

“All or Nothing”

A few years ago, I was just drifting off to sleep around 10:30 one evening, when I heard the most horrendous sound of tires squealing, scraping metal, and crashing glass. It went on for what seemed like an eternity. You have to realize, that I live on a state highway, just after a curve and I froze in anticipation of whatever what happening to come crashing through my bedroom wall at any second.

As soon as the noise stopped, my adrenaline kicked in and I ran to the front door. I could see a truck on its side across the street, lights still on, motor still running. My daughter yelled, “Should I call 911?” I replied, “Yes” as I ran out the door. I ran across the street and could see a man lying on the ground beside the truck. A neighbor had also responded by then and we discovered the man barely conscious and bleeding. I yelled across the street to my daughter to get a blanket. While she was getting the blanket, I stopped traffic to keep them from running into the debris that was on the road. We covered the man with the blanket. Someone else put something on his bleeding head and soon, the emergency personnel were there to take over.

At the point when I was no longer needed for assistance, I became aware that I was standing in the wet, cold grass with no shoes on and in my shorty pajamas!! The lights from the emergency vehicles made my condition quite visible and there were cars backed up in both directions, so I headed back across the street to get some clothes on. I became aware that the road was full of glass, fishing tackle, broken bottles, a bicycle and dozens of beer cans. It hurt to walk back across the street in my bare feet, something I hadn’t even noticed through the adrenaline rush the first time across.

We later learned that the truck lost control and flipped over – endwise – five times before coming to rest on its side. It was pretty obvious by then that the man in the truck was drunk. I retrieved my blanket and gingerly carried it to the trash. I didn't want to take a chance on what someone else's blood might have in it. After the mess was cleaned up I made my way back to bed, several hours later than I had planned on. As my feet began to warm up, tiny little cuts on the bottom of my feet began to sting. It took me some time to settle back into sleep again.

As I lay there, I became angry. Angry that I had risked my life near downed power lines. Angry that I had cut my feet. Angry that I had to throw a perfectly good blanket away. Angry that I had been so scared. Angry that I was losing sleep. Angry...angry...angry. And when I read in the paper the next day that the man had a blood alcohol content of 2 and one half times the legal limit, I was reaaaaaaaaaallllllllllllllly angry. What happened to the compassion I felt for this man when I first heard the accident? What happened to my instinctive, impulsive rush to come to his aid? What happened to my concern for his well being?

You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. (James 2: 8-10)

How could I love this neighbor as myself when I felt so much anger and if I really get honest about it, disgust? I was definitely showing partiality. So, according to James, I was the one who was sinning.

For by grace give to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned (Romans 12: 3-13)

Sober judgment, huh? Interesting choice of words. I was definitely thinking of myself more highly than I ought to think. I

wasn't the one driving drunk. But did it really make me any better than him?

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35)

Wasn't it good enough that I was out there helping this guy in front of everyone's headlights? Couldn't they see that I was a good person – a Christian – just by my being there? Oh – but the rest of the verse says...”if you have love for one another.” Well, I probably did not qualify at the moment I found out the man was drunk. I became judge and jury at that moment and decided that he was stupid enough to drive while he was that drunk, he wasn't worth the effort.

We love because he first loved us. Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not see. The commandment we have from his is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. (1 John 4: 19-21)

Uh oh. I could be in big trouble now. If I don't love my neighbor, then I don't love God? But I do love God! Just because I didn't love that man doesn't mean I didn't love God. But wait a minute. I went to his rescue didn't I? I responded automatically to his need. So, maybe its like when my kids were little and I told them I stilled loved them even though I was angry at what they did. I disliked the action, not the person. OK. Maybe I did love that man. After all, he is only human and God only knows I have surely have done things that in God's eyes were not pleasing to him.

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love; I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And

if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. (1 Corinthians 13: 1-3)

Were my actions that night just being a noisy gong? Did I really want to help the guy or was I driven by self-serving actions – to make myself look good? I had faith that I could move a mountain when I ran across the road to help the victim in the truck. But without love, was it really faith? I gave away my possession without thinking to help the man, but then I whined about it later. Without love, I really was nothing.

If we can recite Bible verses backward and forward and pray eloquently in church, but sit in judgment of the person beside us in the pew because they are of a different skin color, WE ARE NOTHING!

If we give our money to the church, then complain about the church giving some of “our” money to a group that is sympathetic to homosexuals, but don’t love the people we are supporting, WE ARE NOTHING!

If we really love teaching and think we are the best teacher in the whole world, but we don’t love the kids we work with because they are from a different economic background, then WE ARE NOTHING!

If we exclude anyone from our churches because of their language, their color, their gender, their sexual orientation, their age, the clothes they wear, their nationality, their job status, their political preference or their religion, we really don’t love these people and WE ARE NOTHING!

