

March 11, 2012  
Colossians 3:12-17  
Creekside COB  
Pastor Rosanna McFadden

### **“Circles of Caring”**

**Purpose: To remind us that compassion shapes us as much as it influences the other.**

**Good morning! As you may remember, we’re using the Church of the Brethren Vision Statement as the basis of our worship services for the next few weeks. We don’t have space to print that statement in the bulletin each week, but I have asked the Media Center to leave it up on the screen. See if you can figure out which part of the statement we’re structuring the service around today, and let us know what you think we ought to be doing the next two weeks. Actually, Ron Nicodemus is leading a Bible study on the Vision Statement here in the Worship Center during the Sunday School hour, so you can share all of those suggestions with him.**

**This morning, in the spirit of the Lenten season, I want to talk about an experience of personal testing. It’s something that many of us have, or will experience; something which tests our capacity for acceptance and perseverance. It can be a traumatic experience; one which tests our Christian values and resolve. I’m talking about going to the grocery store with a toddler. Mothers, fathers, grandparents, aunts and uncles and other caregivers share this experience. Even when you’re able to minimize the potential pitfalls: have they had a nap? Are they hungry? Have I had a nap? Am I in a hurry? it can still turn into a fiasco, where total strangers are staring at you with disapproval, and you just want to get home so you can tell your kid, “Don’t you ever do that again.”**

**I remember one time when I was shopping at Kroger in Goshen, and one of my kids (who shall remain nameless) was freaking out -- and I was, too, trying to keep this kid shut down so we didn’t disrupt the**

entire store -- and in the middle of threatening my kid, I came around the end of an aisle... and ran into someone from Creekside (who shall also remain nameless). Instantly I was a lot nicer to my kid, and pretty embarrassed about myself: maybe I *could* choose to be more patient and tolerant. For most of us, trips to the grocery store are a blip on the radar: something we get over, and our kids do, too. This isn't the case for everyone, though. I want to share a story with you, and let you know that I have permission to share it.

Many of you have met my sister-in-law, Joy, and her kids, Nika, Joshua, and Maya, who have been coming to Creekside. Joy is really easy person to talk to; Maya, her youngest, who is 5, is tougher to talk to. Maya is autistic: she has a developmental disorder which puts her on the autism spectrum. Maya is toward the high-functioning end of that spectrum, and there are a lot of things she can do -- some things as well or better than other kids her age -- but verbal communication has been slow in developing. Maya can be overwhelmed by things -- the feel of her clothing against her skin, large groups of people, unfamiliar places -- things that most of us don't even notice, or have learned to take in stride. Until recently, Maya didn't have the verbal skills to say what was wrong. She'd just start yelling, or try to run away from whatever sensory input was too much. Needless to say, this made trips to the grocery store especially challenging. Often Joy would have to stop halfway through her shopping, abandon her cart in the aisle, and leave the store and go home. One time this happened at Wal-Mart: Joy was shopping, Maya flipped out, and Joy was making her way out of the store when a woman stopped her and said, "Why can't you control your child?" Joy answered: she has autism -- sometimes things are overwhelming for her, and she screams. And the woman responded, "Children like that shouldn't be allowed to live." That breathtaking, awful, and incredibly judgmental response has stayed with me as an example of how *not* to treat one another.

Listen again to the first verses of today's text from Colossians: "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with

compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another, and if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other, just as the Lord has forgiven you.” It’s about as easy to bear with one another and forgive each other as it is to go through the grocery store with a screaming kid -- wow, does it take a lot of patience. Notice how the passage begins, “*As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved...*” We are called to relate to one another out of the conviction that we are valued and loved. If we are fortunate, we experienced this love in our own family, from parents or grandparents who took us to the grocery store and loved us even if we behaved badly. If we are really fortunate, someone important to us expressed that love in words, or in tangible ways. This has not been everyone’s experience. There’s a story about a Brethren man who loved his wife so much... he almost told her. Whatever you got, or didn’t get, from your family or from others, as Christians we must be grounded in the conviction that we are loved by God. If you open the Bible and read almost any section of it, you will find the love of God. It is in the story of creation, where God is pleased with the world and with Adam and Eve, and call them good. It’s in the story of the Exodus, where God leads the Hebrew people out of slavery and guides and protects them in the wilderness until they reach the promised land. It’s in the promises of the law, where God covenants with those who follow the commandments. God’s steadfast love is a theme which runs throughout the psalms, and even through the prophets, when God is grieved that the people have turned away from God’s love. And that’s just the Old Testament: the New Testament tells the story of God’s Son, Jesus, who loved us so much he allowed himself to be put to death on a cross to demonstrate the power of love and the promise of new life. No wonder the writers of the New Testament can’t stop talking about God’s love: it is the foundation of the entire narrative of the Bible. It is what shapes our identity as God’s people, as followers of Jesus. If we are Christians, then the Bible story is *our* story. We can’t call ourselves Christians and deny the reality of God’s love for us.

