

Elephant
“God’s going to work with you.”
Hebrews 12:1-2

Fourth in the series, Xtreme Love: lessons from the Methodist heart

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When Do You Become a Real Christian?

One day I was talking with some people who had been to Israel. They described Jerusalem; and seeing the Sea of Galilee; and walking the streets of Bethlehem. One of them talked about going to a site on the Jordan River where Jesus is thought to have been baptized; and how moving it was to be baptized again in that special place.

He said, the first time he had been baptized he didn’t think that he had much, if any, faith. But this time, he knew so much more and his belief was so much stronger. He seemed to think that this was his real baptism. The first one didn’t count, at least not so much.

I already knew that churches like ours that baptize children believe that baptism is something you should only get once, because it’s a sacrament that is valid because of what God does, not how pure or true you happen to be. You could renew your baptism, just not replace it. But, it wasn’t the second baptism that troubled me. It was that he sounded like you need to be at a certain level of goodness or strength of belief to be a Christian, or even to belong to God. You can belong to God and still not act like it.

Big

It’s true, though, that there are a lot of people who claim to believe in God and Jesus who also do things that aren’t very Christian. I don’t just mean people like European conquerors of foreign lands who slaughtered thousands of people in the name of God and the King for the sake of their own personal treasury. It’s not limited to greedy corporate executives who go to church one day and the next day make millions of dollars through questionable ethics. And it’s not just the Christian addict, prostitute, or pickpocket trapped in a life that won’t mesh with the Bible.

It’s also Christian people like you and me who, in little ways or big have a hard time letting go of a way of life that makes us feel, at least a little secure or fulfilled on our own terms and not God’s.

When we were in high school, a friend of mine decided that he was going to be a pastor. He set off for college to earn BA in theology, and was planning to go on to seminary. Then, something happened. He never followed through with his plans. In fact, for some years he claimed to be an atheist. I always thought it was because he read too much theology or ran into a convincing professor capable of arguing persuasively against the Christian Faith. It wasn't until recently that he told me what really happened.

A few things contributed to change his mind; but one of the main reasons was that he had been made a member of our church's administrative board and attended a few meetings where he watched how people treated each other when they disagreed. He said they tore each other apart; and it wasn't long before he decided that he didn't want to live his life putting up with people who said they loved Jesus and then treated each other like that.

I've seen a lot of the other side of church, where people have so cared for each other that they've saved lives and given hope. But you and I both know how it's easy to decide to follow Jesus, live by the Ten Commandments and the love of God, but then turn around and behave like Jesus never lived or taught.

There once was a driver who was being tailgated on a busy street by a woman who was showing signs of stress. Suddenly, a light turned yellow and he did the right thing and stopped, even though he might have beaten the light if he'd stepped on the gas. The woman behind him hit the roof, leaned on her horn, screaming in frustration because she missed *her* chance to sail through the intersection. (You might have seen her around, too!) She was still ranting away when she heard a tap on her window and looked up into the face of a very serious police officer. He ordered her to get out of her car with her hands up. He put her in handcuffs and drove her straight to the police station where she was searched, fingerprinted, photographed, and placed in a cell. After a couple of hours, she was let out of the cell and escorted back to the booking desk where the arresting officer was waiting with her personal belongings. He said, "I'm very sorry for the mistake. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, making gestures, and cussing a blue streak at the driver in front of you, who'd done nothing but obey the law. Then I noticed the *CHOOSE LIFE* license plate holder, the *WHAT WOULD JESUS DO?* bumper sticker, and the chrome-plated Christian fish emblem on the trunk. So, naturally, I assumed you had stolen the car."

You might be a patient driver. You may never have broken the law. But you still may have spread a rumor because you felt hurt or just didn't like something you saw

someone doing. It's possible that you never questioned an injustice you've seen another suffer; so long as you stayed comfortable and out of danger. You might have decided in favor of your own interest at the expense of someone else. You might have found it easier to judge someone else for their sins, rather than forgive them and accept them as the child of God they, regardless, are.

We have all fallen short, somehow. And when we do, it's almost like living like that is really more important than living in light of God's love the way that Jesus taught.

That's not a very pleasant thing, either to admit or to mention. But it's true. Jesus saw the way people tear each other apart, ending up with a world that's often miserable in the process. Then he offered us a different world that we could create with God right here. He forgave us. Then by the power of his love and the light of his teaching he gave us the Way to follow him.

But what have we often done? 'Said, "Yes" to Jesus; then continued to live as we lived before, knowing God's loves us, but acting like God doesn't. You can have a *relative change* but still need a *real change*. In other words, you can be rescued from pushing God away, so your relationship is changed. But if you still live like you did before, like you didn't have Christ in your life. You still need a turn-around in your attitudes actions.

There is a saying that's used for times when there is something very wrong, but no one wants to say so: "There's an elephant in the room." It means that something is there and it's very big. Everybody bumps into it and trips over it and has to move around it. It seems absurd: you know it doesn't belong there, yet no one says it's there, and no one does anything to remove it.

Having God's love, yet living like God hasn't loved, saved, and claimed you, is the elephant in the room; and this elephant is very, very big.

Methodist founder John Wesley said what is needed is a *real change*, a *conversion*, in other words. A lesson from the Methodist heart is that God cares so much about you so much that you are accepted just as you are; but God loves you enough to not let you stay as you are. Somehow, God works in you to open your eyes to see the elephant; and say "Here I am, the apple of God's eye, yet I still don't act like it. God help me!"

This isn't something you can just do on your own. Opening your eyes to see the elephant is a gift: a gift God gives. We call it, *converting grace*. And this begins the real change.

That's when you turn from a world that has no room for God to a world that is filled with the Presence. And from that point, there's no telling what God can do with you.

This is what Hebrews 12 is getting at. *Lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and run with perseverance the race that is set before you, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of the faith...* Now that you love God, let go of the stuff that holds you back: and run with it!

Real Christian

One day in South Africa's Kruger National Park, Laura and I had hiked a trail inside our campground, a place made safe by a fence that kept large predators out. We had just walked out onto the road leading into the camp when a woman in a car pulled to a stop, rolled down her window, and told us that we might be interested in an elephant browsing just outside the gate. This was a rare opportunity. Everywhere else in the park you can't get out of your vehicle; in fact you aren't even allowed to hang out your arm. You could be seriously fined if you happened to survive. It was nearly impossible to see one of the "Big Five" animals on foot. So we walked down the camp road and approached the entrance.

At first we didn't see it; but then the brush and the trees began to move. We got a little closer; we heard the snapping of good-sized branches, turned into food. Then all-at-once the elephant raised his head: just several feet away from us; looking straight at us as his trunk curled around the browse and stuffed it into his mouth.

This thing had tusks!

And there we stood, in awe and watched, and waited, clicking pictures one-right-after-another. Then something occurred to me I whispered to my wife. "Laura," I said, "I have a feeling that if this guy gets annoyed, he's not going to pay much attention to the fence.

So we backed away, and recommitted ourselves to the safety of the place where we were supposed to be.

It's good to see the elephant. Then, it's good to back away. Because there is something better than living like there is no God.

God wants you to belong to Jesus *for real* and not just in name, only. *For real* is how life in Christ is fulfilling and makes a difference in the face of anything that comes your way. *For real* is how your life can affect the world around you for Christ's sake.

For real: and God will get you there...if you want.