Jesus answered, “The first is, “hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You

should love your neighbor as your self.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

Jesus lived up to his own words. He consorted with the worst of the worst – the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the Samaritans, the lepers, the lame, those with evil spirits. And not only did he allow himself to be with them, HE LOVED THEM!! Jesus showed us by example as well as word that we are to love all whom we come in contact with. NO EXCEPTIONS! There is no other commandment greater than these. If we are to truly love God with our heart, our soul, our mind and our strength, we can only do so by loving our neighbor. And Jesus went on to make it abundantly clear to the disciples that they were to go into all the ends of the earth to preach his word to all people! NO EXCEPTIONS!

Let’s consider the king who invited all kinds of guests to the wedding banquet for his son. The guests would not come. The king sent his slaves out into the streets to invite everyone they could find, both good and bad, to come to the feast he had prepared. Those that were expected to come did not. I can’t help but compare this to what might happen when the new Creekside Church building is completed. What are you going to do if those you expect to come don’t? Once the church is all polished and spic and span and ready to receive, what will you do if no one comes?

If your expectations regarding the attendance of those you invite are not met, will you then go out and gather all you can find to fill your church? I said earlier that Jesus rubbed elbows with all sorts of people and loved them in such a way to make them feel comfortable. Crowds followed Jesus everywhere he went to be with him. His love, as it came from God, made those he came in contact with feel not only loved, but welcome. What will you as members of Creekside Church of the Brethren need to do to make others feel loved? What will you as Creekside Church of the Brethren do to make others feel welcome. I get an email every morning with a thought for the day. A couple this week

have seemed appropriate for this morning: Elbert Hubbard says: "Parties who want milk should not seat themselves on a stool in the middle of the field in hope that the cow will back up to them." And this one by Ovid was from just this morning: "Let your hook be always cast; in the pool where you least expect it, there will be a fish."

I've already admitted to my feelings about the guy whom I felt didn't live up to MY standards so I know as human beings, it is sometimes difficult to accept those who we see as different than ourselves. I really am grateful that my faith journey has brought me a long way since the incident I share this morning. I have come to realize that unless I have walked in someone's shoes for a while, I am not able to judge or criticize or speculate about anything they have done. Life has too many variables in it to expect cut and dried responses.

How about all of you? If Creekside is to truly "bear fruit in the spirit, sharing holy hospitality by offering healing and hope to your community and world, and inviting others to walk by faith." as your vision statement says, who will you invite to church the first Sunday you hold worship in that meeting place? Because you consider yourselves "God's beloved in Christ and united in the Spirit", will you truly "share God's love through acceptance, service and witness" as your mission states. Who will you gather in off the street when the wedding guests don't show up?

Many of the words you have heard here this morning are not mine. They are the words of Jesus. And they are the words of the Creekside Church of the Brethren responding to the words of Jesus. Do you recall what you heard earlier?

- You shall love your neighbor as yourself, there is no other commandment greater than this.
- I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think.
- If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love; I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal
- We love because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars

- **Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another**

Debbie Wyne tells this story:

His name is Bill. He has wild hair, wears a T-shirt with holes in it, jeans, and no shoes. This was literally his wardrobe for his entire four years of college. He is brilliant, kind of esoteric and very, very bright. He became a Christian while attending college. Across the street from the campus is a well-dressed, very conservative church. They want to develop a ministry to the students, but are not sure how to go about it. One day Bill decides to go there. He walks in with no shoes, jeans, his T-shirt, and wild hair. The service has already started and so Bill starts down the aisle looking for a seat. The church is completely packed and he can't find a seat.

By now, people are really looking a bit uncomfortable, but no one says anything. Bill gets closer and closer and closer to the pulpit, and when he realizes there are no seats, he just squats down right on the carpet. (although perfectly acceptable behavior at a college fellowship, trust me, this had never happened in this church before!) By now the people are really uptight, and the tension in the air is thick.

About this time, the minister realizes that from way at the back of the church, a deacon is slowly making his way toward Bill. Now, the deacon is in his eighties, and has silver-gray hair, and wears a three-piece suit. He is a godly man, very elegant, very dignified, very courtly. He walks with a cane and, as he starts walking toward this boy, everyone is saying to themselves that you can't blame him for what he's going to do. How can you expect a man of his age and of his background to understand some college kid on the floor?

It takes a long time for the man to reach the boy. The church is utterly silent except for the clicking of the man's cane. All eyes are focused on him. You can't even hear anyone breathing. The minister can't even preach the sermon until the deacon does what he has to do.

And now they see this elderly man drop his cane on the floor.

With great difficulty, he lowers himself and sits down next to Bill and worships with him so he won't be alone. Everyone chokes up with emotion. When the minister gains control, he says, "What I'm about to preach, you will never remember. What you have just seen, you will never forget."

And neither should we.