**But God's love for us is just the first step. Colossians goes on to say, "Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you." We must take the love which God has given to us and share it with other people. This isn't an easy task. Frankly, other people can be pretty annoying. Some days I'd rather push a fussy toddler through the grocery store than have to bear with other people. Tolerance is difficult, but forgiveness is impossible if we begin with the conviction that we are right and if other people would just be like us, they would be alright, too. Here's a news flash: people aren't all the same. Some people didn't learn English as their first language, some people aren't white, some people didn't grow up going to church, some people aren't middle class, some people aren't heterosexual, some people don't have all the physical or mental abilities that we do. When we start sorting people into "us" and "those people" based on ourselves as the norm, we start down a path which ends up forming us to be like that woman at Wal-Mart who made the incredibly arrogant judgment that some children shouldn't be allowed to live.**

**I don't know anything more about that woman -- Joy was understandably too shook up to stick around and ask questions -- but I can surmise a few things. I bet she doesn't have a child or a grandchild with a developmental disability. I bet she's never spent time volunteering with special needs kids, or caring for someone who is disabled. I can't guess whether or not she considers herself a Christian; some Christians are comfortable condemning other people, whether they know them or not. Let me be clear: there are things which are wrong for us to do. The Bible spells out a lot of these specifically, and others in more general terms. All of us -- the Bible is clear about this, too -- have done things which are contrary to God's will, and which damage our relationship with God. This is called sin. We are to avoid sin when we can, repent of it when we do not avoid it, and encourage others by our words and our example to turn away from sin and live as God calls us to. One of the sins which the Bible cautions us about is judging other people, because we never know**

the whole story. I don't happen to think that a toddler throwing a fit in the grocery store is sin, but it does make a difference how I view that behavior if it's a kid who didn't get the candy he wanted, or a child who is developmentally unable to process the stress of her environment. Either way, the gold standard of acceptable behavior is not what is least annoying to me, or least disruptive to my Wal-Mart shopping experience.

The word compassion means to "suffer with." It is the capacity to enter into another's pain; to share another's experience. Compassion is an important quality for Christians to foster, partly because it's important for people who are hurting to have caring and support. But compassion is even more vital because of how it shapes those who offer it. Compassion is partly about the other, but it's mostly about ourselves. There will continue to be children with special needs, and if they are fortunate, they will have a parent like Joy. But the person who is really disabled is the woman whose compassion was so impaired that she couldn't recognize the worth of a child who is different. We are all children of God -- it's an incredibly diverse family; if we restrict our compassion to people who are like us, who deserve it (because they're trying being like us), or who don't annoy us at Wal-Mart, our circles of caring will grow smaller and smaller, and we will lose some of our own humanity, our ability to extend compassion, in the process.

My daughter Becca shared this quote with me: "You shouldn't criticize someone until you've walked a mile in their shoes -- because by then, you're a mile away, *and* you have their shoes!" As flippant as that is, it points to the reality that it's easier to criticize or condemn someone if we distance ourselves from them first, not just physically, but emotionally. If we don't actually *know* anyone who is Muslim or who has mental illness, it's much easier to dismiss whole groups of people as "those people," than if we move beyond our own circle and interact with people who are different from us. Jesus was constantly crossing into other circles in his ministry: healing lepers, talking to a Samaritan woman, eating with tax collectors, allowing a woman of ill-

repute to anoint his feet, keeping the Pharisees from stoning a woman caught in adultery. What did all these people have in common? They were children of God; they were brothers and sisters of the Pharisees, and the Pharisees were doing everything they could to disown them. Colossians 3:14 says, "Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." That's a tall order. We haven't found perfect harmony yet in the family of God, but following Jesus' example is a fine place to start. If we are called to be courageous disciples of Jesus through Scripture, we must take seriously Jesus' example of embracing the outcast. As challenging as this may be, it is the way which we develop our own capacity for compassion. If we embrace others, then they can share God's love with the people around them. When we radiate God's love, it ripples out from us and touches other people in ways we cannot imagine. Let me leave you with these words from Colossians 3:17: "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." Let us embrace one another in Jesus' name. Amen.