

“The devil made me do it!” We are able to come up with some fantastic excuses and rationalizations for almost everything we do. It may have begun in the Garden of Eden with Adam telling God, “*The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit from the tree and I ate*” (Gen. 3:12). It seems like Adam blamed both Eve and God for his disobedience. Can’t you hear his thinking, “If God hadn’t given me the woman....”

Jesus is nearing the end of his ministry. The disciples are being prepared to carry on the mission he started. They are gathered in the upper room. He has washed their feet and given them an example of what it means to be a follower of his. This is their last time together, their last table fellowship. He knows the heart of Judas and yet he still has washed his feet.

What would you have done with Judas? Asked him to leave and then left the city for a while until this all blows over? Or, would you have taken Judas aside and tried to talk with him, convince him that what he is about to do is wrong? Jesus reaches out in an act of love - he gets on his knees before Judas and washes his feet as he does to all the disciples with him.

He has taught love and he has demonstrated love. And with this comes the words of a new commandment. He gives a new challenge for living. This is the toughest, hardest thing he could have asked his followers to do, “*Love one another*”. He asks them to love and serve, as he has loved and served, the world. He has set the example. He has loved them and tried to mold them into one body. He has demonstrated his love for the poor, the widows, the lepers, the outcast, the blind, the lame, the children and women. He has loved those who have stood outside the circle. He has reached out to Gentiles and shown the same love for them.

His parables have taught the same lesson: The Good Samaritan, the lost sheep, the prodigal child. Even in death his words will be words of forgiveness, “*Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing*” (John 23:34). Now he challenges them to love as he has loved.

It is a love beyond selfish love, “*For God so loved the world...*” (John 3:16). It is an expansion of love beyond what many believed possible. It is easy to love those who are like us (most of the time). It is harder to love when they are different or are our enemies. Yet, from the beginning of his ministry he has challenged his followers to love. In the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s Gospel he calls for them to “*turn the other cheek*” (5:38) and “*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*” (5:43). We are to feed, clothe and love the whole world. Love one another, period, no exceptions.

Did you notice the word Jesus chose? Commandment. A new Commandment. Not a new suggestion or maybe you should try this. I am amazed at how many people call for the Ten Commandments to be posted in public places while leaving out the one commandment Jesus gave, ***Love one another!***

We still question the wisdom of Jesus. You don’t have to go beyond a daily newscast or a daily paper to hear of Christians calling for hatred of others, those who are different. We challenge those whose lifestyles we don’t like or approve of. We challenge their beliefs but will not let ours be challenged. If they are not like us, let’s bomb them to eternity. Let’s build a wall and keep them out, those we deem unworthy. How do these words and actions demonstrate the 11th Commandment? How do they show God’s love for the world?

What if we loved....? What if we worked at improving the living conditions in the nations the people are fleeing from? What if we made it attractive for them to stay in their home town and earn a living wage for their families? Much of the money they earn is sent back to families at home. Even political refugees long for home. If they could provide for their family at home

they would have stayed home. For the cost of a bomb or two we could change the world through love. Which demonstrates more the love of the living Christ?

I have had opportunity to talk with many who have left their home for other countries. They would rather stay home but they go in order to support their family back home. They seek better paying jobs in a foreign land. It is not that they wanted to leave but they could see no other option. What if we helped provide an option?

Remember it was love that put Jesus on the cross. If he had called for the nation of Israel to be rebuilt with its former glory and power he would have been celebrated by the religious leaders. If he had rejected those who were on the outside and worked to keep them there and if he had not opened his love to women and gentiles the leadership would have embraced him and come over to his side. But, Jesus chose the most difficult path of all — the hardest commandment to keep — he chose love of the whole world.

Looked for an example and got a letter from Bill and Ann Clemmer this week. Bill and Ann are American Baptist missionaries who have served in some of the most desperate places in our world. Dr. Bill was one of the first doctors to deal with the ebola crisis in Congo when it first came to the forefront many years ago. They have served in Haiti, Congo and most recently in war torn South Sudan. They have been home on home assignment this past year. They have been waiting God's call. Bill writes:

The call came 3 weeks later after celebrating Christmas in Maine with our children. IMA World Health, a partner agency, has been running a program in Eastern Congo providing care to over 25,000 women and children, victims of sexual and gender-based violence in the context of ongoing war in a region that has known nothing but conflict over the past 20 years. There was a need for interim leadership and was I available for 30 days? When do you want me to start I asked?

30 days have turned to 90 and now it seems we will be here for an extended period; the needs are overwhelming...This is not the 'safest place' we have ever worked. Aside from the fighting and continued culture of violence, there are ongoing episodes of kidnapping for ransom of nationals and expatriates alike. Doctors Without Borders, Save the Children and others have had persons abducted and consequently pulled back to rethink how to meet needs in such an environment.

If that is not enough, there are also environmental threats.

An active volcano overshadows the town of Goma where we reside. The last eruption in 2002 spewed an immense river of lava into the middle of this heavily populated border town, leveling houses, schools, clinics, even the airport, killing scores of people unable to escape. The threat level has recently been raised to yellow as the lake of molten lava in the crater spews tongues of fire and smoke into the air.

Lake Kivu, on whose banks I sit while writing this letter, has one of the highest concentrations of methane gas known in a natural setting, trapped under layers of water in this deep lake, built up over the years from the underground volcanic fissures. A similar methane-imbued lake on the other side of Africa, erupted in a huge gaseous cloud in the 1980s, killing thousands of those who lived by the water.

The city of Goma with 500,000 persons, is tucked between the volcano and the lake; an eruption of either would be devastating.

However, we have an abiding sense that this is where we should be...In our 25 years of service overseas, I don't believe we have ever intentionally sought out a country or place to work. We don't 'bid on assignments, strategize for posts, or compete for positions.' It has rather been a matter of being available and willing. However, in all our years of service, we have been overwhelmingly blessed. Whether in the midst of abject poverty in Haiti, rebellion in Zaire, austerity in South Sudan or war in Congo...we have never been alone nor could have ever imagined a more meaningful or fulfilling work.

We don't know when the volcano will erupt, when the methane in the lake may bubble up, when rebels will reenter Goma, or if abductors linger by the path. We do know that over 25,000 women and girls have been brutally assaulted, and we have been given the capacity, the occasion, the means and the time to make a difference.

There is no other explanation as to why the Clemmers feel called by God to this situation: ***Love one another.*** Jesus' words were: "*By love will all know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*" Can we do any less than what Jesus asks?

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NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1973, 1978, 1985  
NRSV, Division of Christian Education, NCC, 1988