beings: they are designed to ensure the steady growth of children of God, born of God, as the Gospel of John says; spiritual beings, citizens of the Kingdom of God. These behaviors Jesus teaches us are not only counter-intuitive, they're counter-instinctual. They are the behavior of spiritual beings, which we are meant to be.

Jesus said: Pray for those who persecute you. Love your enemies. Forgive as God has forgiven you. Care for the stranger, the person you don't know – because God does know who they are, and sent you to be God's representative to them.

Jesus, on the cross, in the last moments of his unprecedented life as God in human flesh and bone, in incredible pain, does what he teaches us to do, models his own words, and prays that God forgive those who are killing him, because – why? “They don't know what they're doing.” They are just doing what people do, what those particular people had to do.

It has occurred to me, and perhaps you, too, that those who attack or persecute people whose ancient forbears might have been among

those who physically put Jesus to death that day were and are not really paying attention to those words of Jesus. I'm thinking here of the persecution and murder of Jews through the centuries, to this very day. You might as well persecute Italians as descendants of the Roman soldiers who actually did the deed.

Here's what I mean: Jesus not only taught radical forgiveness, selflessness, and love: he lived them. He died demonstrating them. Moreover, God forgave those who crucified Jesus for what they did, since his Son asked him to. So why, or how, could we possibly hold anyone responsible for this act that God has already forgiven? This act which is crucial to the gift of redemption and salvation – and forgiveness – which God designed for us in Jesus Christ?

And since they didn't *know* what they were doing, were acting according to their instincts - a theme you can trace right from the beginnings of Scripture that only grows stronger as we enter into the New Covenant (think of Peter's betrayal, how he wanted to be as close as he could be to Jesus, yet denying he even knew Jesus in fear for his life) - how can we not do our very best to emulate the teaching of our Master and forgive those who wish us harm? Knowing, of course, that we will never be able to forgive in such a breathtaking way. Asking God for forgiveness even though we know what we do, just can't help it.

There's a bit more to the story of Fannie and Lala the canary: after Valerie told the story a few times, she remembered one small but critical detail. It turns out that Fannie didn't just drop Lala because Valerie was shouting at her, or because Fannie somehow remembered (or even knew) Family Rule Number One. It turns out that Fannie, running like mad with her lunch in her mouth, came out into our bedroom, where Lovey, our other, older cat was standing. Fannie saw Lovey, the two looked at each other, something clearly was communicated between them, and *then* Fannie put down the bird.

God has set the family rules, Christ has set the standard for what it means to be a child of God: "Love one another as I have loved you" and "Forgive as you have been forgiven." And we, if we are to be faithful followers of our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, ought to be about living his example, even if what we must do goes against every instinct in our humanity.

If one cat can get another cat to put down its prize, the result of acting on the very thing it was designed to do, do you think that we, who claim to be the Teacher's disciples, can work some more at setting aside the resentment, anger, enmity, and hurt that others have caused us, if for nothing else than the sake of the one who died so that we could try? Maybe even try to get others to follow that path, too?

For the sake of your soul? For the sake of eternal life?

