

Our cat's name is Juno. She is a good cat, as cats go. (I am now going to badmouth cats. So, if you have a cat, cover their ears. If you have a dog or another animal with you today, you can now begin to feel vastly superior to your cat loving neighbors). But, getting back to Juno, she has a tendency, like all cats, to get herself into trouble. She get's locked in closets. She refuses to come inside even though it's getting cold and we don't want to leave her out at night.

When she was in Honduras with us, she got into the habit of walking out on the balcony. We lived three stories up. Now, that wouldn't be a big deal, except she insisted on walking on the very edge of the balcony; outside of the railing. I would see her out there and practically have a heart attack while she was nonchalantly cleaning her paws sitting on the three inch wide strip of concrete overhanging the street.

Well, I guess she was a bit too overconfident on her perch because one day she fell from then down three floors onto the concrete sidewalk. Philip went racing down to see if she was still alive and found her crouching among bags of trash that were piled near there. He carefully carried her upstairs, and she limped some for a few weeks but basically, she was fine. The vet said that nothing was broken, but only that she had used up one of her 7 lives. (In Honduras cats have 7 lives instead of 9 lives.)

But that's just the way cats are, isn't it? Cats are Independent, fearless, and reckless. They think that they are indestructible – like when they run across the street just inches from car tires. While I'm at it I might as well mention that cats are also demanding, self-centered, ungrateful, and cruel.

They want to be fed and get rather noisy about demanding food. They see no problem with toying with defenseless little animals like baby rabbits, moles and birds. And they would kill those little animals if we didn't save them in time. And then after a long, tiring day, when

Philip is lying on the couch, Juno comes up to him and he thinks, “Oh, she wants to be kind and give me some comfort.” But probably, she just wants to be scratched behind the ears.

So, we scratch her behind the ears, and we feed her, and we clean her cat box, and we rescue her when she’s in trouble, even if it doesn’t seem like she cares very much about us. She acts as though she could live just fine without us, even though she wouldn’t last more than a few days out there in the wild on her own. But our relationship with our cat is one that I wouldn’t want to do without. I love Juno despite of her “me, me, me” behavior. I love her unconditionally.

Now, for those of you with dogs, you may think, “Oh, my dog isn’t like that cat. He (or she) cares about me.” But, they too can be demanding when it’s meal time, and they don’t lift a paw to go out and “catch” some dinner for everyone in the family. They too recklessly chase animals.

Some horses love their owners and would consider them far superior in the “care” department, but others bite, kick and buck even as we try to feed them or brush them. My example of a cat here is imperfect, but, it’s just meant to be an illustration to help us see things possibly from God’s point of view.

So, now, think about God’s relationship with us. Isn’t it in many ways similar to ours to our beloved pets? We too think that we are totally in control of our world and can do just fine without God. We don’t even realize how much God does for us. We too are often self-centered, reckless, demanding, and cruel to others, but God loves us unconditionally. God provides us with food, gives us a beautiful world to live in, gives us plants and animals to be responsible for, and if, sometimes, we remember to be grateful for all we’ve been given, I think we make God’s heart very glad.

St. Francis, known as the patron saint of animals, is really a saint for another reason. He came from a wealthy family and his father expected him to go into business as he had. But Francis

had other ideas. He had a dream in which he heard God's voice telling him that there were more important things for him to do in life. He from that day on, gave away his possessions, and dedicated himself to working for the poor the homeless, the sick and the needy.

What Francis had was empathy. He had the ability to commiserate with those who were in pain, and walk a mile in their shoes. That's what separates us from cats. We can have empathy for others. Cats go mostly on instinct; grabbing for what food they can get, seeking the best things for themselves.

We can, if we choose, care about others, empathize with their plight, love unconditionally as God loves us. We don't have to sell our possessions and become a religious as Francis did. We just need to care about how, what we do and say, affects our neighbor.

Jesus tells us in our Gospel reading for today, that he empathizes with our troubles, and our burdens. So, not only has God created a beautiful, fruitful world for us, but God sent us Jesus to show us that God's care continues to this day through the Holy Spirit. Jesus wants us to know that he will share our load, and help us carry our troubles. That's what St. Francis did. Let us try our best to follow in this great saint's footsteps.