

June 22, 2023

CORRECTED BUT NOT STUCK IN THE DOGHOUSE

Previously, I shared some lessons I learned from dealing with our rascally puppy, Alfie. He is now two years old, and God is still employing him as a furry little Teacher's aide. The latest lessons: growing up is not a straight line, patience takes practice, and love keeps no record of wrongs.

After many months of behaving like a civilized adult, Alfie suddenly decided that sneaking into the bathroom to raid the wastebasket and shred used tissues was great fun. My frustrated, "Why now?" was met with his rollicking, "Why not?" Besides this unacceptable new antic, he also had a couple of maddening housebreaking lapses. I can only guess he was thinking, "Why stop in the middle of a rousing game of indoor fetch to detour to the outdoor facilities?" Really, Alfie?? After all this time, do you still not get it?

As soon as I uttered these words -- and admittedly a few more, for impact -- I felt an unexpected commonality with Jesus, who said something similar to his longtime disciple Philip, after his much more significant moment of thick-headedness (John 14:9). The lesson that dawned on me as I put Alfie in solitary confinement was that even after years of following Jesus, I, too, still have moments of thick-headedness, lapsing into old sins and stumbling into new variations. But by his mercy, God doesn't consign me to the doghouse forever. And He doesn't consign you there, either.

Instead, He bears with our weaknesses, knowing that we are but dust (Psalm 103:14). He knows that on this side of heaven we can certainly clean up our act, and grow in holiness, but we remain sinners (Romans 3:23; 1 John 1:8). As even the godly apostle Paul acknowledged, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do

the very thing I hate...For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing" (Romans 7:15, 18–19).

By God's mercy and love, we are not left in this hopeless condition, nor written off for our relapses like a puppy who can't seem to get it fully right. We know on the divine authority behind the Bible that "If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

God will indeed shine a spotlight on our sin by the power of the Holy Spirit, and He may certainly allow negative consequences to ensue. His desire is not to shame us, but only to lead us to a fresh start, for there is "now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). Jesus faithfully and personally continues to lead us onward and upward: "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly of heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:29).

So instead of shaming ourselves for straying from his path yet again, we can confess, be forgiven, and start anew, thanks to Jesus' self-sacrificing death upon the cross for our sins. Like the imperfect apostle Paul, we can be confident that "he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6). And as He does this good work in us, we are inspired to extend his grace to others, exemplifying that "love covers a multitude of sins" by overlooking minor offenses, tolerating provocations, and forgiving the sin against us (1 Peter 4:8; Matthew 5:39, 6:14).

With love in the Lord,
The Rev. Christine Maddux