

The Bulletin Board

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“¹⁴ And if I say to the wicked man, ‘You will surely die,’ but he then turns away from his sin and does what is just and right- ¹⁵ if he gives back what he took in pledge for a loan, returns what he has stolen, follows the decrees that give life, and does no evil, he will surely live; he will not die. ¹⁶ None of the sins he has committed will be remembered against him. He has done what is just and right; he will surely live.” (Ezekiel 33.14-16)

Crescentville is a town small enough for folks to know one another yet large enough that it supports a few successful businesses. There is a small main street with the usual assortment of stores, a pleasant park near the center of the town, and a church that faces the park in that town square.

There is a large bulletin board on the front lawn of the church. The board does not appear to be of human design and, much to the occasional dismay of those who attend the church, the information posted appears fresh each Monday morning. This is no ordinary board containing simple announcements of church activities. It is a board that lists various sins by category. Member anxiety stems from the fact that nearly everyone at some point or another has seen his or her name on that board under some specific sin category.

There is only one way that people can have their names removed from the board. They must find someone in the church willing to support and pray for them. Obviously, this means that a named individual basically confesses to another person that the board tells the truth and that he or she needs help to break the bonds of that particular sin.

Out of shame, some try to ignore the board, but only a handful have lasted more than a few weeks in that kind of denial. Sooner or later, friends in the church approach them and ask why they are unwilling to receive help. The few too stubborn to resist this final confrontation quietly leave the church.

This is a story. If Crescentville exists, I doubt it has a church bulletin board of the kind described above, yet I rather wish that such a board *did* exist. In this ideal place, people in the church have learned how to admit that they sin, their friends all sin, and if they want help walking away from a particular sin, there is always someone willing to help them.

I want to return to the story for a bit, however, and ask you to allow me a little leeway in its continuation. I want to place a sex offender (Mike) in this small town—a man who spent time in prison for his crimes and is now trying to start over. Mike used his time in prison trying to understand why he did the things he did. A mandated sex offender treatment program helped provide understanding in some areas; the many chapel activities he attended took care of the rest. Mike’s wife had divorced him and took the family across country. His room above the garage of an old house at the edge of town was all he could find but it served his purposes. Most important to Mike had been to find a church family, so when a friend told him about Crescentville’s small and unusual church, that was where he headed.

It was somewhat of a surprise for Mike to see the bulletin board on the front lawn of the church. It was even more of a surprise to see his name listed, the only name in a column labeled ‘Child molestation.’

Entering the church, he saw heads turn his way and then just as quickly turn back, huddled conversations taking place on either side of the main aisle. Feeling color come to his cheeks, he slid into an available spot at the end of a pew.

Just before the end of the service, a small group of individuals whose names were on the board stood and asked for prayer partners. Mike stood among them, head bowed, his weight shifting from foot to foot. One by one, others left their pews, approached a standing individual, and went into prayer with that person. Before long, Mike was alone, wondering why he ever thought this church would be able to help him. He thought of sitting down. He thought of leaving. Before he could do either, he became aware of someone standing next to him.

She was at least 80 years old, a face filled with wrinkles formed in both good and bad times. She looked up at him and said, “My name is Alice. When I was a little girl, a neighbor molested

me. I wanted him to rot in hell. I wanted to kill him. He took my happiness and I wanted to hate him for as long as I lived.

“When he was arrested, I learned that I was not his only victim. In the investigation that followed, I also learned he had killed a little girl in another state who threatened to tell on him. The judge sentenced him to life without parole. Her parents wanted him executed.” She paused for a moment before softly adding, “And so did I.”

“I’m an old woman now and I have decided the time for my sadness cannot end unless I will it to end. When I saw your name and your sin on the bulletin board today, I knew God was telling me to stop hating. And here you are. And here I am standing next to you. Who would have thought that such a thing would even be possible?”

In that moment, Mike felt his knees go weak; a wave of some deep emotion passing through him as she gently invited him to sit beside her. “Why don’t we start with a prayer?”