

OPEN YOUR EYES

“Do not consider his appearance or his height. . . . The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”

Thus sayeth the Lord.

I read an article once that said, in animal shelters, black cats are the most overlooked of all felines.

Black seem to be the least preferred of cat colors, ranking below all combinations of white, orange, gray, spotted and striped.

Black cats are stereotyped as Halloween cats. They bring bad luck. They're considered more suitable for hitching a ride on a witch's broomstick than curling up on your pillow.

A woman named Margie Seyfer began volunteering at an animal shelter in her home city when she was ten years old. It always struck her as very unfair that, time after time, she would get to know affectionate, adorable black cats, and watch them be passed over by potential adopters just because of their color. But what could she do?

One day, after having worked many years at the shelter, Margie was spending a few minutes petting a sweet, half-grown, female black kitten that had been found as a stray and brought to the shelter. The slender thing purred warmly, basking in the warmth of Margie's attention, and was playfully patting her hand with one paw.

Margie thought it was a shame that the kitten was probably too big to be adopted on baby-kitten appeal alone. She was so solidly black that most people who were looking for a cat didn't even pause for a single moment in front of her cage to consider taking her home.

Margie noticed that no name was written on the informational card in front of the kitten's cage. The volunteers at the shelter were welcome to name the stray animals that were taken in, so she thought for a moment about a name she could give to the kitty that would encourage people to take a second look. Margie wanted to come up with an appealing name that might draw people's attention and, hopefully, increase the chances that the black kitten would be adopted.

The name "Jellybean" popped into Margie's head. She thought it was cute, so she wrote it on the card, just as she had done for thousands of cats over the years that had come to the shelter without a name.

Margie was taken completely by surprise when, later that afternoon, she overheard a woman walking through the cat room say, "Jellybean! What a wonderful name!" She stopped to look more closely at the kitten, who was batting at a piece of loose newspaper in the cage.

She asked Margie if she could hold Jellybean. As she opened the cage, Margie sheepishly admitted that the kitten didn't know her name yet, because she had only been given that moniker a few hours ago.

Margie placed the kitten into the woman's arms, and Jellybean, as if knowing what heartstring to tug on, leaned into the woman and looked up into her eyes with a purr of kitten bliss. After a few minutes, the woman told Margie that she'd like to adopt this black kitten. When the paperwork was approved a few days later, she took Jellybean home.

Margie was pleased, of course. Whenever an animal was adopted it nourished her soul. But she chalked up Jellybean's adoption to a lucky break for one fortunate black kitten, and moved on.

Margie was surprised again a few weeks later when the woman who had adopted Jellybean returned to the shelter and sought her out. Margie was refilling water bowls in a cat room when the woman approached her.

"You were the one who helped me adopt that black kitten a few weeks ago, remember? Jellybean? I know you were the one who named her, and I've been wanting to stop back and thank you. She's the sweetest thing—I just love her to pieces. But I don't know if I would have noticed her if she hadn't had that great name. It just suits her perfectly. She's so bouncy and colorful—I know that sounds crazy. Anyway, I wanted to say thank you."

Margie told the woman she was touched that she had taken the time to stop by, and thrilled to know that Jellybean was doing well in her new home. Then Margie explained how black cats were often unfairly overlooked and confessed that the name had been her conscious and deliberate attempt to get someone to notice a cat who would probably not have been adopted otherwise.

“Well, it worked.” the woman responded. “You should name all the black cats Jellybean.”

Margie smiled politely at the suggestion, and thought to herself that nice woman knew nothing of the harsh realities of animal shelters. Just because she had named one kitten Jellybean and it had gotten adopted didn’t mean much—it had been a stroke of luck. After all, black cats were still black cats, and most people didn’t want them.

As the day went on, Margie kept thinking about the woman’s advice: “You should name all the black cats Jellybean.” As crazy as it seemed, she decided she had nothing to lose. Pen in hand, she walked along the cages, looking for a black cat without a name.

There was only one, a small black kitten alone on a cage, sleeping. Margie wrote “Jellybean” on its cage card. Later that afternoon, someone came along and said they would like to adopt “that little Jellybean.”

“Well,” Margie thought to herself, “that really wasn’t a fair test. It was so cute and tiny.”

A few days later, a nameless black cat came along, fully grown. She named it Jellybean. It was adopted.

Days later, another. Adopted.

The process repeated itself enough times that, after a while, Margie had to admit that maybe there was some magic in that name after all; and it almost seemed wrong not to name black cats Jellybean—especially ones that had a bounce in their step and a spark of joy in their eyes.

Although Margie had usually avoided using the same name for more than one cat, after a while, her fellow volunteers were no longer surprised when they came across another of her Jellybeans.

Margie knew that more far-reaching solutions were certainly needed to ensure that every cat had a home; but, knowing that so many of her black Jellybeans were now in their forever homes, sitting in sunny windows, sniffing at ladybugs walking across the kitchen floor, and snuggling in bed with their adopted people, she was pleased that a name made such a big difference. And the name “Jellybean” allowed some humans to see beyond a dark, midnight coat into the rainbow riches in a cat’s heart.

It's so easy to judge someone by their outer appearance, isn't it? For some, when they see people of color, their minds immediately jump to unfair and often very wrong stereotypes.

If the person looks Hispanic, they must be illegal immigrants who need to be sent back to where they came from.

A young, African-American man walking down the street at night, wearing a hoodie, must be a criminal, and possibly violent. So Officers Smith and Jones become hyper-vigilant, pull out their guns, put their fingers on the triggers, and are ready to shoot him at the slightest wrong movement.

An individual who looks Middle Eastern and is clearly a Muslim boards a plane, and people look to see if they might have a suspicious looking package on them.

Ragged-clothed homeless people are deadbeats who not only don't deserve a handout from you, they don't deserve your compassion and respect.

People who have a *Trump/Pence* bumper sticker on their GM truck are prejudiced and have a Ku Klux Klan outfit in their closet and a swastika flag hanging on the wall.

People who have a *Biden/Harris* bumper sticker on their Toyota Prius are socialists who want the government to limit our freedoms, force us to get COVID vaccines and wear masks, and discourage people in need from pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps.

That's what human beings like us tend to see when we look at another person. Their outer appearance. And their outer appearances, combined with our own inner prejudices and stereotypes, often leads to unchristian, judgmental behavior.

But the Lord does not look at human beings the way we look at them.

The Lord looks past people's outer appearances, looks past the many prejudices and stereotypes we human beings have because of what others look like on the outside, and sees deep into their soul.

How can we ever discover what's in a person's heart if we refuse to look beyond what he or she looks like on the outside?

The answer is, we can't.

"Do not consider his, or her, appearance or their height. . . . The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

And the Lord would like us to do that, as well.

My prayer is that we will heed God's words and strive to look at people's hearts, rather than their outward appearance.

Because otherwise, some very cute, friendly black kittens who aren't named Jellybean will never get adopted.

And some very nice, wonderful human beings who don't look like us will never be recognized.

May the Lord open our eyes to see the inner soul of others, and fill our hearts with love for them, so that doesn't happen. Amen.